

Sunday, February 23, 2025, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Hagen Quartet

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Lukas Hagen, *violin*
Rainer Schmidt, *violin*
Veronika Hagen, *viola*
Clemens Hagen, *cello*

PROGRAM

Joseph HAYDN (1732–1809) String Quartet in G major, Op. 54, No. 1
Allegro con brio
Allegretto
Menuetto. Allegretto
Finale. Presto

HAYDN String Quartet in E major, Op. 54, No. 3
Allegro
Largo cantabile
Menuetto. Allegretto
Finale. Presto

INTERMISSION

Robert SCHUMANN (1810–1856) String Quartet No. 3 in A major,
Op. 41, No. 3
Andante espressivo – Allegro molto moderato
Assai agitato
Adagio molto
Finale: Allegro molto vivace

Recordings: Myrios Classics, Deutsche Grammophon, Decca Classics, and Orfeo International

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Joseph Haydn is often referred to as the father of the symphony, but he might even more justly be called the father of the string quartet, for it was he who took the string quartet out of the informal, entertainment-oriented divertimento tradition and transformed it into a genre of the highest musical weight and importance, one in which composers could express their noblest thoughts. During his three decades at the Esterházy courts in Hungary and eastern Austria, Haydn was blessed with the finest musicians the wealthy, music-loving Prince Nicholas Esterházy could buy. With superb string players at his disposal, the composer could experiment over and over with a smaller ensemble capable of music-making of the most refined and virtuosic qualities.

Luigi Tomasini was the brilliant principal violinist of the Esterházy orchestra and may well have been the inspiration for Haydn's sustained exploration of the string quartet medium; the composer later said, "No one plays my quartets like Luigi." However, there was another talented Esterházy violinist—and later successful cloth merchant—who played a significant role in Haydn's production of quartets during the years 1788–90, near the end of his tenure serving the princely Esterházy family: Johann Tost. While we don't know exactly what his relationship to Haydn was, the composer dedicated 12 superb quartets, Opp. 54, 55, and 64, to him; today they are referred to as the *Tost Quartets*.

In his more than 40 quartets, Haydn never stuck to a formula, but continually broke new ground in terms of formal structures, harmonic boundaries, rhythmic play, melodic development, and expressive mood. And though he wrote spectacularly virtuosic first-violin parts, he also brought the other three instruments into a more equal relationship, promoting a richer contrapuntal texture. Each one of his quartets is *sui generis*.

Written in 1788, Haydn's Op. 54 comprises three extraordinary quartets, of which we will hear the very popular first and the more rarely heard—not because of any inferiority in quality!—third.

Joseph Haydn

String Quartet in G major, Op. 54, No. 1

Given the sheer energy and irresistible rhythmic verve of its first movement, it is no wonder that this G-major quartet is so popular. Propelled by staccato repeated notes in both the main theme and the accompaniment, this movement focuses primarily on one theme—a common tactic for Haydn—but that theme is full of so many contrasting elements that there is never an issue of monotony. A brief, quiet descending and ascending idea might be considered a second theme, but it comes so late in the exposition that it draws little attention. An entrance of the principal theme bursts dramatically into G minor to launch the development section, which includes hectic excursions into distant keys. An irregular recapitulation also includes more developmental activity, this time paying more attention to that modest second theme.

In C major, the second movement is not really a slow movement, but a lyrical *Allegretto*. Again poised on staccato repeated notes, this time quiet and pulsing, its lilting *siciliano*-like theme for the first violin initially sounds charmingly innocent. Nevertheless, it will carry us through a mysterious passage of some of the most beautifully unorthodox harmonies Haydn ever created. A similar passage returns in the recapitulation. This is remarkable music of great subtlety, enlivened by surprises.

The vigorous Menuetto draws inspiration from the upward-leaping patterns of the first movement's theme and intensifies them by adding a strongly stressed dissonant tritone interval on the repeats. In the trio section, Haydn silences the first violin and

turns the spotlight on the cello, whose wide-ranging melodic accompaniment is combined with a rustic, folk-like melody for the second violin.

