PRINCETON
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CONCERTS

Ébène String Quartet

25/26 SEASON

PRINCETON
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CONCERTS

Dear Friends,

We are always delighted to welcome the Ébène Quartet back to Richardson Auditorium.

Few ensembles have made such a distinctive impression here as this remarkable group, whose improvisatory spirit is matched by a truly distinctive sound—warm, refined, and instantly recognizable. There is a natural ease and immediacy to their playing that makes each performance feel alive in the moment, as though the music is being discovered anew.

Tonight we have the special pleasure of hearing them bring Ravel's Quartet—one of the cornerstones of the repertoire—to life. This is music that depends on color, nuance, and an instinctive sense of imagination, qualities the Ébène Quartet possesses in abundance.

I am proud that the Ébène Quartet considers Richardson Auditorium a home away from home, and I look forward to welcoming them back for many years to come.

Enjoy!

Marna Seltzer
Director of Princeton University Concerts

ÉBÈNE STRING QUARTET

Pierre Colombet, Violin
Gabriel Le Magadure, Violin
Hélène Clément,* Viola
Yuya Okamoto, Cello

*substituting for Marie Chilemme, on temporary leave

This concert is sponsored by Michael and Jeanette Timmons, in memory of Wendy Idelson Levine.

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
(1756–1791)

String Quartet in D Minor, K. 421
- Allegro moderato
- Andante
- Menuetto. Allegretto
- Allegretto, ma non troppo

MAURICE RAVEL
(1875–1937)

String Quartet in F Major
- Allegro moderato—très doux
- Assez vif— très rythmé
- Très lent
- Vif et agité

INTERMISSION

JOHANNES BRAHMS
(1833–1897)

String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 51, No. 2
- Allegro non troppo
- Andante moderato
- Quasi Minuetto, moderato
- Finale. Allegro non assai

Photographs and audio/video recording are prohibited during the performance. Out of respect for the artists and enjoyment of your fellow concertgoers, ***please turn off cell phones and other electronic devices*** *before the concert. Scan this QR code with your smartphone to view instructions for silencing your phone.*

About the Program

By Lucy Caplan © 2026 • Program Annotator

Lucy Caplan is Assistant Professor of Music at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. Her first book is Dreaming in Ensemble: How Black Artists Transformed American Opera *(Harvard University Press, 2025).*

The string quartet is hallowed ground. It has a reputation for profundity and innovation in equal measure: the place where composers work out their relationship to tradition, to each other, and to themselves. Consider, for example, musicologist Alfred Einstein's description of Mozart's set of six string quartets dedicated to Franz Joseph Haydn—including K. 421, the first work on this evening's program—as works in which Mozart "completely found himself," as "music made of music." Freed from opera's requisite drama, or the concerto's requisite solo virtuosity, composers are liberated within the string quartet to make music of the purest form.

This is an appealing narrative, but not necessarily an entirely accurate one. String quartets offer a purely instrumental palette with an inimitable sonic blend, yet they are no more immune to external influence than any other sort of music. Indeed, the tradition has a palimpsestic nature, with composers often making direct reference to their predecessors in the genre. Beyond musical interchange, string quartets also reveal glimpses of the wider world—a world shaped, significantly, not only music history but also by broader social forces like imperialism, colonialism, and migration. These quartets may be "music made of music," but they are also music made of the complex, messy, ever-changing environments in which their composers lived and worked.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, String Quartet in D Minor, K. 421 (1785)

In a dedication page for the set of quartets to which this piece belongs, Mozart described his work as "the fruits of a long and laborious endeavor." The effortlessly brilliant sound of his music masks his perfectionist tendencies: he often revised his music over and over again before finding it complete. The autograph score for this set of quartets, in fact, contains ten different types of paper—evidence of the works' lengthy and complex gestation. In the case of the quartet K. 421, this extensive process yielded a work of exceptionally intricate design. The work foregrounds counterpoint, and all four players take on relatively equal—and equally complex—roles within the score. Its rhetorical language is one of dialogue and conversation, rather than solo oration. The first violin's opening gesture—a descending leap of an octave—is mirrored by a passacaglia-like stepwise descent in the cello. As early as the fourth measure, the inner voices break from their opening pattern of repeated notes to momentarily pick up the melody from the violin.

