

Sunday, February 2, 2025, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Danish String Quartet

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

PROGRAM

- Caroline SHAW (b. 1982) Entr'acte, for string quartet (2011)
...followed, without pause, by...
- Joseph HAYDN (1732–1809) Andante from String Quartet in F Major,
Op. 77, No. 2 (1799)
- Igor STRAVINSKY (1882–1971) Three Pieces for String Quartet (1914)
- Turlough O'CAROLAN (1670–1738) Three Melodies
(arr. by the Danish String Quartet) (late 17th/early 18th century)
Mabel Kelly
Planxty Kelly
Carolan's Quarrel with the Landlady

INTERMISSION

- Dmitri SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975) String Quartet in E-flat minor, Op. 144 (1974)
Elegy: Adagio
Serenade: Adagio
Intermezzo: Adagio
Nocturne: Adagio
Funeral March: Adagio molto
Epilogue: Adagio

Major support for this performance is provided by The Bernard Osher Foundation.

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and has previously recorded for DaCapo and Cavi-Music/BR Klassik.*

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Folk Echoes and Final Reflections: Musical Conversations across Time

For the past several seasons, the Danish String Quartet (DSQ) has intrigued Cal Performances audiences with its multi-part *Doppelgänger* Project, which combined masterpieces from the height of Schubert's career with new works commissioned from four composers—not so much as “responses” but as contemporary counterparts.

The DSQ's latest program weaves together several ongoing threads in the artistic journey of this boldly curious quartet, which will receive the Léonie Sonning Music Prize in June—the first time an ensemble has garnered this prestigious award. One thread is an animated series of excursions into folk music, which is represented by the musical voyage across the North Sea on their 2024 album, *Keel Road* (the title inspired by a phrase in Seamus Heaney's sonnet “The Shipping Forecast”). The DSQ presents its arrangements of melodies by the Baroque-era Irish harp master Turlough O'Carolan in dialogue with several canonical composers who drew ingeniously from folk sources.

Another thread centers around the legacy of Dmitri Shostakovich's string quartets. The DSQ has created a new music theater work, *I Press Your Hands Warmly*, which is inspired by the links between the quartets and the composer's life as documented by his letters. Scheduled to premiere later this year, the project features a collaboration with the Danish actor Lars Mikkelsen (famed for his role in the Netflix series *House of Cards*).

The Art of Transition: Shaw and Haydn

Still another facet to this program is the thought-provoking juxtaposition of works from different eras—a signature of the DSQ. As in the *Doppelgänger* Project, this can involve pairings of canonical composers with today's creative voices. The ensemble begins with a particularly arresting example of this dynamic interplay, opening with music from the 21st century.

Caroline Shaw was only 30 when she received the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Music for her radiant *a cappella* piece *Partita for 8 Voices* (becoming the youngest-ever recipient of the award). Now one of the most sought-after American composers, Shaw has deep roots in string music, having played violin from a very young age. She founded her own string quartet while in high school, and the first full-length album devoted exclusively to her compositions, *Orange* (2019), is a Grammy Award-winning anthology of her pieces for string quartet performed by the Attacca Quartet.

Entr'acte is a relatively early work dating from 2011, when Shaw was a graduate student at Princeton. It also exists in versions for string orchestra and a small wind ensemble and has entered into pop culture thanks to its use in an episode of the television series *Mozart in the Jungle*. (Shaw appeared in the fourth season, when a conductor attempts to impress her with a surprise audition in which he leads a band in the piece outside her apartment.)

Shaw writes that the impetus for *Entr'acte* was hearing the Brentano Quartet play the very last of Haydn's string quartets (the String Quartet in F major, Op. 77, No. 2). She points specifically to “their spare and soulful shift to the D-flat major trio in the minuet.” *Entr'acte* is a single-movement work modeled on the format of a minuet and trio (in other words, an ABA structure, with a highly contrasting middle section)—“riffing on that classical form but taking it a little further.” The title *Entr'acte* underscores the musical events often passed over as shifts or “transitions” from one section to another.

While composing the piece, Shaw experimented with novel sonorities, including new ways to incorporate plucked strings. Her fellow violinist Alex Fortes describes how Shaw “found an interesting timbre by stopping the string with the bow on the bridge and plucking with the left hand,” generating “a very delicate but sustained

sound” that is an important part of the soundscape of *Entr'acte*.

At times, the classical past seems distantly filtered, like afterimages of a dream recalled with effort. Says the composer: “I love the way some music (like the minuets of Op. 77) suddenly takes you to the other side of Alice’s looking glass, in a kind of absurd, subtle, technicolor transition.”

