



Sunday, March 19, 2023, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Castalian Quartet

Sini Simonen, *violin*
Daniel Roberts, *violin*
Ruth Gibson, *viola*
Steffan Morris, *cello*

PROGRAM

Joseph HAYDN (1732–1809) String Quartet in D major, Op. 20,
No. 4 (1772)
Allegro di molto
Un poco adagio affettuoso
Allegretto alla zingarese
Presto (scherzando)

Kaija SAARIAHO (b. 1952) *Terra Memoria* (2006)

INTERMISSION

Franz Schubert (1797–1828) String Quartet in G major, D. 887 (1826)
Allegro molto moderato
Andante un poco moto
Scherzo: Allegro vivace
Allegro assai

This performance is made possible, in part, by the E. Nakamichi Foundation.

**Haydn, Saariaho, and Schubert:
Quartets from Three Centuries**

That the top of the cover page of one of the first print editions of Joseph Haydn's Op. 20 set of string quartets was decorated with the image of a rising sun—hence the nickname “Sun Quartets,” which is sometimes encountered—has always seemed emphatically appropriate. Through the cogency of his invention and architectural vision in these works, Haydn proclaimed the birth of a new day for this form of chamber music. The example that the Castalian Quartet has chosen to open their program, published as the fourth in the Op. 20 six-pack, characteristically upends conventional expectations through adventurous detours and games of harmony and time.

The Castalians then fast-forward to our own century to present Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho's contribution to the string quartet medium. Her arresting *Terra Memoria* deploys a far wider array of string techniques and textures than Haydn, but they share an underlying goal of intimate communication. The composer's website describes her music as “not a working out of abstract processes, but an urgent communication from composer to listener of ideas, images, and emotions.”

Legend holds that Franz Schubert requested a special private performance of Beethoven's Op. 131 just days before his premature death in 1828—the year following Beethoven's own death—and was moved to exclaim: “After this, what is left for us to write?” But the world would not know for decades of the towering masterpiece Schubert himself had already created with his String Quartet in G major, which fills out our program.

Invention and Contrast:**Haydn's Quartet in D major from Op. 20**

“We had some exquisite quartets by Haydn, executed in the utmost perfection,” observed the English music histo-

rian and composer Charles Burney about a visit to Vienna in 1772. That was the year in which the composer, then 40 years old, composed his Op. 20 set of six string quartets. Their publication two years later, in Paris, represents a milestone in the history not only of the string quartet but of Western music itself, according to Sir Donald Tovey, who famously declared that “there is perhaps no single or sextuple opus in the history of instrumental music which has achieved so much.”

Haydn had experimented with the medium in the second half of the 1750s but then put it aside until the 1770s, when he focused intensively on its potential in the Op. 9, Op. 17, and Op. 20 sets (all composed between c. 1769 and 1772); another hiatus of nearly a decade separated this explosion of creative energy from the ensuing set of quartets (Op. 33, heralded by the composer as representing “a completely new and special style”). Haydn was employed at the time by the fabulously wealthy Prince Nikolaus Esterházy I, but, according to the musicologist James Webster, there is no documentary record of string quartet performances at the court per se, so he may have written these three batches for admirers in Vienna. The quartets would play a crucial role in spreading his name internationally.

Invention and impactful contrasts are hallmarks of the Op. 20 set, which encompasses exuberant high spirits and somber intensity, with two of the quartets written in minor keys. The Quartet in D major itself juxtaposes deep reflection with comic, off-beat romping in the second and third movements, respectively. The opening surprises with its softness, even reserve, but is soon kicked into an extroverted mood of vigorous virtuosity. Haydn of course generates engaging drama from this inherent tension and from false-flag gestures such as the prolonging of the moment of recapitulation. These feints send us down one rabbit hole after another of musical development.

The second movement, unusually headed “Un poco adagio affettuoso,” shifts to the minor and presents a set of variations. In this case, the theme that is varied is in itself so astonishingly beautiful that Haydn’s ability to uncover so many more facets becomes a *tour de force* of creative invention. (Note, for example, the cello’s starring role in the second variation.) The coda’s depth of feeling anticipates something of the Romantic spirit to come. The outburst of vital energy in the minuet is almost jarring in its contrast, but at the outset Haydn actually recycles the same four notes he had used for the slow movement’s theme (now in the major key) to suggest these are two sides of the same coin. The metrical invention in this third movement is especially playful in its syncopated romping, setting the stage for the finale’s scintillating comedy and high jinks. The four musicians ensemble sing, dance, and even giggle—and, to top it all off, lose their voices in the end.

