

presents...

## Shenson Chamber Series

# CASTALIAN STRING QUARTET

Sini Simonen | Violin\*  
Daniel Roberts | Violin

Ruth Gibson | Viola\*  
Steffan Morris | Cello

\* Sean Lee and Natalie Loughran have graciously agreed to perform with the Castalian Quartet during Sini Simonen's and Ruth Gibson's maternity leave.

Wednesday, November 15, 2023 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

**JANÁČEK**

### String Quartet No. 1 (Kreutzer Sonata)

*Adagio - Con moto*  
*Con moto*  
*Con moto (Vivace. Andante)*  
*Con moto (Adagio)*

**MARK-ANTHONY  
TURNAGE**

### Awake for String Quartet

*I. Bridgetower 23*  
*II. Shut Out*

INTERMISSION

**BEETHOVEN**

### String Quartet in B flat, Op. 130, with Grosse Fuge ending, Opus 133

*Adagio, ma non troppo-Allegro*  
*Presto*  
*Andante con moto, ma non troppo*  
*Alla danza tedesca (Allegro assai)*  
*Cavatina (Adagio molto espressivo)*  
*Finale: Grosse Fuge (Op. 133)*

**The Shenson Chamber Series is made possible by Fred M. Levin,  
The Shenson Foundation.**

**This program is made possible in part by the generous support of Bruce and Carolyn Lowenthal.**

**The Castalian String Quartet** is represented by David Rowe Artists     [davidroweartists.com](http://davidroweartists.com)



## ARTIST PROFILES

*SF Performances* presents the Castalian String Quartet for the second time. The ensemble first appeared in November 2021.

Since its formation in 2011, the London-based **Castalian String Quartet** has distinguished itself as one of the most dynamic, sophisticated young string quartets performing today. They are an Artist in Residence at the Wigmore Hall in London and are the inaugural Hans Keller String Quartet in Residence at the Oxford University Faculty of Music. They are also the recipient of the Royal Philharmonic Society's 2019 Young Artists Award.

The Castalian String Quartet will tour North America in the 2023–24 season with performances in Dallas, San Francisco, Louisville, Chicago, Houston, and many other cities. Another highlight will be their collaboration with pianist Stephen Hough, who will join them for concerts in Costa Mesa, Carmel and Napa, CA; New York, NY; Rockport, MA; and Washington, D.C.

The Quartet works with many living composers, including recent premieres of works by Mark-Anthony Turnage, Charlotte Bray, and Edmund Finnis. They have also established a strong presence abroad, with performances of the complete Haydn Op.76 Quartets at Wigmore Hall; at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Berlin Philharmonic, Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, Paris Philharmonie, Vienna Konzerthaus, Montreal's Salle Bourgie, Carnegie Hall, the Spoleto USA Festival, and the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. They have played at the Heidelberger Frühling, East Neuk, Kuhmo, Edinburgh, Lockenhaus, and Banff International Festivals. Further afield, they un-

dertook tours of China and Colombia.

In spring 2022, the Castalian String Quartet released its first recording, *Between Two Worlds* (Delphian), featuring works by Thomas Adès, Beethoven, and first violinist Sini Simonen's own arrangements of early works by Orlando de Lassus and John Dowland.

The Castalian String Quartet studied with Oliver Wille (Kuss Quartet) at the Hannover University of Music, Drama and Media, graduating with a master's degree. In addition to the above, awards include Third Prize at the 2016 Banff Quartet Competition and First Prize at the 2015 Lyon Chamber Music Competition. The Quartet was selected by Young Classical Artists Trust (YCAT) in 2016. They have received coaching from Simon Rowland-Jones, David Waterman and Isabel Charisius.

Their name is derived from the Castalian Spring in the ancient city of Delphi. According to Greek mythology, the nymph Castalia transformed herself into a fountain to evade Apollo's pursuit, thus creating a source of poetic inspiration for all who drink from her waters.

## PROGRAM NOTES

### String Quartet No. 1 "The Kreutzer Sonata"

**LEOŠ JANÁČEK**  
(1854–1928)

Czech composer Leoš Janáček labored for years in obscurity. And at the time of his sixtieth birthday in 1914 he was known only as a choral conductor and teacher who had achieved modest success with a pro-

vincial production of his opera *Jenufa* ten years earlier. Then in 1917 came a transforming event. The aging composer fell in love with Kamila Stösslová, a 25-year-old married woman and mother of a small child. This one-sided love affair was platonic—Kamila was mystified by all this passionate attention, though she remained an affectionate and understanding friend. But the effect of this love on Janáček was staggering: over the final decade of his life he wrote four operas, two string quartets, the *Sinfonietta*, the *Glagolitic Mass*, and numerous other works, all in some measure inspired by his love for Kamila (he also wrote her over 600 letters).

