



SAN FRANCISCO
PERFORMANCES

presents...

Alexander String Quartet

Zakarias Grafilo | Violin
Frederick Lifszitz | Violin

Paul Yarbrough | Viola
Sandy Wilson | Cello

Recorded Friday, June 12, 2020

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA

**JOHANNES
BRAHMS**

String Quartet in C minor, Opus 51, No. 1

Allegro

Romanze: Poco Adagio

Allegretto molto moderato e comodo

Allegro

String Quartet in A minor, Opus 51, No. 2

Allegro non troppo

Andante moderato

Quasi Minuetto, moderato

Finale: Allegro non assai

Intermezzo in A Major, Opus 118, No. 2

Andante teneramente

(arranged for string quartet by Zakarias Grafilo)

Funded in part by a generous gift from Thomas and Lily Beischer

Produced, engineered and mastered by **Matt Carr**

Instruments:

Quartet Instruments: Ellen M. Quartet, all by Francis Kuttner, 1987

Bows by Arcus

ABOUT THE ARTISTS



The **Alexander String Quartet** celebrated its 35th anniversary in 2016. The Quartet has been Ensemble-in-Residence since 1989 with San Francisco Performances, the result of a unique partnership between SF Performances and The Morrison Chamber Music Center at San Francisco State University. Starting in 1994, the Quartet joined with SF Performances' Music Historian-in-Residence, Robert Greenberg, to present the Saturday Morning Series exploring string quartet literature.

The Quartet has appeared on SF Performances' main-stage Chamber Series many times, collaborating with such artists as soprano Elly Ameling and mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato; clarinetists Richard Stoltzman, Joan Enric Lluna and Eli Eban; pianists James Tocco, Menahem Pressler, Jeremy Menuhin, and Joyce Yang; and composer Jake Heggie.

PROGRAM NOTES

In one of the most famous remarks in the history of music, Brahms complained to a friend about the strain of having to compose within the shadow of Beethoven: "You have no idea how the likes of us feel when we hear the tramp of a giant like him behind us." This comment is usually taken to refer to the overpowering example of Beethoven's symphonies, but it applies just as accurately to Beethoven's cycle of 16 string quartets. Assaulted by that example, Brahms wrote—and destroyed—at least 20 quartets as he grappled with the form. But during the summer of 1873 Brahms retreated to the lovely resort town of Tutzing in Bavaria, and there—with a view across the magnificent Starnberger See to distant snow-capped peaks—he finally completed two string quartets that he was willing to publish. On this program the Alexander String Quartet performs those two quartets.

There is something very Beethoven-like about the **Quartet in C minor**. This is not music that sets out to charm the heart or please the ear. Rather, it impresses by its fierce logic and the economy of its means: the entire quartet is unified around a central musical idea—the rising, dotted figure heard in the first violin at the very beginning. The

mood of this quartet is dark—Brahms sets it in C minor, the key Beethoven reserved for his most dramatic works, and he drives the music forward with an unrelieved logic that might have left even that earlier master gasping for relief.

The opening *Allegro* takes its character and much of its shape from the theme heard at the very opening. That nervous climbing figure saturates this movement (and much of the quartet)—as theme, as accompaniment, as rhythm. Brahms marks the second movement *Romanze*, which suggests music of a lyric or gentle nature, and here he alternates two ideas that—in the aftermath of the first movement—do seem gentle.

Brahms presents two themes simultaneously at the beginning of the *Allegretto* as the first violin's chain of sixteenth pulses steadily above the viola's wistful tune. The trio section brings the quartet's one moment of sunshine—the first violin sings a little waltz-tune, and beneath that the second violin alternates A's on open and closed strings; the shifting colors of the resulting "wow-wow-wow" make an effective accompaniment to the waltz.

The finale brings back the furies and the concentration

of the first movement. Its opening figure is derived almost literally from the quartet's very beginning, and the more relaxed second subject is a slow variant of that same shape. The very end brings no relief: Brahms returns firmly to C minor, and the implacable final cadence recalls one last time the thematic motif that has saturated the entire quartet.

Brahms composed the **Quartet in A minor** for his friend, the violinist Joseph Joachim, and he incorporated Joachim's personal motto "Frei aber einsam" ("Free but lonely") in the notes F-A-E that shape the opening theme. The second subject simply glows: it is a long duet for the violins, and Brahms marks it *dolce* ("sweet"), *lusingando* ("charming"), and *grazioso* ("graceful"). From these contrasted materials, he builds an extended sonata-form movement that concludes on evocations of Joachim's motto. The most striking part of the *Andante moderato* is the duet for first violin and cello at its center: over buzzing tremolos from the middle voices they sing a "Hungarian duet" in close canon.

Brahms calls the third movement a "quasi-minuet" and rather than building it on the standard minuet-and-trio

form he offers a lilting, ghostly minuet. Many have heard the influence of Hungarian music in the *Allegro non assai* finale, for the first violin's soaring dance at the very beginning seems to have its origins in fiery gypsy fiddling. Brahms speeds this wild dance to its close on a *Più vivace* coda.

Late in life, Brahms wrote 20 brief piano pieces. These pieces distill a lifetime of experience and technical refinement into very brief spans, and in their inward and sometimes bleak way they offer some of Brahms' most personal and moving music. Someone once astutely noted that a cold wind blows through these late piano pieces; Brahms himself described them as "lullabies of my pain." The **Intermezzo in A Major** in fact is a lullaby (Brahms' marking is *Andante teneramente*: "tenderly"), and that gentle mood prevails throughout. The music is heard at this concert in an arrangement for string quartet by Zak Grafilo, first violinist of the Alexander String Quartet.

—Notes by Eric Bromberger