K. 421 is the only quartet in this set in a minor key, and Mozart emphasizes this distinctive feature by remaining in that key for three of the four movements. The exception is the Andante, which transports us to a peaceful F major and a lilting 6/8 time signature. Flashes of the work's essential minor-key despair nevertheless peek through, though, like an actor momentarily breaking character. The Menuetto hammers home the reappearance of the d minor key with repeated tonic notes in the first violin, as well as a descending bass line which echoes the first movement. Given the severity of this opening, the Trio section—gentle pizzicato, an impossibly elegant melody in the violin (and later the viola)—comes as an utter surprise. The quartet concludes with a mercurial theme and variations, jumping from despair to exuberance and back again. The ending is bright and triumphant, but it feels somehow less than joyous—as if it cannot entirely shake off all that it has endured to reach this point.

Maurice Ravel, String Quartet in F Major (1903)

Maurice Ravel was only fourteen years old at the time of the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris, a spectacular world's fair that brought tens of millions of visitors to the city (and was the occasion for the construction of the Eiffel Tower). Located in the colonial metropole, the fair also introduced visitors to music and culture from around the world—often in a manner which exoticized and demeaned colonized peoples and other non-European groups. Colonial subjects were displayed in "living exhibits," a cluster of constructed villages which misrepresented their cultures as primitive, unsophisticated, and culturally inferior to Europeans. One especially popular exhibit featured Javanese people living under Dutch colonial rule, including a group of dancers accompanied by musicians playing in a gamelan ensemble. This music had a profound influence on Ravel, Debussy, and other young French composers. Does the exploitative context in which they first encountered it matter to how we listen? This is a tricky question, particularly when it comes to works like Ravel's String Quartet, which do not make direct allusions to "exotic" peoples or musical traditions. At the very least, this context might prompt us to consider how what's often described as the quintessentially "French" sound of these composers' music is related to the colonial context of its creation.

Composed in Paris, where Ravel was at the time auditing Gabriel Fauré's composition class at the Conservatoire, the quartet delights in sonic variety. The first movement begins with a gentle sweetness, floats from theme to theme, and fades away toward ethereal stillness. The mood brightens in the second movement, whose vibrant pizzicato theme gives way to high trills and tremolos; the movement's astonishing middle section is slow and searching, a glimpse into an utterly different world. A roaming sensibility

pervades the third movement, which moves freely across tempi and textures. After such wandering, the fourth movement feels like a homecoming: energy bubbles up in repeated patterns, echoes of moments earlier in the quartet, and a sense of collective joy. One wonders how the Javanese visitors at the fair might have reacted to this music if the tables were turned; what might they have heard that was both exotic and familiar in Ravel's sonic world?

Johannes Brahms, String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 51, No. 2 (1873)
Brahms's two string quartets comprising Op. 51 were his first published works in the genre, but they represented the culmination of many years of attempts, pursued to various degrees of completion. Brahms was notoriously hard on himself, and he found it intimidating to make his own contribution to a form already mastered by such forebears as Haydn, Beethoven, and Schubert. A sense of indebtedness to the past can be heard in this piece, namely in Brahms's allusions to Schubert. Much like Schubert's quartet in the same key, it mixes sorrow with perpetual hope. Yet it also showcases hallmarks of Brahms's singular style: the fondness for three-against-two rhythms, the dense textures, the melodies that soar above.

