PRINCETON UNIVERSITY CONCERTS

Ébène String Quartet

2022 Spring Season

Welcome back to Princeton University Concerts!
We've missed you!

Thursday, March 31, 2022 at 7:30PM • Richardson Auditorium, Alexander Hall

ÉBÈNE STRING QUARTET

Pierre Colombet, violin
Gabriel Le Magadure, violin
Marie Chilemme, viola
Raphaël Merlin, cello

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
(1756–1791)

String Quartet No. 14 in G Major, K. 387 (1782)
- Allegro vivace assai
- Menuetto: Allegretto
- Andante cantabile
- Molto allegro

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH
(1906–1975)

String Quartet No. 8 in C Minor, Op. 110 (1960)
- Largo—
- Allegro molto—
- Allegretto—
- Largo—
- Largo

INTERMISSION

JOHANNES BRAHMS
(1833–1897)

String Quartet No. 3 in B-flat Major, Op. 67 (1875)
- Vivace
- Andante
- Agitato (Allegretto non troppo)
- Poco allegretto con variazioni

PLEASE NOTE: Wearing a mask over your mouth and nose is required while inside the venue. Thank you for keeping our community safe.

About the *Program*

By Lucy Caplan © 2022 • Program Annotator

Lucy Caplan is a Lecturer on History and Literature at Harvard University. In 2016 she received the Rubin Prize for Music Criticism.

To attend a chamber music concert is to bear witness to a social experiment. A group of people come together as a collective, working toward a common goal. It can be tempting to reach for a lofty metaphor here: Aren't string quartets, we might suppose, like miniature democracies, in which every voice contributes equally to the whole? In fact, the appeal of such music-as-politics metaphors goes both ways. The poet Walt Whitman celebrated how he could "hear America singing," the "varied carols" of a nation's citizens ringing out over the nineteenth-century landscape. The philosopher Horace Kallen liked to describe American democracy not as a melting pot, but as an orchestra, in which all types of people could each contribute a distinct sound to the "symphony of civilization." Yet like most metaphors, these ones have their limits. Who is invited to be part of the ensemble in the first place, and who is excluded? What happens when louder

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voices drown out quieter ones? In asking these questions of societies and string quartets alike, cracks appear in the foundation. As any musician will confirm, rehearsals and performances rarely feel like democratic utopias. Moreover, most music for string quartet—especially that which stands at the core of the canonical repertory—begins from an uneven premise, in which each musician is asked to fulfill an entirely distinct role within the musical whole. All may be essential to the work's integrity, yet they are certainly not equal.

This evening's program, which ranges from the sparkling elegance of Mozart to the impassioned despair of Shostakovich to the cerebral merriment of Brahms, offers myriad ways to consider the types of relationships that might emerge

among a string quartet's four voices. This shift in perspective can aid new ways of listening, ones which are attuned less to an imagined ideal relationship among musicians and more to what is actually happening onstage. If quartets are not themselves democracies, they still invite us to listen with an open mind.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, String Quartet No. 14 in G Major, K. 387 (1782)
Mozart's string quartets have an unusual relationship to democratic listening. While these works teem with freshness and warmth, they are often accompanied by a surfeit of praise so effusive that it threatens to overwhelm the music itself. The Quartet No. 14, nicknamed "Spring" and often lauded as an exemplar of Mozartean genius, is a prime example. High esteem accompanied the work almost from the beginning. It is part of a set of six quartets dedicated to Haydn, whom Mozart had recently met upon moving from Vienna to Salzburg. Haydn adored these works by the younger composer and proclaimed to Mozart's father, Leopold, that "Before God and as an honest man, I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name. He has taste and, what is more, the most profound knowledge of composition."

Amid the chorus of affirmation, other perspectives have emerged. Some listeners, for example, understand these quartets as emblematic of a sort of identity crisis in Mozart's compositional style, in which he struggled to retain his own stylistic convictions while simultaneously incorporating the influence of figures like Haydn. Heard in this light, interesting new angles appear. Take the quartet's first movement: Its phrases are charming and beautiful, no doubt, yet there is a hint of uncertainty in their tendency to meander just a bit past when we might expect them to end. They are like a sonic analogue to cursive handwriting, linked together by elegant loops and connective lines. The second movement, a minuet, is a clear homage to Haydn. It borrows his fondness for out-of-place accents, which cause phrases to rock back and forth across the bar lines; a contrasting trio is surprisingly somber in comparison. In the calmly expansive third movement, the first violin moves into a place of lyrical prominence, buoyed by contrapuntal support from the other three voices. Their roles equalize in the fourth movement, a fugue-like tour de force in which virtuosity and energy are meted out equally. All four instruments come together in gentle, quiet agreement at the work's close.

Dmitri Shostakovich, String Quartet No. 8 in C Minor, Op. 110 (1960)
If most string quartets are only implicitly or metaphorically related to politics, Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 8 is the rare exception. Composed in 1960

while the composer was visiting Dresden, a city that had been decimated by bombings during World War II, the piece carries a striking dedication: "In memory of victims of fascism and war." Shostakovich wrote it in a mere three days, a compressed time frame which the music's urgency reflects. There are no respites or silences; each of the five movements moves immediately into the next, and they are further linked by a common theme, based upon the composer's initials (D-S-C-H, which translates to D-E-flat-C-B in German nomenclature). After a mournful opening Largo, whose elegiac first notes sound out the first iteration of the D-S-C-H theme, we are thrust into the notoriously anguished second movement: a frenzied explosion of sound which feels almost pure in its unabashed emotional sweep. From the wreckage, there emerges a creepy, waltzing rondo whose constant oscillations from major to minor have a profoundly destabilizing effect. A threatening knock at the door is heard—again, and again, and again. Two more Largos are in store: The fourth movement, based upon Russian melodies associated with funerals and revolution, has a deep seriousness, and the final movement returns to the subdued, effortful mood with which the quartet began.