Of Matter and Memory: Saariaho’s Sonic Poetry

The music world is celebrating the 70th birthday of Kaija Saariaho this season—she reached that milestone in October—but the Finnish composer is not one to rest on her accumulated laurels. Cal Performances audiences who attended the 2015–16 season had a chance to sample the variety of her inspirations when Saariaho was featured in a residency that included concerts, master classes, and conversations. Her *oeuvre* ranges from intimate chamber works to trailblazing operas, including the recent *Innocence*, a searing drama involving gun violence that will receive its Bay Area premiere at San Francisco Opera in June 2024. Her debut opera from 2000, *Lamour de loin*, became the second work by a woman to be staged in the history of the Metropolitan Opera.

Saariaho is driven by the artist’s desire to communicate, but she simultaneously pos-

sesses the determined curiosity of a scientist in her investigations of sonic textures and possibilities. Collaborating with fellow artists at IRCAM, the musical research center established by Pierre Boulez in Paris (which she has made her home since 1982), Saariaho experimented early on with electronic-acoustic hybrids. She was influenced by the approach to instrumental timbre pioneered by IRCAM’s so-called “Spectralist” composers, who used computer analyses of the complex array of sounds produced by a particular tone or chord.

In Saariaho’s compositions—which, like *Terra memoria*, sometimes create the illusion of electronics through purely acoustic instruments—sounds sometimes seem to hover and shift about the listener like a mobile sculpture and acquire an uncanny, ghostlike tangibility even as they evoke the aura of unstable mirages. Her music is intensely mindful of the implications of resonance, even of the relative weights of sound textures.

These implications permeate *Terra Memoria*, her second work for the string quartet medium. Her first, *Nymphéa*, dates from 1987 and was inspired by the image of a water lily floating on a liquid surface. It incorporates her spectralist analysis of the sounds of the cello and uses live transformations through electronics of the music generated acoustically by the string players. Almost two decades later came the request to write a piece for the Emerson Quartet, which was commissioned by Carnegie Hall, resulting in *Terra Memoria*. The Emersons gave the premiere on June 17, 2007; Saariaho subsequently created a version for string orchestra.

The ways in which sounds come into being and fade back into non-existence hold endless fascination for Saariaho. Music involves a process of making sense of this phenomenon through memory. *Terra Memoria* inscribes into its title—the Latin words for “earth” and “memory,” respectively—this

cycle of tangible reality and its lingering presence. The composer dedicates it “to those departed.” She explains: “We continue remembering the people who are no longer with us; the material—their life—is ‘complete,’ nothing will be added to it. Those of us who are left behind are constantly reminded of our experiences together: our feelings continue to change about different aspects of their personality, certain memories keep on haunting us in our dreams. Even after many years, some of these memories change, some remain clear flashes which we can relive.”

Saariaho’s reflections influenced her treatment of the musical material. “Some aspects of it go through several distinctive transformations, whereas some remain nearly unchanged, clearly recognizable,” the composer writes. The title *Terra Memoria* encapsulates the relationship: the material itself is represented by her concept of “earth,” or corporeal reality, while its treatment and transformation take on the role of “memory.”

The piece unfolds in interlinked sections designed in arch form, beginning and ending at the edge of audibility. The musicians are instructed at the beginning to play “extremely softly ... as if the music had been continuing already for a while, but we start hearing it, gradually, only now.” Saariaho’s nuanced instructions incorporate a vast array of string techniques and sound modifications of the instruments and the ensemble texture. The composer writes: “I love the richness and sensitivity of the string sound and, in spite of my spare contribution to the genre, I feel when writing for a string quartet that I’m entering into the intimate core of musical communication.”

Symphonic in Scope: Schubert’s Great Final Quartet

Schubert had been a prolific writer of string quartets when he was a teenager. But these early efforts were mostly trial works or were intended for the comfortable ritual of do-

mestic music-making: a string quartet made up of family members was fond of playing for themselves and friends, with the composer joining in as violist (the same “insider view” preferred by Mozart). Apart from a projected quartet in 1820 (only one movement of which, known as the *Quartettsatz*, was completed, even though it is known as his Quartet No. 12), Schubert composed no more string quartets until 1824, when he produced the first two of his final three quartets in close succession: *Rosamunde* (No. 13) and *Death and the Maiden* (No. 14).

Another pause followed, and in June 1826—over an astoundingly short period of 10 days—Schubert wrote the String Quartet No. 15 in G major, which carries no nickname. It was not performed in public during the composer’s remaining two years of life and was the last of the final three to be published, appearing in 1851; indeed, all of Schubert’s quartets, save the *Rosamunde*, were published posthumously. It is of the same vintage as Schubert’s expansive Piano Sonata in G major, D. 894, which he completed in October of 1826; he is also believed to have completed the *Great Symphony* in C major in the spring or summer of that year. In each of these works, Schubert seems intent on pursuing new, daring, ambitious paths.

The extended proportions of this quartet, as well as the muscular style of its string writing (resulting in notably “big” sonorities), give the composition a sense of symphonic scope. The opening movement, above all, is enormous. Its duration can vary considerably, depending on whether the exposition repeat is followed and, of course, on tempo choices. Overall, the movement “may be regarded as epic or novelistic—in the sense used by Theodor W. Adorno in his book on Mahler,” wrote the musicologist Carl Dahlhaus.