The DSQ proceeds without pause into a movement from the Haydn quartet that inspired Shaw. In 1799, Haydn made his final contributions to the genre that he had elevated to unprecedented heights through an oeuvre spanning nearly half a century. These comprise the two quartets of Op. 77, which were commissioned by Prince Franz Joseph Lobkowitz—the same music-loving patron who had recently asked Beethoven to write his first series of quartets, the six works published in 1801 as his Op. 18. As a result of failing health, Haydn was able to complete only two rather than the usual set of six quartets gathered in a publication. He later worked on a third quartet to be included in Op. 77, which he left unfinished; that fragment was published as Op. 103.

By this time Europe’s preeminent composer—keenly celebrated for his 1798 oratorio *The Creation*—Haydn distilled all of his artistry into these late quartets. Op. 77, No. 2 reverses the order of the internal movements, so that the Andante, in its original context, comes third in order, following the minuet that so captivated Shaw. Particularly favored by quartet players, the Andante shifts to D major (in contrast to the home key of F major for the other three movements) and offers a series of sophisticated variations on the theme initially presented by first violin and cello.

A Post-Rite Stravinsky Experiment

Three Pieces for String Quartet is a rarity in Stravinsky’s published catalogue, which includes no other string quartets as such. Nor

does this work resemble a conventional multi-movement quartet. It is, rather, a curious set of miniatures dating from 1914, when the composer made his home in Switzerland. Only the year before, he had shocked the music world with *The Rite of Spring*, the third of his large-scale ballet scores for the Ballets Russes company based in Paris.

Stravinsky deliberately eschews the careful development of musical ideas through a formal design that can evoke the sense of a narrative unfolding. His focus on the sheer sounds made by the strings, through spare pizzicati and other effects, makes for a fascinating comparison with Caroline Shaw’s *Entr'acte*. At the same time, his references to Russian folk and vernacular elements—drones in No. 1 and a chorale in No. 3—have a parallel in Haydn’s inspiration from folk sources across his career.

In 1928–29, Stravinsky orchestrated these abstract pieces and added another to create *Quatre études*, furnishing these programmatic titles: “Dance” (No. 1), which is condensed to almost Webern-like brevity; “Eccentric” (the humorous No. 2), “the jerky, spastic movement, the ups and downs, the rhythm” of which, the composer recalled, conveyed his impressions of the movements of the music hall comedian and dancer Little Tich—an example Stravinsky later cited of a musical idea being inspired by “a purely visual experience”; and “Canticle” (No. 3), which looks ahead to the more overtly spiritual music of later years. Stravinsky regarded its final 20 measures as “some of the best music of that time.”

Travels with an Irish Bard

The harp player and composer Turlough O’Carolan, who became blind as the result of smallpox he contracted when he was a teenager, comes from a tradition of itinerant musicians in Ireland. He wandered the country and also played in Dublin, becom-

ing a friend of such illustrious figures of the era as Jonathan Swift. O'Carolan earned his reputation as a songwriter, writing both songs with lyrics (almost always in Irish Celtic) and instrumental pieces. About 200 of these have survived.

The DSQ have long made it a practice to work their own arrangements of folk music from Scandinavia or elsewhere in Northern Europe into their live performances. *Keel Road* is their third album devoted to folk music (beginning with the vivid snapshots of village life conveyed by the 2014 recording *Wood Work*) and includes the three O'Carolan songs we hear (along with a fourth). "We put our own harmonies on his fantastic melodies and sometimes change the structure by adding little intros and outros," Sørensen explains. "But the core of what is basically Baroque folk music in this case remains the same."

The wistful beauty of "Mabel Kelly" ("Maible Ni Cheallaigh") is irresistible, regardless of what is known of the object of O'Carolan's portrait. (According to the crowd-sourced Traditional Tune Archive, this air "was probably composed in honor of the only daughter and heiress of Laughlin Kelly of Lismoyle, County Roscommon.") "Planxty" is a word closely associated with O'Carolan's songs, though its origin remains shrouded in mystery. Some suggest it derives from the Latin *planctus* ("lament") and refers to a song of tribute or mourning for a particular person. The DSQ's arrangement of "Planxty Kelly" builds in texture from its earthy, folk-flavored opening statement. "Carolan's Quarrel with the Landlady"—perhaps inspired by the artist's notorious cantankerousness when his drink was in question—takes on a disarming charm in the ensemble's rendition.

A Different Kind of Pain: Shostakovich's Final Quartet

Shostakovich's string quartets—numbering 15 in total, like his symphonies—trace an artistic and personal journey from his early 30s up to the twilight of his career. The ailing composer completed the last of these in 1974, a little more than a year before his death. (Shostakovich's actual swan song, another chamber work of austere beauty, is the profound Sonata for Viola Solo, Op. 147, which the composer finished in July 1975, mere weeks before his passing.)

Afflicted with neurological symptoms that caused weakness and numbness in his limbs, Shostakovich composed part of the Quartet in E-flat minor while staying in a Moscow hospital and by 1974 had been diagnosed with lung cancer. Despite the work's intense darkness and sense of brooding over final things, the composer wrote in a letter to his close friend Isaac Glikman that he "had some joy in writing it."

