

Sunday, November 17, 2013, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Danish String Quartet

Frederik Øland, *violin*
Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, *violin*
Asbjørn Nørgaard, *viola*
Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, *cello*

PROGRAM

- Hans Abrahamsen (b. 1952) String Quartet No. 1, “Ten Preludes” (1973)
- Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) String Quartet in A minor, Op. 13, “Ist Es Wahr?” (1827)
- Adagio — Allegro vivace
Adagio non lento — Poco più animato — Tempo I
Intermezzo: Allegretto con moto — Allegro di molto — Tempo I
Presto — Adagio non lento — Adagio

INTERMISSION

- Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132 (1825)
- Assai sostenuto — Allegro
Allegro ma non tanto
Heiliger Dankegesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart: Molto adagio — Neue Kraft fühlend: Andante
Alla Marcia, assai vivace — Più allegro
Allegro appassionato

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Hans Abrahamsen (b. 1952) String Quartet No. 1, “Ten Preludes”

Composed in 1973.

Hans Abrahamsen has been a prominent figure in Danish music since the Kontra Quartet of Copenhagen premiered his String Quartet No. 1, “Ten Preludes,” in 1973; he was 21. Abrahamsen, born in Copenhagen in 1952, demonstrated exceptional musical gifts in his early teens and had already begun composing by the time he entered the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen in 1969 to study French horn and composition, in which his principal teacher was Niels Viggo Bentzon. He continued his composition studies at the Royal Academy of Music in Århus with Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, and in 1975 went back to Copenhagen for advanced training in music history and music theory; he also studied composition privately with Per Nørgård and György Ligeti. Since 1982, Abrahamsen has taught at the Academy of Music in Copenhagen; he has also served as Artistic Director of the Esbjerg Ensemble. Among his honors are the Carl Nielsen Prize (1989) and Wilhelm Hansen Prize (1998). In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Danish critic, teacher, and music administrator Anders Beyer wrote, “Abrahamsen’s music possesses a particular epic quality. He likes to tell stories, to create musical images for the listener. But these are not in the shape of clear forms and figures: his works never reveal their innermost secrets, and the composer rarely presents the listener with unambiguous solutions.”

Abrahamsen wrote of his String Quartet No. 1, subtitled “Ten Preludes,” “Even with all their brevity, these ten ‘short-stories’ for string quartet contain almost all that can be desired of musical expression within the relatively short period of 20 minutes. Violence expressed as joy, simplicity as necessity, contrasts as form. The eruptive side of the music is not sharply segregated from the simple, harmoniously melodious side. Each of the ‘short stories’ points forward to the next and at the same time back to its predecessor and thus makes for a unified

overall structure. That the last of the preludes is a straight Baroque pastiche could be interpreted as an almost Holbergian moral in which things are sorted out and loose ends tied up. As in fairy tales one could say, ‘...there, this was a true story.’”

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) String Quartet in A minor, Op. 13, “Ist Es Wahr?”

Composed in 1827.

Felix Mendelssohn, in 1827, must have been the most musically sophisticated eighteen-year-old in Europe. Upon the foundation of his fine general education had been placed disciplined training in theory and composition from Carl Friedrich Zelter (a distinguished pedagogue who was then the director of the Berlin Singakademie), tutelage in violin with Carl Wilhelm Henning (a respected member of the Berlin Opera orchestra) and Eduard Rietz (a close friend who succeeded Mendelssohn as director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus concerts upon the composer’s death in 1847), and in piano with his mother (a student of the noted German theorist Johann Philipp Kirnberger, himself a pupil of Johann Sebastian Bach) and Marie Bigot (an esteemed Alsatian virtuoso and friend of Haydn and Beethoven). Mendelssohn’s first dated composition, a cantata, was completed on January 3, 1820, three weeks before his eleventh birthday, though this piece was almost certainly preceded by others whose exact dates are not recorded. Two years later began the twice-monthly Sunday family concerts at the Mendelssohns’ Berlin mansion, for which Felix selected the programs, led the rehearsals, appeared as piano and violin soloist and chamber musician, and even conducted, though as a young teenager he was still too short to be seen by the players in the back rows unless he stood on a stool. By 1825, he had written over 80 works for these concerts, including operas and operettas, string quartets and other chamber pieces, concertos, motets, and a series of 13 symphonies for strings.