Not surprisingly, Janáček became consumed in these years with the idea of women: their charm, their power, and the often cruel situations in which they find themselves trapped by love. The theme of a woman who makes tragic decisions about love is portrayed dramatically in the opera *Katya Kabanova* (1921) and abstractly in his two string quartets. The second of these quartets, subtitled "*Intimate Pages*," is a direct expression of his love for Kamila, while the first, subtitled "*The Kreutzer Sonata*," takes its inspiration from Tolstoy's novella of the same name. In Tolstoy's story, a deranged man tells of his increasing suspicion of his wife, who is a pianist, and the violinist she accompanies in a performance of Beethoven's *Kreutzer Sonata*. He returns home unexpectedly, finds them together, and stabs his wife to death.

Working very quickly in the fall of 1923, Janáček composed a string quartet inspired by Tolstoy's story (the actual composition took only nine days: October 30–November 7). A few days before the premiere of the quartet in 1924, Janáček wrote to Kamila, telling her that the subject of his quartet was "the unhappy, tormented, misused and ill-used woman as described by the Russian writer Tolstoy in his work, *The Kreutzer Sonata*." Janáček's biographer Jaroslav Vogel reports that the second violinist at the premiere (who was in fact the composer Joseph Suk) said that "Janáček meant the work to be a kind of moral protest against men's despotic attitude to women."

Listeners should be wary of trying to hear exact representations of these ideas in the quartet, for this is not music that explicitly tells a story. Some have claimed to hear an elaborate "plot" in this music, but it is much more useful to approach the *First String Quartet* as an abstract work of art that creates an agitated, even grim atmosphere. Listeners should also not expect

the normal structure of the classical string quartet. Janáček's late music is built on fragmentary themes that develop through repetition, abrupt changes of tempo and mood, and an exceptionally wide palette of string color. The opening movement alternates *Adagio* and *Con moto* sections, and the other three movements, all marked *Con moto*, are built on the same pattern of alternating sections in different speeds, moods, and sounds. There are several striking touches: the arcing melodic shape heard in the first measures of the quartet will return throughout (the quartet ends with a variation of this figure), while the opening of the third movement is a subtle quotation from the *Kreutzer Sonata* of Beethoven, a composer Janáček disliked. Throughout the span of the 18-minute quartet, the music gathers such intensity that its subdued ending comes as a surprise.

Janáček's performance markings in the score are particularly suggestive: by turn he asks the players to make the music sound "grieving," "weeping," "sharp," "lamenting," "desperate," "lugubrious," and—at the climax of the final movement—"ferocious." One does not need to know Janáček's markings, however, to feel the intensity of this music.

## Awake for String Quartet

**MARK-ANTHONY TURNAGE**

(B. 1960)

The Castalian Quartet's management has provided a note for this piece:

Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Awake* (2021) is a two-movement work inspired by Rita Dove's collection of poems, *Sonata Multipartita*, about the life of the mixed-race nineteenth-century violin virtuoso George Bridgetower, to whom Beethoven originally dedicated his 1804 violin sonata now known as the "*Kreutzer*." The Castalian String Quartet commissioned *Awake* to mark 100 years since Leoš Janáček composed his first string quartet, "*Kreutzer Sonata*," which references Leo Tolstoy's 1889 novella of the same name. *Awake* premiered at the Edinburgh International Festival in August 2023.

*Awake* was co-commissioned for the Castalian String Quartet by the Borletti-Buitoni Trust and Cosman Keller Art and Music Trust.

## String Quartet in B-flat Major, Opus 130

**LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN**

(1770–1827)

Beethoven composed the *Quartet in B-flat Major* between July and December of 1825, and the music had its premiere in Vienna on March 21, 1826, almost exactly a year to the day before the composer's death. This massive quartet, consisting of six movements that span a total of nearly 50 minutes, concluded with a complex and extremely difficult fugue that left the first audience stunned. Beethoven, by this time totally deaf, did not attend the premiere, but when told that the fourth and fifth movements had been so enthusiastically applauded that they had to be repeated, he erupted with anger at the audience: "Yes, these delicacies! Why not the Fugue? Cattle! Asses!"