In fact, Shostakovich had been contemplating a cycle of 24 quartets that systematically traverse all of the major and minor keys—as he had done in his 24 Preludes and Fugues for solo piano, Op. 87. With its chain of six slow movements, this E-flat minor quartet has no precedent in the cycle—or in the repertoire, for that matter—and may have marked the start of a new series of "late quartets." But the composer acknowledged to a surviving colleague in the Beethoven Quartet, the ensemble that had premiered 13 of his string quartets (and whose cellist suddenly died while they were rehearsing the work), that he would not be able to complete the projected cycle.

"If we can sense pain in the Fifteenth Quartet ... it is not primarily of the physical or even narrowly psychological variety," writes the Berkeley-based critic and writer Wendy Lesser in *Music for Silenced Voices* (2011), her wonderful book of reflections on Shostakovich's quartet cycle. "...One

might be tempted to call the tone ‘valedictory’ if that word didn’t seem too smug and tidy to cover this quartet’s overwhelming sorrow at leave-taking.”

Shostakovich directs that all six movements, all Adagio, are to be played without pause. Yet the slownesses here—the varieties of grief and introspection, the shades of black—are distinct. The opening movement, the longest part of the work, is labeled *Elegy* and proceeds like a quasi-liturgical chant, offering not the solace of a Requiem but a bleached soundscape of unappeased solitude. Expressive gestures like vibrato are severely limited—like wartime rations.

Razor-sharp swellings of sound make *Serenade* seem closer to a troubled dream. Restlessness inhabits the brief *Intermezzo*, which leads into the nighttime landscape and unsettling textures of *Nocturne*, against which the viola bears a heartrending

melody aloft. Lesser compares the effect to “a very late, very eerie Leningrad summer twilight.”

The gravitational center of the quartet occurs in the *Funeral March*, its basic rhythmic pattern increasingly interrupted and fragmented by stark pauses. A retrospective attitude dominates the final movement, *Epilogue*, but the recall of earlier themes feels unresolved. “The quartet as a whole contains a strange reversal,” writes Lesser. “At the beginning everything is all over, but by the end it is in a state of flux.”

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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

Celebrated for its “intense blend, extreme dynamic variation (in which they seem glued together), perfect intonation even on harmonics, and constant vitality and flow” (*Gramophone*) and renowned for the palpable joy its members exude in music-making, the Grammy-nominated **Danish String Quartet** has become one of today’s most in-demand classical quartets.

The ensemble’s inventive and intriguing programming and repertoire choices have produced critically acclaimed original projects and commissions as well as sophisticated arrangements of Scandinavian folk tunes. In August 2024, the quartet released its long-awaited third album of folk-inspired traditional and original tunes, *Keel Road*, on ECM. The release marks the group’s 10th anniversary of exploring Scandinavian folk traditions, a tradition begun

with the 2014 album *Wood Works* and followed by *Last Leaf*.

With a growing audience in North America, the quartet embarks on four tours (of 24 cities) of the US and Canada this season, beginning with major summer festivals including Aspen and Tanglewood. The musicians will also perform at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC and Carnegie Hall in New York, and at the Nashville Symphony’s Chamber Music Series, the Friends of Chamber Music in Denver, and the Savannah Music Festival. Outside the US, the quartet performs this season in Denmark, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, Italy, and Greece.

The Danish String Quartet continues to tour its ambitious *Doppelgänger* initiative (seen previously here at Cal Performances), a multi-year commissioning project pairing new works by four composers with major



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quartets and quintets by Schubert. During the 2024–25 season, the quartet, joined by cellist Johannes Rostamo, performs Thomas Adès' *Wreath for Franz Schubert* (paired with Schubert's String Quintet in C major) at Tanglewood and the Ottawa Chamberfest and in Amsterdam and Leipzig. In the spring of 2025, the artists return to Carnegie Hall and the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society and to Flagey in Brussels, Belgium, to perform Bent Sørensen's *Doppelgänger* commission, paired with Schubert's Quartet in G major.

The final disc in the quartet's five-disc Prism series on ECM was released to great acclaim in 2023, with the *New York Times* dubbing the collection "essential listening." Prism explores the symbiotic musical and contextual relationships between Bach fugues, Beethoven string quartets, and works by Shostakovich, Schnittke, Bartók, Mendelssohn, and Webern. The group's discography also features the complete quartets of Nielsen, Adès, Nørgård, and Abrahamson, reflecting the members' special affinity for Scandinavian composers.

The musicians have been the recipient of many awards and appointments, including *Musical America's* 2020 Ensemble of the Year, the Borletti-Buitoni Trust, BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artist, and a coveted spot in the Bowers Program (formerly CMS Two). In 2011, the quartet was awarded the Carl Nielsen Prize, the highest cultural honor in Denmark.

The Danish String Quartet celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2024, having formed when violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard were teenagers under the mentorship of 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, please visit the artists' website at www.danishquartet.com.

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