

Tuesday, March 5, 2024, 7:30pm
First Church (Formerly First Congregational Church), Berkeley

Isidore String Quartet

Adrian Steele, *violin* (first on Haydn & Beethoven)
Phoenix Avalon, *violin* (first on Childs)
Devin Moore, *viola*
Joshua McClendon, *cello*

PROGRAM

Joseph HAYDN (1732–1809) String Quartet in C major, Op. 20,
No. 2 (1772)
Moderato
Adagio
Minuetto: Allegretto
Fuga a quattro soggetti

Billy CHILDS (b. 1957) String Quartet No. 2, *Awakening* (2012)
Wake Up Call
The White Room
Song of Healing

INTERMISSION

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770–1827) String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132 (1825)
Assai sostenuto - Allegro
Allegro ma non tanto
Molto adagio - Andante
("Heiliger Dankgesang...")
Alla marcia, assai vivace
Allegro appassionato

The Isidore String Quartet appears by arrangement with David Rowe Artists.
www.davidroweartists.com

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Joseph Haydn**String Quartet in C major, Op. 20, No. 2**

Haydn's Op. 20 quartets are pillars of the string quartet repertoire, works that both solidified the genre as worthy of its own lineage and introduced new compositional techniques into the post-Baroque classical world. They were composed in 1772, when the 40-year old Haydn was already well established as a composer, leading a busy life composing symphonic, chamber, and vocal works for the court of Prince Nikolaus Esterhazy.

In the second of the Op. 20 string quartets, Haydn begins immediately to challenge the existing hierarchy of voices, announcing the theme with a three-voice texture led by the cello. The traditional melodic instrument, the first violin, is made to wait its turn to state the theme once more before the exposition can continue. In the aftermath of such treason, Haydn, never lacking wit, seems almost to tease the first violinist with the cello's sixteenth-note flourishes shortly thereafter, to which the first violin immediately responds with a dramatic run of its own.

Beyond the warm embrace of his melodies and the ease of his musical dialogue, Haydn also veers into darker territory in the quartet, introducing the concept of *Sturm und Drang*, clearly influenced by the burgeoning Romanticism of his contemporaries and the more operatic modes that he was writing in for his other duties in the Esterhazy court. The second movement introduces itself in a desperately grand, almost garishly ornamented statement from the whole ensemble, before a series of outbursts and laments, as if part of an operatic recitative. Haydn pairs this with an ever-developing chromaticism, incredibly apparent in the waning moments of the second movement and in the opening of the third.

In the third movement, Haydn adds to the minuet an ever-present drone, creating a bagpipe-like texture and allowing him to cleverly and chromatically introduce the

subject of the fourth movement fugue against the G drone. In the finale, Haydn once again sets up the drama, marking the quartet *sotto voce* until the dam can no longer hold, leading to a dramatic and unexpected flurry of forte sixteenth notes that leads us to the end of the piece.

—Adrian Steele

Billy Childs (b. 1957)**String Quartet No. 2, *Awakening***

Los Angeles-native Billy Childs began performing publicly on the piano at the age of six and would eventually receive a bachelor's degree in composition from the University of Southern California Community College of the Performance Arts. As a performer and composer, Childs was in demand early on, collaborating with pillars of the jazz industry, signing with Windham Hill Records in 1988, and receiving commissions from prestigious soloists and ensembles (Los Angeles Philharmonic, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Kronos Quartet, Ying Quartet). A formative education, extensive experience, and an unwavering self-conception allowed the five-time Grammy Award-winning musician to develop a unique voice as a pianist and composer in both the classical and jazz worlds.

Commissioned by the Ying Quartet and completed in 2012, Childs' String Quartet No. 2, *Awakening* depicts the emotional, physical, and spiritual journey in dealing with the serious illness of a loved one; it is inspired by Childs' real life experience with his wife. After she was diagnosed with a pulmonary embolism and taken into emergency care, Childs, one state away, was notified of the situation and immediately rushed to be with her. This three-movement work outlines the complex emotional journey, providing insight into the vulnerability of the composer.

The first movement, titled *Wake Up Call*, opens with a tremolo/trill in the second violin and viola, set against snap pizzicato in

the cello, and a 12-tone opening pronouncement in the first violin, expressing his initial shock at learning of his wife's hospitalization. This cacophony of an anxiety-ridden sound world is juxtaposed with a reflective middle section overcome with heartbreakingly lyrical cascades of melody that accumulate throughout the quartet, evoking a sense of uncontrollable anguish, fear, and lamentation. This brief look inside the composer's psyche is swiftly dissipated as the opening material engulfs the music once again. *Wake Up Call* gives us a glimpse into both the external and internal experience of Childs in this time of the unknown.

The White Room, the second movement, conveys the powerlessness and urgency he experienced waiting at her bedside through the use of a plaintive melody set against heartrending bitonal harmonies. Utilizing various extended techniques (false harmonics, glissandos, Bartókian pizzicatos), Childs manifests the feeling of being in the sterile, unwelcoming hospital room devoid of comfort with its blindingly white walls and eerily repetitive machinery noises. The mechanical landscape eventually avalanches into two cadenzas in the viola and first violin that seem to spew rage, anger, and torment. The doubled sixteenth note figure that pervades the movement, resembling a heartbeat, rises and falls as the emotional arch takes shape, eventually settling into a state of numbness and fatigue.