Mendelssohn possessed a boundless curiosity and enthusiasm about all music, old and new. By age 18, he was intimately familiar with the Classical forms and idioms of Mozart and Haydn, and he erected upon them the creative precocities of his youth (including the magical Octet of 1825, among the greatest pieces of music ever composed by one so young), but he was also one of the leading Bach scholars of the time. Zelter had guided him fruitfully through *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, and his musically knowledgeable maternal grandmother, who had known Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel when she grew up in Berlin, obtained for him a copy of the rare, unpublished score of the *St. Matthew Passion* in 1823 or 1824. Before the end of 1827, Mendelssohn had enlisted the town's best vocalists to rehearse the *Passion* and determined to perform it in public—the renewal of interest in Bach's music, and, indeed, the entire Baroque revival, date from that concert, on March 11, 1829, at the Singakademie. Complementing Mendelssohn's antiquarian strain was his interest in the most daring, avant-garde music of the day—the last works of Beethoven. In the years before his death, in March 1827, Beethoven explored uncharted continents of style and expression in his sonatas, quartets, *Missa Solemnis* and Ninth Symphony, and Mendelssohn eagerly studied those amazing and challenging creations.

The Quartet in A minor that Mendelssohn completed on October 26, 1827, was the product of this entire congeries of influences—Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, plus, of course, his own genius—which were further enflamed by a *petite affaire de le cœur*. The previous spring, shortly before matriculating at Berlin University, Mendelssohn had indulged in a short holiday at Sakrow, the Magnus family estate near Potsdam, and there he fell in love, at least a little. The circumstances, even the maiden's name, are uncertain (one Betty Pistor, a family friend and a member of a choir for which Mendelssohn was then piano accompanist, has been advanced as a possibility), but he was sufficiently moved by the experience to set to music a poem of his friend Johann Gustav Droyson that began, “Is it true

[*Ist es wahr?*] that you are always waiting for me in the arboved walk?” The piece, published two years later under the title *Frage* (“Question”) as the first number of his Op. 9 set of songs, was woven as thematic material into the new A minor Quartet. The score was published in 1829 as Mendelssohn's Op. 13.

“In this work, the mature composer stands revealed,” wrote Homer Ulrich of Mendelssohn's A minor Quartet in his comprehensive survey of the chamber repertory. “All the melodic charm, all the perfection of detail, all the deftness of touch we associate with the later works are present in this Quartet from his eighteenth year.” This Quartet is also the most Beethovenian of Mendelssohn's works, embracing bold contrasts, adventurous harmonies, complex counterpoint, cyclical procedures, multi-compartmented movements, and a pervasive impassioned expression that lend this music an urgency which Mendelssohn seldom recaptured. At a performance of the Quartet at a Paris salon, a music-loving priest nudged Mendelssohn during the finale, and whispered, “He does that in one of his symphonies.” “Who?” asked the composer. “Why, Beethoven, the author of this Quartet,” came the reply. “That was bittersweet,” Mendelssohn allowed.

The Quartet opens with a slow introduction whose A major tonality serves as an emotional foil for the tempestuous main body of the movement. Two arching phrases—the second soaring high in the first violin's compass—preface the quotation of the searching motto phrase from *Ist Es Wahr?*, recognizable by its long-short-long rhythm. The music's tempo and energy are quickened by scurrying filigree before the viola initiates the principal theme, based on the motto rhythm. The cello posits a lyrical melody as the complementary subject. The scurrying phrases return to mark the onset of the development section, which is remarkable for the intensity of its counterpoint and its nearly febrile mood. The recapitulation serves both to return and to enhance the earlier themes before the movement closes with an explosive coda that stops without resolving the music's strong tensions. The deeply felt *Adagio* offers another paraphrase of