This is clearly music that intends to make a statement about *something* beyond itself, but what is that something? Some hear the quartet as autobiographical, Shostakovich's personal plea of distress against the repression he faced. Copious self-quotation of music from the composer's broader oeuvre within the quartet seems to support this view. Others hear the quartet as a more general protest against authoritarianism and violence everywhere. The work's dedication, so broad in scope, seems to support this view. Ultimately, clarity on this point is elusive. Shostakovich himself seemed to endorse different interpretations at different moments, a caginess perhaps attributable to the precarious conditions in which he worked. As listeners, we can do nothing but live with that uncertainty; it becomes yet another means by which this quartet wrests its audiences out of their comfort zone and into the unknown.

Johannes Brahms, String Quartet No. 3 in B-flat Major, Op. 67 (1875)
Brahms was his own toughest critic. He probably wrote upwards of 20 string quartets, but only three survive, as he rejected and discarded the vast majority of what he wrote. Even those works saved from the dustbin came in for criticism: He characterized the Op. 67 Quartet, alongside several other contemporaneous works, as a mere "trifle." There is a modicum of truth to this description. Written while Brahms was on vacation in a seaside town, the quartet is sunnier than most of the composer's works. Yet it also retains much of Brahms' characteristic

intricacy: dense rhythmic patterns, emotionally intense melodies, and structural complexity throughout.

In the first movement, it almost seems as if Brahms is reminding himself to relax—he's on vacation!—with an unusually simple opening theme. Yet that simplicity is something of an illusion. Tricky three-against-two patterns abound, requiring the performers to stay on their toes. The second movement is similarly demanding in its almost orchestral scope. Rich sonorities coalesce at the movement's beginning, then the players split into impassioned one-on-one conversations: First the two violins converse, then the first violin and cello are in dialogue. In the third movement, the traditional instrumental hierarchies of the string quartet are upended as the viola takes center stage. The other three instruments are muted as the viola introduces a melody both agitated and impassioned; in a contrasting trio section, all four instruments' sounds dissolve into a fragmented, eerie mosaic. The serene elegance of the fourth movement's opening measures gives way to an imaginative set of variations; the generous use of pizzicato gives them a lilting peacefulness. Brahms eventually made his peace with the work, as later in life he admitted that it was his favorite among his surviving quartets.

About the *Artists*

ÉBÈNE STRING QUARTET

After studies with the Quatuor Ysaÿe in Paris as well as with Gábor Takács, Eberhard Feltz, and György Kurtág, the Ébène Quartet had unprecedented and outstanding success at the 2004 ARD International Music Competition, beginning their rise to fame, which resulted in numerous other prizes and awards. In 2005 the quartet was awarded the Belmont Prize of the Forberg-Schneider Foundation; in 2007 it was prizewinner of the Borletti-Buitoni Trust; and in 2019—as first ensemble ever—it was honored with the Frankfurt Music Prize.

In addition to the traditional repertoire, the quartet also dives into other styles ("A string quartet that can easily morph into a jazz band" *The New York Times*, 2009). What began in 1999 as a distraction in the university's practice rooms—improvising on jazz standards and pop songs—has become a trademark of the Ébène Quartet. To date the quartet has released three albums in these genres, *Fiction* (2010), *Brazil* (2014), and *Eternal Stories* (2017). The free approach to various styles creates a tension that is beneficial to every aspect of their artistic work. The complexity of their oeuvre has been greeted enthusiastically by audiences and critics.

Ébène's albums, with recordings of Bartók, Beethoven, Debussy, Haydn, Fauré, and the Mendelssohn siblings, have received numerous awards, including Gramophone, *BBC Music Magazine*, and the MIDEM Classic Award. In 2015 and 2016 the musicians dedicated themselves to the theme "Lied." They participated in the album *Green—Mélodies françaises* by Philippe Jaroussky and released a Schubert album with baritone Matthias Goerne (arrangements for string quartet, baritone, and double bass by Raphaël Merlin) and the Schubert String Quintet with cellist Gautier Capuçon.

"We need the inspiration from the audience," said cellist Raphaël Merlin in an interview with the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* ("New Journal of Zürich") in Spring 2020, and this was one of the central ideas of their "Beethoven Around the World" project. Between May 2019 and January 2020, the quartet recorded Beethoven's 16 string quartets in a worldwide project on six continents. With this complete recording, the four artists celebrated their 20th anniversary, which they then crowned with performances of the complete string quartet cycle in major European venues such as the Philharmonie de Paris and the Alte Oper Frankfurt. Invitations from Carnegie Hall, the Verbier Festival, and the Vienna Konzerthaus were also on the agenda before being canceled due to COVID-19.

With their charismatic playing, their fresh approach to tradition, and their open engagement with new forms, the musicians have been successful in reaching a wide audience of young listeners and in conveying their talent in regular masterclasses at the Paris Conservatoire. In January 2021, the quartet was commissioned by the University of Music and Performing Arts in Munich to establish a string quartet class as part of the newly founded "Quatuor Ébène Academy."

This is the Ébène Quartet's fourth appearance at PUC and we are thrilled to have them back.

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