The quartet's first movement is rather anxious even as it is beautiful. The opening melodic figure has the shape of a parabola, with an upward leap followed by a descent. The second theme relaxes, its propulsive dotted rhythms flowing freely forward atop a gentle bed of triplets. The second movement's song-like ease invokes Schubert once again. Yet it also looks forward: Arnold Schoenberg famously cited the development of this movement's deceptively simple melody, composed of whole and half steps, as evidence of Brahms's progressive tendencies. In lieu of a scherzo, the quartet's third movement is marked "quasi Minuetto," and it is restrained in mood and tempo. Its trio section is brighter, full of lively staccato rhythms. In the final movement, Brahms ventures beyond the Schubertian past and into another of his favorite realms of influence. Its dance rhythms are inspired by Hungarian folk music and by so-called "gypsy" music—more accurately known as music of the Roma people, who inspired many European composers despite, or perhaps because of, their social marginalization. The lively main theme moves around the ensemble, from violin to viola, before forceful chords sound in all four voices. Propelled forward by continual rhythmic vigor, the movement barrels toward a powerful close.

FREE FOOD!

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS!

Join Internoshin'! Meet your fellow student attendees at intermission in the Richardson Lounge (basement level) over free snacks. *Hosted by the Student Ambassadors of PUC.*

ÉBÈNE STRING QUARTET

After studying with Quatuor Ysaÿe in Paris and with Gábor Takács, Eberhard Feltz, and György Kurtág, Quatuor Ébène's unprecedented and outstanding victory at the ARD Music Competition in 2004 marked the beginning of its rise to prominence, leading to numerous further prizes and accolades. In 2005 the quartet received the Belmont Prize of the Forberg-Schneider Foundation, was a recipient of the Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award in 2007, and in 2019 became the first ensemble to be honored with the Frankfurt Music Trade Fair Prize. Alongside traditional repertoire, the quartet regularly explores other musical genres, as *The New York Times* made note of: "A String Quartet That Can Easily Morph Into a Jazz Band." What began in 1999 as a bit of fun for the four young musicians at university—improvising on jazz standards and pop songs—became Quatuor Ébène's trademark. The four French musicians celebrated their 20th anniversary as a quartet, crowned with complete Beethoven cycles in leading venues such as the Philharmonie de Paris and Alte Oper Frankfurt, as well as appearances at Carnegie Hall and the Wiener Konzerthaus. In January 2021, the quartet was appointed by the Munich University of Music and Performing Arts to establish a string quartet class as part of the newly founded "Quatuor Ébène Academy." To mark the 40th anniversary of Suntory Hall, the quartet is set to present the complete Beethoven string quartet works in Tokyo. They will also begin new Beethoven cycles at venues including the Berlin Philharmonie, Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome, and Wigmore Hall in London.

This is the Ébène Quartet's sixth appearance at Princeton University Concerts. For their official biography, please visit www.quatuorebene.com.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

Your help is critical to our future. Ticket sales cover less than half the cost of presenting the finest world-class music. The remaining support comes from a visionary endowment established by the Ladies' Musical Committee in 1929; the Philena Fobes Fine Memorial Fund and the Jesse Peabody Frothingham Fund; and, most importantly, from donors like you. We are deeply grateful to the individuals whose support at every level ensures that live musical performance continues to enrich Princeton, the community, and the region.

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> “In a period of economic difficulty or social strife the arts don’t just help us to cope, they call into question the way we live our lives.”
>
> —Pianist Stephen Hough,
> *who appeared with the Takács Quartet (2024/25 Season)*

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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY CONCERTS

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Thursday, January 22 | 12PM | Book Group
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Thursday, February 5 | 7:30PM
BENJAMIN BERNHEIM Tenor*
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Thursday, February 12 | 7:30PM
MARMEN STRING QUARTET*

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Sunday, February 22 | 3PM
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Thursday, March 19 | 7:30PM
TABEA ZIMMERMANN Viola
JAVIER PERIANES Piano*

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Thursday, March 26 | 7:30PM
PATRICIA KOPATCHINSKAJA Violin
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Concert Classics Series
Wednesday, April 8 | 7:30PM
ÉBÈNE STRING QUARTET

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Thursday, April 23 | 7:30PM
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Wednesday, April 29 | 7:30PM
LISA BATIASHVILI Violinist
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