the motto theme at beginning and end as the frame for the somber, densely packed fugal episode that occupies the middle of the movement. The third movement, titled *Intermezzo*, uses a charmingly folkish tune, daintily scored, in its outer sections to surround an ethereal passage of musical featherstitching at the center. Both ideas are deftly combined in the coda. A dramatic cadenza-recitative for the violin over tremolo harmonies, reminiscent of the fourth movement of Beethoven's A minor Quartet, Op. 132, launches the finale. A clutch of highly charged motives is presented and worked out with great intensity as the music unfolds. The work closes not with a wail of tragedy or with a sunburst of redemption, but with a recall of the Quartet's most introspective moments—first the theme of the *Adagio*, and then the introduction from the opening movement, bringing with it a final reflection upon the music and thought, *Ist Es Wahr?*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) Quartet in A minor, Op. 132

Composed in 1825. Premiered on September 9, 1825, in Vienna, played by the Schuppanzigh Quartet.

“I sit pondering and pondering. I have long known what I want to do, but I can't get it down on paper. I feel I am on the threshold of great things.” Those words of Beethoven, written in 1822, were prophetic. At the time, he was still involved in the five years of Herculean labor that finally yielded up the *Missa Solemnis* in 1823, a task that demanded all of his concentration lest it be crowded from his thoughts by a head (and sketchbook) full of yet unconnected ideas for a new symphony, into which, he was convinced, he needed to somehow take the unprecedented step of integrating a chorus. The string quartet, a genre for which he had not written in a dozen years, was also on Beethoven's mind, as evidenced by a letter of June 5, 1822, to the Leipzig publisher Carl Friedrich Peters urging him to consider issuing a new quartet that he would have ready “very soon.” Burdened by poor health, financial difficulties (Rossini was

appalled at the squalor of Beethoven's small, dank apartment when he visited him that year), the emotional drain of being guardian to a worthless nephew, and the obsession with finishing the *Missa* and the Ninth Symphony, it was, however, to be some time before he was able to return to quartet writing in earnest.

On November 9, 1822, Prince Nikolas Galitzin, a devotee of Beethoven's music and an amateur cellist, wrote from St. Petersburg asking Beethoven for “one, two or three quartets, for which labor I will be glad to pay you whatever amount you think proper.” Beethoven was elated by the commission, and he immediately accepted it and set the fee of 50 ducats for each quartet, a high price, but one readily accepted by Galitzin. The music, however, took somewhat longer. The Ninth Symphony was completed in February 1823, but Beethoven, exhausted, was unable to begin Galitzin's quartets until May. “I am really impatient to have a new quartet of yours,” badgered Galitzin. “Nevertheless, I beg you not to mind and to be guided in this only by your inspiration and the disposition of your mind.” The first of the quartets for Galitzin (E-flat major, Op. 127) was not completed until February 1825; the second (A minor, Op. 132) was finished five months later; and the third (B-flat major, Op. 130) was written between July and November, during one of the few periods of relatively good health that Beethoven enjoyed in his last decade. (Beethoven completed the Opp. 131 and 135 Quartets the following year to round out this stupendous ultimate series of his compositions.) Galitzin received his three new scores in fine copies by the middle of 1826, and promised payment “in a day or two.” The Prince, for all his good intentions and evident sympathy for Beethoven's creative process, however, found himself, as he put it, “awkwardly placed” at the time, and the bill remained unpaid. (During the preceding year, one of Galitzin's children died, his wife fell gravely ill, and his indirect involvement in a revolutionary movement brought him to the edge of bankruptcy.) Beethoven sued for his money without success, and the account was not finally settled until 1852 (!) between Galitzin's son and Beethoven's heirs.

The A minor Quartet, Op. 132, was the product of the difficult first months of 1825. Beethoven had begun sketching the piece by the end of the previous year, but before he could progress very far with it, he was stricken with a serious intestinal inflammation, a frequent bane of his later years. “I am not feeling well,” he complained to Dr. Anton Braunhofer on April 18th. “I hope that you will not refuse to come to my help, for I am in great pain.” Braunhofer was alarmed by the composer’s condition, and gave him strict advice: “No wine; no coffee; no spices of any kind.... I’ll wager that if you take a drink of spirits, you’ll be lying weak and exhausted on your back in a few hours.” The physician also recommended a recuperation in the country to allow for the plentiful imbibing of “fresh air” and “natural milk.” Beethoven had recovered sufficiently by May 7th to repair to the distant Viennese suburb of Baden, and remained there—with occasional visits to the city—until mid-October. It was at Baden that the A minor Quartet was largely written. Beethoven’s illness and recovery touch directly on the music of the Quartet, which takes as its centerpiece a magnificent *Adagio* titled *Heiliger Dankesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart* (“A Sacred Song of Thanks from One Made Well, to the Divine; in the Lydian Mode.”). Though not specifically programmatic, the Quartet, whose overall structure follows the minor-to-major, dark-to-light progression familiar from the Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, evidences what Joseph de Marliave called “the habitual state of mind of the composer: the fight against destiny, the triumph of joy over pain.” Maynard Solomon observed that “music here appears to become an implicit agency of healing, a talisman against death.”

The première of the A minor Quartet was given by the ensemble of violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, a champion of Beethoven’s works in earlier years and the first musician in Austria to undertake public quartet concerts. Schuppanzigh had been in Russia for some time and only returned to Vienna at the end of April 1823, when he resumed his series of concerts, which once again became major events

in the city’s musical life. Schuppanzigh gave the first performance of the Op. 132 Quartet on September 9, 1825, at the Hotel Der Wilden Mann in Vienna to an audience of about 14 persons. Beethoven had enticed the publisher Maurice Schlesinger to come from Paris to hear the new work, and he was so impressed with the piece that he agreed immediately to issue the score. Schuppanzigh’s quartet played the work again privately two days later, and gave its public premiere in Vienna on November 6th. The reaction to all of these performances was uniformly laudatory.

Basil Lam summarized the structural logic of the A minor Quartet in the following manner: “No other composition in all Beethoven’s works shows the unintegrated contrasts of this Quartet. Once he had become possessed by the unique vision of the *Heiliger Dankesang* [‘Holy Song of Thanks’], no solution of the formal problem was available other than to surround it with sound images united only by their total diversity.” The *Adagio*, then, is not only the central element in the five-movement structure of the Quartet, but is also its expressive heart. The movement’s form alternates varied versions of a hymnal theme of otherworldly stillness based on the ancient church modes with a more rhythmically dynamic strain marked *Neue Kraft fühlend* (“feeling new strength”), a technique also used in the Fifth and Ninth Symphonies. The *Heiliger Dankesang* is one of the most stunningly rapturous creations in 19th-century music.

To support a slow movement of such magnitude requires surrounding music of considerable breadth and emotional weight, and Beethoven chose to precede it with a large sonata form and a fully developed scherzo and trio. The opening movement, craggy and sometimes even belligerently willful in its progress, is based on several terse ideas presented in the exposition: a slow-moving motive in melodic half-steps; a melancholy violin line with dotted rhythms; a playful little imitative episode that serves as the formal second theme; and a more lyrical strain presented by the violins above a galloping triplet accompaniment. There is a brief development section, mostly based on the half-step motive

and the melancholy melody, before the apparent recapitulation of the themes begins. Though the themes are presented in proper order and balance, they are not properly adjusted as to key, and another full recapitulation, suitably transposed, is required before the movement can end. The long scherzo, in A major, developed almost entirely from the violin motive heard in the fifth measure, is paired with a central trio whose flowing themes are often rhythmically displaced.

Beethoven followed the transcendent *Heiliger Dankesang* with one of his most glaring formal incongruities—a little march of four-square structure whose emotional blandness provides an almost shocking descent from the exalted realms of the *Adagio*. This movement lasts only a short time, however, and it is linked to the finale by an instrumental recitative, as Beethoven had done in the Ninth Symphony. The last movement, in fact, is based on a theme that he had originally intended for that Symphony, but which here becomes the subject for a vast sonata-rondo that gains the hard-won, victorious luminosity of A major in its closing pages.

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Caroline Bittencourt

EMBODYING the quintessential elements of a chamber music ensemble, the **Danish String Quartet** has established a reputation for possessing an integrated sound, impeccable intonation, and judicious balance. With its technical and interpretive talents matched by an infectious joy for music-making, the quartet is in demand worldwide by concert and festival presenters alike. Since making its debut in 2002 at the Copenhagen Festival, the group of musical friends has demonstrated a passion for Scandinavian composers, who they frequently incorporate into adventurous contemporary programs, while also proving skilled and profound performers of the classical masters. Last season, *The New York Times* selected their concert as a highlight of the year: “One of the most powerful renditions of Beethoven’s Opus 132 String Quartet that I’ve heard live or on a recording.” This scope of talent has secured them a three-year appointment in the coveted Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center’s CMS Two Program beginning in the 2013–2014 season and they have also been named as a BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artist for 2013–2015.

Repertoire featured in the Danish String Quartet’s 2013–2014 season engagements includes works by Hans Abrahamsen, Beethoven, Debussy, Osvaldo Golijov, Peter Lieberson, Ligeti, Mendelssohn, Carl Nielsen, and Shostakovich. The Quartet begins its season in the United States in November with a performance at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., followed by a new-music performance at Lincoln Center’s Kaplan Penthouse in November 2013 and a concert in New York City’s Alice Tully Hall in February 2014, presented by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. The Quartet also makes its Cal Performances debut and its Boston debut as part of the Boston Celebrity Series, in addition to season performances in St. Cloud, Dallas, Detroit, San Diego, Sedona, and Princeton. The Danish String Quartet made its West Coast debut in summer 2013 at Music@Menlo.

Since winning the Danish Radio P2 Chamber Music Competition in 2004, the Quartet has been in great demand throughout Denmark, and in October 2013 presented the seventh annual DSQ-Musifest, a three-day

festival held in Copenhagen that brings together musical friends the Quartet has met on its travels. Outside of its homeland, the Quartet will perform in the United Kingdom, Spain, Germany, Northern Ireland, Australia, Norway, and Poland during the 2013–2014 season.

In 2009, the Quartet won First Prize in the eleventh London International String Quartet Competition, as well as four additional prizes from the same jury. This competition is now called the Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition, and the Danish String Quartet has performed at the famed hall on several occasions. It will return to Wigmore Hall in April 2014 to perform a program of Beethoven and Haydn.

The Danish String Quartet was awarded First Prize in the Vagn Holmboe String Quartet Competition and the Charles Hennen International Chamber Music Competition in Holland, as well as the Audience Prize in the Trondheim International String Quartet Competition in 2005. The Quartet was awarded the 2010 Nordmetall-Ensemble Prize at the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Festival in Germany and, in 2011, received the prestigious Carl Nielsen Prize.

In 2006, the Danish String Quartet was Danish Radio’s Artist-in-Residence, giving them the opportunity to record all of Carl Nielsen’s string quartets in the Danish Radio

Concert Hall, subsequently released to critical acclaim on the Dacapo label in 2007 and 2008. In 2012, the Quartet released an equally acclaimed recording of Haydn and Brahms quartets on the German AVI Music label, and recently recorded works by Brahms and Fuchs with award-winning clarinetist Sebastian Manz at the Bayerische Rundfunk in Munich to be released by AVI Music in early 2014. The Quartet’s love of Scandinavian music has been captured in a recording of folk music that it released on its own label in September 2013.

Violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard met as children at a music summer camp where they played both football and music together, eventually making the transition into a serious string quartet in their teens and studying at Copenhagen’s Royal Academy of Music. In 2008, the three Danes were joined by Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin. The Danish String Quartet was primarily taught and mentored by Tim Frederiksen and has participated in master classes with the Tokyo and Emerson string quartets, Alasdair Tait, Paul Katz, Hugh Maguire, Levon Chilingirian, and Gábor Takács-Nagy.

The Danish String Quartet is represented in North America by Kirshbaum Demler & Associates, Inc., 711 West End Avenue, Suite 5KN, New York, New York 10025.