



MIDDLEBURY
PERFORMING ARTS SERIES

P R E S E N T S

Danish String Quartet

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2023

7:30 PM ET

ROBISON HALL, MAHANEY ARTS CENTER



Danish String Quartet

Frederik Øland, Violin

Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, Violin

Asbjørn Nørgaard, Viola

Fredrik Sjölin, Cello

Program

Chacony in G Minor, Z. 730,
arr. Benjamin Britten

Henry Purcell
(1659-1695)

String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 20, No. 3

Joseph Haydn
(1732-1809)

Allegro con spirito

Minuetto: Allegretto

Poco adagio

Finale: Allegro di molto

String Quartet No. 7 in F-sharp Minor **Dmitri Shostakovich**

Allegretto

(1906-1975)

Lento

Allegro–Allegretto

Intermission

Nordic folk music, announced from the stage
arr. Danish String Quartet

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Program Notes

PURCELL Chacony in G Minor, Z. 730, arr. Benjamin Britten (c. 1678; arr. 1947-48, rev. 1963)

Henry Purcell's Chacony in G Minor takes us to the London theatres that reopened after the return of Charles II to England in 1660. Restoration theatre music was "incidental," auxiliary to the actual play, and performed before the main event began and during the interval. By and large, a suite of theatre music comprised eight pieces—an overture and a sequence of dances—that were very often subsequently used as concert works. As the Purcell scholar Peter Holman explains, much Restoration theatre music only survives in concert versions, and it is therefore often problematic to decide which music was written for which play. This is certainly the case with Purcell's Chacony in G minor, which was probably composed around 1680—that is, while Purcell was employed by Charles, and nearly a decade before he turned his attention almost exclusively to the theatre, after the accession of William III (who notoriously disliked music) and Queen Mary in 1689.

Despite being in a minor key, the Chacony was probably written as a lively dance. Charles had picked up the French habit of

listening to music while standing and tapping his foot, and he emphatically preferred music that gratified his partiality. The piece is based on a descending tetrachord—four consecutive notes of a minor scale, leading from tonic to dominant—which became associated with the lament, a decisive instance being Dido's lament from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (1689). As was usual in England, in the case of the Chacony, the "chaconne" of the title is used indeterminately, and the word might equally suggest a passacaglia or simply a ground.

HAYDN String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 20, No. 3

Reflecting the preoccupation with the minor mode in Haydn's symphonies of the years around 1770, the Op. 20 set, uniquely, contains two minor-keyed quartets. They could hardly be more strongly contrasted.

The outer movements of No. 3 in G Minor are astringent, nervy, sometimes bizarrely elliptical. In the opening Allegro con spirito—whose eccentric main theme (in an eccentric texture, with viola doubling first violin at the octave) comprises a four-bar plus a three-bar phrase—Haydn veers abruptly between hectic desperation and recurrent buffo-like (comedic) fragments whose

effect is mocking, even sinister, rather than jolly. In the exposition and development, a little wriggling unison figure, like a stage aside, adds a touch of grotesquerie. The music's waywardness reaches its climax in the recapitulation, which drastically reworks the events of the exposition and expands a brief snatch of violin recitative into an almost hysterical *cri de cœur* (passionate outcry).

The desolate minuet, its unease enhanced by the pervasive five-bar phrases, is relieved by its exquisite, lulling E-flat major trio. Both minuet and trio fade away strangely on the brink of C minor, an effect that Haydn replicates in the unsettling *pianissimo* close of the finale. Though written against the background of sonata form, the *Poco adagio* in G major is essentially a fantasy on a single ardent melody. (A rare surviving sketch for Op 20 reveals that Haydn originally conceived the melody for cello rather than first violin.) Each of its reappearances is characterized by an evocative new sonority, typical of the composer's heightened sensitivity to tone color throughout the Op 20 quartets.

SHOSTAKOVICH String Quartet No. 7 in F-sharp Minor, Op. 108

Shostakovich's Seventh Quartet was completed in March 1960. It is the shortest of the series but is no less significant for that. In many ways it explores aspects of quartet writing not encountered in other of his works, at least up to that time. Ostensibly in three movements, which are played attacca, in practice it comes across as a four-movement structure, for the finale is very much in two parts. The work is dedicated to the memory of his first wife, Nina, who had died in 1954, and who, had she lived, would have celebrated her 50th birthday in 1960.

The quartet opens with a chromatic descending idea on first violin, answered by three repeated quavers, firmly anchoring the tonality to F sharp minor. A secondary rising theme—also in quavers—over a low C leads to the second subject proper in E-flat minor, on the cello. This is combined with the secondary theme, and a developmental codetta leads to an extraordinary counterstatement of the preceding material. The tempo changes to 3/8, the quavers remaining even, and the timbre to pizzicato, as the tonality returns to F-sharp minor. The second subject is restated more or less regularly in F-sharp, and the earlier

repeated quavers in a gentle coda quietly bring the movement to its close.

The second violin begins the central Lento with an accompanimental figure spread across the four strings, over which first violin sings a long-breathed theme clearly derived in part from the opening idea of the quartet. The instruments are muted throughout and when the viola and cello enter, in bare fifths, they bring the first glissando in any Shostakovich quartet. First cello, then viola, and finally both in octaves, continue the violin theme—second violin accompanies virtually throughout the movement—which is taken up by first violin again, over an eventual low D pedal, to the end, but not before a falling viola phrase—A, G-sharp, F-sharp, E-sharp (i.e. F-natural)—is heard. At once the finale burst upon us, the quartet's opening anapaestic rhythm extended but at once silenced by the viola's four-note phrase (the significance of which remains unclear) as the movement immediately hurtles on its breathless way. In its rush, themes from the second movement are recalled—almost grabbed at—before the quartet's opening idea is given out, a third higher, by all four instruments in octaves, *fff* (*fortissimo*).