But it was not just the audience at the premiere that found the concluding fugue difficult. With some trepidation, Beethoven's publisher asked the crusty old composer to write a substitute finale and to publish the fugue separately. To everyone's astonishment, Beethoven agreed to that request and wrote a new finale—a good-natured rondo—in the fall of 1826. Since that time, critics have debated which ending makes better sense artistically, and this is one of those debates that will probably continue forever. For generations, the *Quartet in B-flat Major* was performed with the substitute rondo as the finale, but recently that practice appears to have evolved, and quartets today are increasingly following Beethoven's original intention and concluding the *Quartet in B-flat Major* with the *Grosse Fuge*. The present performance offers the quartet in its original form.

In either version, this music presents problems of unity, for its six movements are quite different from each other. The issue is intensified when the *Grosse Fuge* is used as the finale, for this movement is so individual, so fierce, that it does seem an independent statement. In its original form, the quartet consists of two huge outer movements that frame four shorter movements (two scherzos and two slow movements). The music encompasses a huge range of emotion, from the frankly playful to some of the most deeply-felt music Beethoven ever wrote. The unifying principle of this quartet may simply be its disunity, its amazing range of expression and mood.

The first movement, cast in the highly-modified sonata form Beethoven used in his final years, is built on two contrasting tempos: a reverent *Adagio* and a quick *Allegro* that flies along on a steady rush of sixteenth notes. These tempos alternate, sometimes in sections only one measure long—there is some extraordinarily beautiful music here, full of soaring themes and unexpected shifts of key. By contrast, the *Presto*—flickering and shadowy—flits past in less than two minutes; in ABA form, it offers a long center section and a sudden close on the return of the opening material. The solemn opening of the *Andante* is a false direction, for it quickly gives way to a rather elegant movement in sonata form, full of poised, flowing, and calm music. Beethoven titled the fourth movement *Alla danza tedesca*, which means "Dance in the German Style." In 3/8 meter, it is based on the rocking, haunting little tune that opens the movement.

The *Cavatina* has become one of the most famous movements in all Beethoven's quartets. Everyone is struck by the intensity of its feeling, though few agree as to what it expresses—some feel it tragic, others view it as serene; Beethoven himself confessed that even thinking about this movement moved him to tears. Near the end comes an extraordinary passage that Beethoven marks *Beklemmt* ("Oppressive"): the music seems to stumble and then makes its way to the close over halting and uncertain rhythms.

This performance concludes with the *Grosse Fuge* Beethoven had intended as the original finale. Let it be said right from the start: the *Grosse Fuge* is a brilliant piece of music and a very tough one, and it should come as no surprise that it has excited quite different responses. Though he was no particular admirer of Beethoven, Stravinsky near the end of his long life came to know and respect the late quartets, and his admiration for the *Grosse Fuge* led him to call it an "absolutely contemporary piece of music that will be contemporary forever." At the other extreme, the iconoclastic American critic B.H. Haggin was adamant that the *Grosse Fuge* should be considered "inaccessible—except for a quiet and lovely episode—by some music lovers who have listened to it repeatedly."

The *Grosse Fuge* is in fact not one fugue, but three different fugal sections, each in a contrasting tempo—Beethoven described it as a "Grand Fugue, freely treated in some places, fugally elaborated in others." The brief *Overtura* suggests the shape of the

fugue subject in three different permutations (all of which will reappear and be treated differently) and then proceeds directly into the first fugue, an extremely abrasive *Allegro* in B-flat major that demands a great deal from both performers and audiences. Much of the complexity here is rhythmic: not only does the fugue subject leap across a span of several octaves, but its progress is often obscured by its overlapping triple, duple, and dot-

ted rhythms. The lyric, flowing central section, a *Meno mosso e moderato* in G-flat major, is fugal in character rather than taking the form of a strict fugue. It gives way to the *Allegro molto e con brio*, which is derived from the second appearance of the fugue subject in the *Overtura*; here it bristles with trills and sudden pauses. Near the close, Beethoven recalls fragments of the different sections, then offers a full-throated restatement of the fugue

theme before the rush to the cadence.

Individual listeners may draw their own conclusions about the use of the *Grosse Fuge* as a fitting close to this quartet, but there can be no doubt that the *Quartet in B-flat Major*—by turns beautiful, aggressive, charming, and violent—remains as astonishing a piece of music for us today as it was to that first audience in 1826.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger