

Sunday, November 10, 2019, 3pm  
Hertz Hall

## Danish String Quartet

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

### PROGRAM

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685–1750) Fugue No. 24 in B minor, BWV 869,  
(arr. Emanuel Aloys Förster) from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

Alfred SCHNITTKE (1934–1998) String Quartet No. 3  
Andante  
Agitato  
Pesante

### INTERMISSION

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770–1827) String Quartet No. 13 in B-flat major, Op. 130,  
with *Grosse Fuge*, Op. 133  
Adagio ma non troppo – Allegro  
Presto  
Andante con moto ma non troppo  
Alla danza tedesca. Allegro assai  
Cavatina. Adagio molto espressivo  
Finale. Allegro

*The Danish String Quartet is currently exclusive with ECM Records  
and has previously recorded for DaCapo and Cavi-Music/BR Klassik.*

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Ideally, each work on a concert program will provide a context for the others. The members of the Danish String Quartet have conceived a five-concert series of such programs, each including a Bach fugue, one of Beethoven's last string quartets, and music by a later composer (Mendelssohn, Webern, Bartók, Shostakovich, and Schnittke). In every program, Beethoven provides what the DSQ calls a prism through which to experience the other works. *Prism* is what the DSQ musicians call their project. This afternoon's performance is part of it.

Bach's fugues fascinated Beethoven and surely formed his own concept of fugue, however far he may have strayed from Bach—and his *Grosse Fuge* strays. In the later 20th century, Alfred Schnittke brought the *Grosse Fuge* into his String Quartet No. 3. These three works look ahead to and back on each other, yet each is strongly profiled and individual, created by a supersized artistic personality.

### Johann Sebastian Bach

**Fugue No. 24 in B minor, BWV 869, from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I (arranged for string quartet by Emanuel Aloys Förster)**  
Johann Sebastian Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* includes two "books," or two sets each of 24 preludes and fugues, in all major and minor keys. He completed the first set in 1722.

Bach intended these preludes and fugues as pedagogical devices, and with them he provided examples of a tuning system that would work well in any key. While most scholars believe Bach meant to exhibit the benefits of equal temperament, a system proposed only 30 years before he published Book I of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, researchers now leave some wiggle room since Bach tuned his own keyboard instruments to his preferences, and not much is known about those. But no abstruse discussion of tuning systems need interfere with enjoyment of music so filled with passion and reflection. Beethoven was just one of the many who revered these preludes and fugues, not only for the technique they exhibited, but as examples of how technique supports expressiveness.

Emanuel Aloys Förster (1748–1823), Prussian-born, settled in Vienna around 1780. There he composed and taught music, became friends with Mozart and Haydn, and earned the admiration of Beethoven. To make string transcriptions of Bach fugues was not an idea original with Förster. Mozart had already done so and had even supplied new preludes of his own. In Förster's elegant transcription of Bach's B minor Fugue, the lines fall naturally into the four channels of the string quartet, and Bach's textures emerge in relief. The pace is steady, the themes simple and pristine, a reasoned music whose pensive opening is soon countered with the entry of a new major-mode voice that injects just a touch of optimism before all parties continue, advancing their intelligent contributions in supremely civil conversation.

### Alfred Schnittke

#### String Quartet No. 3

If this quartet from 1983 is your first encounter with Alfred Schnittke, you may believe its opening prepares you for a soothing meditation. A few more seconds will shatter your expectations and tell you a few things about this man: that he was a polystylist, and that he wrote the kind of music you'd guess the Soviet authorities would have hated. (For the most part, they did.)

Schnittke was born to a German father and a Volga-Deutsch mother in Engels, an industrial city about 450 miles southeast of Moscow. At 12, he began to study music in Vienna, where his journalist father had been transferred. Schnittke completed his studies at the Moscow Conservatory and taught there until 1972, when he began supporting himself by composing for film. He scored 60-odd movies, and that work, demanding quick responses to the ever-changing emotional twists of plot, conditioned the style of his concert music. His enormous output included nine symphonies, three operas, four string quartets, and many, many concertos.

With the international honors his music was receiving, and in a Soviet Union beginning to relax its strictures on artists, Schnittke was spared the indignities and bullying heaped on

earlier Soviet composers. But no bureaucrat could have been happy with something as deeply strange as the composer's Symphony No. 1, a love-it-or-loathe-it hour of dissonance that sounds like the work of a Russian Charles Ives and that demands so much patience and serious listening, it practically begged the Composers Union to ban it (the Composers Union obliged). Schnittke so displeased the authorities that in 1980 he was prohibited from traveling outside the country. In 1990, a year after the Berlin Wall fell, he settled in Hamburg, where in 1998 he died at 63.

The String Quartet No. 3 is the kind of emotion-laden work you might expect from a composer so closely attuned to film. Very simplistically, you can take polystylism to mean the incorporation and refashioning of found objects into your own work. The quartet begins with a quotation from the *Stabat mater* by the 16th-century Flemish composer Orlando di Lasso, establishing a serenity immediately dispatched by a drone that grows louder and tighter under the second violin's plucked strings. In a film, this ominous figure might accompany careful steps into a dark room; in musical terms, it recalls the opening of Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*. The melodic gesture from Beethoven is not so far from Shostakovich's signature DSCH motif, and that too is submerged in the texture (the names German assigns to musical tones enabled Shostakovich to notate his initials; translated into English, they are D/E-flat/C/B). A disintegration morphs into languid siren-like lines. While apparently quoting Lasso, Beethoven, and Shostakovich, Schnittke transforms their themes—you might say he views them through a prism—and builds a tight structure all his own.

The second movement begins as a kind of waltz, but again Lasso intrudes. Roughly halfway through, the mood reverts to the mysterious atmosphere of the quartet's opening. The tempo shifts into overdrive and, as in Beethoven's fugue, verges toward chaos. The final movement, following with no break, opens with a grand *Grosse Fuge*-like gesture. Lasso returns, and Beethoven, in an extended meditative passage, subdued and tense to the end.

You don't need to know where Schnittke found his themes, although awareness of his sources will undoubtedly help read extra-musical meaning into the work, if you're so inclined. (Some listeners have interpreted the conglomeration and wrenching apart of snippets old and new to suggest integration, or breakdown, or both.) Schnittke maintained his goal was to unite serious and light music, by which he had to have meant something beyond what many other composers have done, composers such as Beethoven, Brahms, Dvořák, Stravinsky, Copland, Adams. "It's not surprising," writes Solomon Volkov, "that Schnittke's music irritates many who feel that the composer has set out to confuse them by combining obviously disjointed and incongruous elements." All that aside, music works better as music than as philosophical statement. As music, this quartet stands on its own.

### Ludwig van Beethoven

#### String Quartet in B-flat major, Op. 130, with *Grosse Fuge*, Op. 133

By the mid-1820s, when Beethoven wrote his last string quartets, he had long since made deafness work in his favor. Without the reality of sound to confine his imagination, a new world of musical possibilities opened. Unconventional his late works may be, but the challenges they present to a listener are their own reward. And while Beethoven's contemporaries may have found his late works odd, the 200 years between then and now have been filled with so many wonders and horrors that rhythmic displacements and unexpected harmonies, far from being alien to the world we know, seem to mirror it.

Beethoven ridiculed the quartet's first audience, those cattle and asses (his words) unable to get their ears around the great serious fugue with which he capped the first five movements, all of them immediately appealing in their own way. But in fact he was not sure his finale was right, and when his publisher asked for an alternate ending, he very uncharacteristically consented. (The fugue was published separately as his Opus 133.) These days, string players tend to favor the fugue over Beethoven's alternate

ending. To call the *Grosse Fuge* a *tour de force* is to give it short shrift. It retains all its power to shake and disturb. Beethoven hoped his contemporaries could come to terms with it, and while such hope may seem clueless, perhaps he felt he had provided enough audience-pleasing music in the first five movements for his listeners to cut him some slack at the end. He seems at last to have admitted he had gone too far, and in his new finale he offered something short and sunny, more in keeping with the spirit of the earlier movements and, because it is in proportion to them, transferring the work's center of gravity to the Cavatina. The alternate ending is worth hearing, and adopting it arguably makes for a more balanced, structurally sound string quartet. But also one less interesting.

At first hearing the individual movements have little apparent in common, but from so careful a builder as Beethoven we expect relationships and correspondences between movements. The grave unison opening, for one example, will find its counterpart in the first measures of the fugal finale. Although this first movement is tightly knit, it seems bipolar, shifting constantly between a somber adagio and an upbeat (even ecstatic) allegro.

The brief presto that follows is a magical display of perpetual motion, not a measure too many or too few.

The Andante picks up where the Presto left off, and a similar sense of endless movement inhabits the flowing melody, rippled with gestures that seem continually to repeat but which, like the swells that wrinkle a river's surface, are never exactly the same. The first violin yearns his opening line, an anticipation of the great tune at the heart of the Cavatina.

This quartet is a fusion of the exalted and the popular. The German dance movement proves that Beethoven could write a tune with the best

of them. Set to words and sung on Broadway, this would be a show-stopper.

A cavatina is a song or aria; the word is related to the now obsolete *cavation*, a hollowing out, as in *excavation*. In this darkly voiced music, Beethoven indeed mines a vein of emotion. After stately reflection from the ensemble, the second violin introduces a song-without-words that is one of Beethoven's most beautiful creations, a soulful cousin to the preceding movement's show-stopping dance. Against a pulsing figure, the first violin utters anguished, broken phrases that fade at last into tranquility.

Now comes the epic finale, so different from what has preceded it. After a brief introduction of themes, the slashing fugue interrupts and continues with increasing ferocity. In great jabs, first and second themes are torn apart, fused, transformed. Watch the players. See what effort this brutal music demands. After an interlude of calm, the dynamic level rises abruptly. Beethoven taunts us, then throws us back into rough water growing rougher. Casting off all restraint, the music threatens to spin out of control. Only concentration and muscle can hold it together. Suddenly it seems to exhaust itself and for a moment grows almost giddy. Again momentum gathers, subsides, bursts out in one more recall of the slashing figure that initiated the fugue. Then Beethoven reconciles his themes, then closes. Triumphantlly.

—Larry Rothe

*Larry Rothe, who writes about music for Cal Performances and the San Francisco Opera, has written for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, and San Francisco Symphony. His books include For the Love of Music and Music for a City, Music for the World.*

“One of the best quartets before the public today” (*The Washington Post*), the Grammy-nominated Danish String Quartet astonishes audiences with its “nimble charisma, stylish repertoire, and the way [its] light and grainy shading can turn on a dime” (*The Guardian*). Beyond even its impeccable musicianship and sophisticated artistry, the quartet’s playing reflects an expressivity and joyful spontaneity that animates repertoire from Haydn to Shostakovich to contemporary scores. The recipient of many awards and prestigious appointments, including *Musical America*’s 2020 Ensemble of the Year and the Borletti-Buitoni Trust, the Danish String Quartet was named in 2013 as BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artists and appointed to the Bowers Program (formerly CMS Two).

In the 2019–20 season, the Danish String Quartet returns to North America in three tours that celebrate Beethoven’s 250th birth anniversary. Along with Berkeley, the quartet appears in Minneapolis, Vancouver, Portland, Seattle, Rohnert Park, Santa Barbara, Irvine, Montreal, Chicago, Detroit, Denver, Boston, and Iowa City, and brings a concert series to La Jolla Music Society this month as part of a three-year residency there. In February 2020, the group returns to Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center to perform the entire Beethoven cycle, and, in May, the musicians present that program in St. Paul (MN) as the Schubert Club’s 2019–20 Featured Ensemble. European engagements include London’s Wigmore Hall, Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw, and multiple dates in Denmark, as well as tours of Germany, Brussels, the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain.

Committed to reaching new audiences through special projects, the quartet in 2007 established the DSQ Festival, which takes place at Copenhagen’s Bygningkulturens Hus and features meticulously curated programs with dis-

tinguished guest artists. In 2016, the group inaugurated a new music festival, Series of Four, which finds its home at the venerable Danish Radio Concert Hall.

The Danish String Quartet has received numerous citations and prizes, including First Prize in the Vagn Homboe String Quartet Competition, the Charles Hennen International



Chamber Music Competition, and the 11th London International String Quartet Competition. In 2011, the quartet received the Carl Nielsen Prize, the highest cultural honor in Denmark. *Last Leaf*, the ensemble’s album of traditional Scandinavian folk music recorded for ECM, was named one of the top classical albums of 2017 by NPR, Spotify, the *New York Times*, and others.

Violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard met as children at a music summer camp, where they played soccer and made music together. As teenagers, they began studying classical chamber music under Tim Frederiksen of Copenhagen’s Royal Danish Academy of Music. In 2008, the three Danes were joined by Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin. For more information, visit [www.danishquartet.com](http://www.danishquartet.com).

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