The recall of first-movement material brings proceedings almost to a halt, and then the second major part of the finale, in effect a fourth movement—not unlike a gentle ghostly waltz—begins. As it proceeds it recalls aspects of the first movement’s counterstatement before recapitulating, in essence, the gentle coda from that movement, now shown to be a coda to the entire composition.

All previous notes are courtesy of Hyperion Records.

Nordic folk music, announced from the stage

arr. Danish String Quartet

Note courtesy of the Danish String Quartet, excerpted from their disc liner notes for “Wood Works”

Folk music is the music of all the small places. It is the local music, but as such, it is also the music of everywhere and everyone. Like rivers, the melodies and dances have flowed slowly from region to region; whenever a fiddler stumbles on a melody, he would play it and make it his own before passing it on. You don’t own a folk tune—you simply borrow it for a while.

We have borrowed and arranged a selection of tunes that are all very close to our hearts. We perform them as a string quartet, one of the most powerful musical vehicles we know. The string quartet is a pure construct: four simple instruments made of wood. But in all its simplicity, the string quartet is capable of expressing a myriad of colors, nuances, and emotions—just like folk music. Our idea is to marry these two simple but powerful things: the folk music and the string quartet. Normally the string quartet has been reserved for the classical masters. Now we want to see what happens when we let the Nordic folk music flow through the wooden instruments of the string quartet. Does it work? We hope so. And remember: we simply borrowed these tunes. They have already been returned.



Biography



Danish String Quartet

Frederik Øland, Violin

Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, Violin

Asbjørn Nørgaard, Viola

Fredrik Sjölin, Cello

The GRAMMY®-nominated Danish String Quartet continues to assert its preeminence among the world's finest string quartets. Celebrated for their "intense blend, extreme dynamic variation (in which they seem glued together), perfect intonation even on

harmonics, and constant vitality and flow" (*Gramophone*) and renowned for the palpable joy they exude in music-making, the Danish String Quartet has become one of today's most in-demand classical quartets, performing to sold-out concert halls around the world. The Danish Quartet celebrated their 20th Anniversary in 2022-2023, having formed when violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard were teenagers under the mentorship of Tim Frederiksen of Copenhagen's Royal Danish Academy of Music. In 2008, the three Danes were joined by Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin.

The Danish Quartet's inventive and intriguing programming and repertoire choices have produced critically acclaimed original projects and commissions as well as popular arrangements of Scandinavian folk music. This season, the Quartet will complete its DOPPELGÄNGER series, an ambitious four-year international commissioning project pairing world premieres from four composers (Bent Sørensen, Lotta Wennäkoski, Anna Thorvaldsdottir, and Thomas Adès) with late major chamber works by Schubert. Each season, the Quartet has performed a world premiere on a program with its doppelgänger—the Schubert quartet or quintet that inspired it—culminating in 2024 in the premiere of a quintet by Adès, after the String Quintet in C

Major. The DOPPELGÄNGER pieces are commissioned by the Danish String Quartet with the support of Carnegie Hall, Cal Performances, UC Santa Barbara Arts & Lectures, Vancouver Recital Society, Flagey in Brussels, and Muziekgebouw in Amsterdam.

In summer 2023 the Quartet performed at Ravinia and at Tanglewood's Seiji Ozawa Hall. The 2023-2024 season sees them on tour in 18 cities in the USA and Canada and venues in Norway, Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, Brussels, Italy, and their home of Denmark.

The Danish String Quartet's most recent recording project is PRISM, a series of five discs on ECM New Series that explore the symbiotic musical and contextual relationships between Bach fugues, Beethoven string quartets, and works by Shostakovich, Schnittke, Bartók, Mendelssohn, and Webern. The final disc, PRISM V, was released to great acclaim in April 2023, with *The Strad* praising the quartet's "refined, coherent and erudite performances, which combine an exhilarating sweep with minute attention to details of phrasing and timbre." The Quartet's discography reflects the ensemble's special affinity for Scandinavian composers, with the complete quartets of Carl

Nielsen (Dacapo, 2007 and 2008) and Adès, Nørgård, and Abrahamsen (their debut on ECM in 2016). They also released two discs of traditional Scandinavian folk music, *Wood Works* (Dacapo 2014) and *Last Leaf* (ECM 2017), which was chosen as one of the top classical albums of the year by NPR, Spotify, and *The New York Times*. A third folk recording is planned for release in 2023 on ECM.

The Quartet takes an active role in reaching new audiences through special projects. In 2007, they established the DSQ Festival, which takes place in intimate and informal settings in Copenhagen. In 2016, they inaugurated a concert series, *Series of Four*, in which they both perform and invite colleagues to appear.

The Danish String Quartet has been the recipient of many awards and appointments, including Musical America's 2020 Ensemble of the Year and the Borletti-Buitoni Trust. In 2013, the Quartet was named as a BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artist and appointed to the Bowers Program (formerly CMS Two). The Quartet was awarded the 2010 NORDMETALL-Ensemble Prize at the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Festival in Germany, and, in 2011, received the Carl Nielsen Prize, the highest cultural honor in Denmark.

The Danish String Quartet appears by arrangement with
Kirshbaum Associates.

www.danishquartet.com



Images from the quartet's 2017 Middlebury debut.

Photos by Aaron Kimball.

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We remember their connection to this region and the hardships they continue to endure.

We give thanks for the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it.