The most immediately striking gesture is the modal ambiguity introduced in the very first measures, with their sudden shift from major to minor. This shift, more than any

thematic “cell,” is the kernel of the G major Quartet and its signature—indeed, the signature of Schubert’s unique sensibility. Given the contemporaneity of Beethoven, together with the magnetic influence the older composer wielded over Schubert, many commentators have compared and contrasted the significance of such modal opposition as used by both composers.

Beethoven, in his “heroic” mode, deploys it with a clear narrative purpose to trace a pattern of “victory” over the troubling implications of the minor. His Fifth Symphony, for example, might be characterized as “optimistic” in the most basic sense that the future is revealed to improve over the past. But Schubert repeatedly equivocates between the modes. Unlike the intensification Beethoven requires, the feeling is closer to the unpredictability of real life.

The Andante is particularly disturbing in its dislocations of the lovely elegy in E minor with which it begins. Schubert’s writing here at times verges on an avant-garde attitude. As in the first movement, tremolos are a sig-

nificant part of the texture. The sense of agitation that these tremolos stir up puzzled Dahlhaus, who wrote that it “hardly seems suited to the idea of epic composure.”

If the lighter scoring of the Scherzo seems to provide mere relief, its contrasting trio merits special attention as the work’s rare oasis of composure—not epic, to be sure, but soul-restoring. It gives the modal oscillation between major and minor, which returns full force in the finale, an even fiercer, more unsettling character. Like the corresponding movement of the D minor Quartet, *Death and the Maiden*, this one assumes the aspect of a wild tarantella, the frenzied dance from southern Italian folklore.

—Thomas May

Thomas May is a writer, critic, educator, and translator. Along with essays regularly commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony, the Juilliard School, the Ojai Festival, and other leading institutions, he contributes to the New York Times and Musical America and blogs about the arts at www.memeteria.com.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Since its formation in 2011, the London-based **Castalian Quartet** has distinguished itself as one of today’s most dynamic and sophisticated young string quartets. Appointed the inaugural Hans Keller String Quartet in Residence at the Oxford University Faculty of Music in 2021, the group is also the recipient of the Royal Philharmonic Society’s 2019 Young Artists Award. The members are gaining international acclaim as they take their talents abroad, having performed at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Berlin Philharmonic, Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, Paris Philharmonie, Vienna Konzerthaus, and Carnegie Hall, among many other esteemed venues worldwide.

The Castalian Quartet will tour North America this season with performances in

San Diego; Schenectady and Buffalo, NY; Middlebury, VT; Waterford, VA; Durham, NC; and Toronto in Canada. The quartet collaborates with many living composers, including recent premieres of works by Mark-Anthony Turnage, Charlotte Bray, and Edmund Finnis. During the 2023–24 season, the group will perform several US concerts with pianist Stephen Hough featuring Hough’s own string quartet in addition to the Brahms quintet. The artists have also established a strong presence abroad, with performances of the complete Haydn Op.76 quartets at Wigmore Hall and concerts at the Paris Philharmonie, the Vienna Konzerthaus, and the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. They have played at the Heidelberger Frühling, East Neuk, Zwischentöne in Engelberg,

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ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Neuchatel Chamber Music Switzerland, and Banff International festivals. Further afield, they have toured China and Colombia.

In spring 2022, the Castalian Quartet released its first recording, *Between Two Worlds* (Delphian), featuring works by Thomas Adès and Beethoven, as well as first violinist Sini Simonen's own arrangements of early works by Orlando de Lassus and John Dowland. *BBC Music Magazine* raved: "Perceptively programmed, *Between Two Worlds* explores the mystic properties of time through a series of intricately connected works, each performed with rare beauty and originality by a quartet working at the height of its powers."

The Castalian Quartet studied with Oliver Wille (Kuss Quartet) at the Hannover University of Music, Drama and Media, graduating with master's degrees. Awards include Third Prize at the 2016 Banff Quartet Competition and First Prize at the 2015 Lyon Chamber Music Competition. The quartet was selected by Young Classical Artists Trust (YCAT) in 2016. The members have received coaching from Simon Rowland-Jones, David Waterman, and Isabel Charisius.

The group's name is derived from the Castalian Spring in the ancient city of Delphi. According to Greek mythology, the nymph Castalia transformed herself into a fountain to evade Apollo's pursuit, thus creating a source of poetic inspiration for all who drink from her waters. Herman Hesse chose Castalia as the name of his futuristic European utopia in *The Glass Bead Game*. The novel's protagonist, a Castalian by the name of Knecht, is mentored in this land of intellectual thought and education by the venerable Music Master.

The Castalian Quartet appears by arrangement with David Rowe Artists:
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