The final movement, *Song of Healing*, is an ode to recovery and rediscovery, with the viola's introductory melody expressing the slow process of healing and a new respect for the transient and delicate nature of life. The centerpiece of this movement is a conversation that occurs between the first violin and cello, signifying the real-life conversation between Childs and his wife as the two began to compartmentalize and understand the impact that this event had on their relationship. The love, trust, and unencumbered expression of emotion can be felt vis-

cerally as this duo rejoins the quartet as the movement comes to a close. A sense of healing, or at least a willingness to heal, is felt as the final chord—a hopeful A major—dissolves into silence.

Childs, through a unique, yet familiar compositional style evocative of 21st-century multigenric perspective, acknowledges and expresses the familiarity of fear, anguish, and resolution regarding the fleeting nature of life, yielding a work that speaks directly to the human experience.

—Devin Moore

Ludwig van Beethoven String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132

The five string quartets and *Grosse Fuge* that Beethoven composed during the last five years of his life mark the pinnacle of his chamber music. Ideas from one spill over to the next. The A minor Quartet was the second of the sequence to be completed and was originally laid out in four movements. Then, in the spring of 1825, Beethoven fell seriously ill, with a variety of debilitating diseases. Towards the end of May, he began to recover and the change in his physical well-being had a profound impact on the quartet.

A central slow movement was the immediate result. Beethoven marked it "Sacred Song of Thanksgiving to the Deity from a Convalescent, in the Lydian Mode" ("Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart"). It is one of the most sublime pieces of music ever written—and one of the longest quartet movements at almost half the length of the quartet itself. Its contemplative stillness is enhanced by the conscious use of an old church mode known as the Lydian mode. Beethoven mentions it in the score, as if to remind us that the old church modes, with their spiritual, often mystical and tonally ambiguous connotations, were a deep source of inspiration in his late works. The slow

movement's successive alternations of *adagio* and *andante* bring new expressions of relief from the composer. These are noted in the margin of his score as "Feeling new strength" and "You returned my strength to find me in the evening" and, in the final section, "With the most intimate feeling." Because of the generally dark character of much of the quartet, this transcendental slow movement seems to radiate inner release from outward suffering.

Beethoven made this slow movement the centerpiece of a vast, arch-like structure. The quartet opens with an Allegro built around two contrasting themes and presenting a thread of unresolved contradictions. The movement departs from conventional form as does the substantial scherzo that follows. Its central pastoral episode, nominally

a trio section, begins with a musette-like theme high on the first violin. It continues with a *ländler* theme that Beethoven wrote down in his sketchbook when he first went to Vienna many years earlier. After the sublime, heavenly slow movement, the mood is abruptly broken by a march—which brings us back to earth with a bump. As in the Ninth Symphony, an instrumental recitative leads to the finale. Its impassioned, waltz-like theme, which gives way to an unequivocal feeling of joy, was, in fact, originally designed to be the finale of the Ninth before Beethoven decided on a choral ending for this work. Both works end with a feeling of transcendence and triumph.

—Keith Horner
Comments welcomed at
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ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Winners of a 2023 Avery Fisher Career Grant, and the 14th Banff International String Quartet Competition in 2022, the New York City-based Isidore String Quartet was formed in 2019 with a vision to revisit, rediscover, and reinvigorate the repertory. The quartet is heavily influenced by the Juilliard String Quartet and the idea of "approaching the established as if it were brand new, and the new as if it were firmly established."

The members of the quartet are violinists Adrian Steele and Phoenix Avalon, violist Devin Moore, and cellist Joshua McClen-don. The four began as an ensemble at the Juilliard School and—following a break during the global pandemic—reconvened at the Kneisel Hall Chamber Music Festival in the summer of 2021 under the tutelage of Joel Krosnick. In addition to Krosnick, the ISQ has coached with Joseph Lin, Astrid Schween, Laurie Smukler, Joseph Kalichstein, Roger Tapping, Misha Amory, Timothy Eddy, Donald Weilerstein, Atar Arad,

Robert McDonald, Christoph Richter, Miriam Fried, and Paul Biss.

The group's Banff triumph resulted in extensive tours of North America and Europe, a two-year appointment as the Peak Fellowship Ensemble-in-Residence at Southern Methodist University in Dallas beginning in 2023-24, and a two-week residency at Banff Centre, including a professionally produced recording along with extensive ongoing coaching, career guidance, and mentorship.

The Isidore Quartet has appeared on major series in Chicago, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Durham, Washington (Kennedy Center), San Antonio, Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa, and has collaborated with eminent performers including James Ehnes, Jeremy Denk, Shai Wosner, and Jon Nakamatsu. The quartet's 2023–24 season features appearances in Boston (Celebrity Series), Washington DC (Phillips Collection), New York (92nd Street Y), Chicago, Baltimore, Ann Arbor, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, Tucson, Phoenix, Santa Fe, La Jolla, Aspen,



Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton; and at Dartmouth College and Spivey Hall in Georgia, among many others. European highlights include Edinburgh, Lucerne, Brussels, Amsterdam, Hanover, Frankfurt, and Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie.

Outside the concert hall, the quartet has worked with *Project: Music Heals Us*, providing encouragement, education, providing encouragement, education, and healing to marginalized communities—including elderly, disabled, rehabilitating, incarcerated, and homeless populations—who otherwise have limited access to high-quality live music performance. The quartet has also been resident ensemble for the Con-

temporary Alexander School/Alexander Alliance International. In conjunction with those well-versed in the world of Alexander Technique, as well as other performers, the ISQ explores the vast landscape of body awareness, mental preparation, and performance practice.

The name “Isidore” recognizes the ensemble's musical connection to the Juilliard Quartet: one of that group's early members was legendary violinist Isidore Cohen. Additionally, it acknowledges a shared affection for a certain libation. Legend has it a Greek monk named Isidore concocted the first genuine vodka recipe for the Grand Duchy of Moscow!

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