Haydn was renowned for the ebullience of his finales, and this sonata-rondo fits right in with its whirling virtuosity for all four instruments punctuated with dashes of Haydn-esque humor. The principal theme opens with a three-note motive that the composer constantly plays with, making it loud, soft, high, low, in different keys. At the end, he sends it to the top of all four instruments and allows it to disappear into the ether.

Haydn

String Quartet in E major, Op. 54, No. 3

The sonata-form opening movement of the E-major quartet demonstrates Haydn's increasing emphasis on relative equality between all four players by pitting them against each other in an elegant battle for supremacy. Second violin and viola propose a firm ascending scale pattern that the first violin interrupts with a more wayward descending idea. This disagreement continues until the cello lays down a sustained pedal note to establish order. Though the first violin persists in its flighty virtuosity, the other instruments are unshaken and maintain their sobriety. In a delicious final touch to the movement, the first violin plays rapid triplets, which the second violin and viola mar with off-the-beat notes in conflicting duple rhythm.

In A major, second movement is a wondrous outpouring of gorgeously ornamented melody demanding great virtuosity from the first violinist, who must negotiate intricate rhythmic play riddled with tiny hesitations, as well as soaring excursions into the high register. The other three instruments are more than accompanists, adding richness and warmth with their subtle contributions to this heavenly song.

Short-long rhythms (known as the "Scotch snap") propel the high-spirited Minuetto, which juxtaposes two pairs—both violins together and viola plus cello—against each other. Announced in unison by all four, the trio section is firm and rustic in feeling.

The exuberant finale belongs to all four players with the second violinist rather than the first introducing the merry refrain melody. Developmental activity animates this music throughout, adding wonderful complexity to its rollicking energy.

Robert Schumann

String Quartet No. 3 in A major, Op. 41, No. 3

Married to his beloved Clara for less than two years, Robert Schumann found his first prolonged separation from her in March–April 1842 very hard to bear. As a brilliant piano virtuoso, Clara was actually the more famous of the two, and for a month, she was on a concert tour in Denmark while Robert stayed back in Leipzig with their baby girl. Sinking into a depression amid fits of heavy drinking to numb his pain, he was unable to compose. Then, using a reliable remedy for his creative blocks, he began working on fugal and other counterpoint exercises; before long, he had moved on to studying quartets by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, while beginning to have "considerable quartet thoughts" of his own.

Since it did not use his instrument, the piano, Schumann had not yet tackled the string quartet genre in earnest. However, in 1838, he had written to Clara: "The thought of . . . quartets gives me pleasure. The piano is getting too narrow for me. In composing now, I often hear a lot of things that I can barely suggest." When Clara finally returned home on April 25, Schumann's spirits soared, and by early June, he was at work on two quartets simultaneously: the first and second of his Op. 41. By July, a third quartet joined them: the String Quartet in A major

we'll hear. All three were completed in less than two months. Over the next few more months—in this his “Chamber Music Year”—Schumann would also create his superb Piano Quintet and Piano Quartet.

The three quartets were dedicated to the composer's revered friend Felix Mendelssohn, and it is certain that Mendelssohn's Op. 44 quartets were a direct inspiration. Schumann arranged a private performance of the quartets on September 29, 1842 for Mendelssohn. And he was thrilled when his slightly older colleague liked them, for as he said, “Mendelssohn is a formidable critic; of all living musicians, he has the sharpest eye.”

However, Mendelssohn's Op. 44 quartets have a strong Classical sensibility while Schumann's three are highly Romantic, both formally and expressively. The A-major Quartet is striking for the originality of its approach to form, yet Schumann's preliminary fugal exercises can also be heard in the quality and brilliance of its counterpoint between the instruments.

The first movement opens with a brief slow introduction, which introduces the two motto elements that will generate the music: a falling interval of a fifth and an unstable, questioning harmony with a dissonant note added, in no way suggesting the home key of A major. As the main *Allegro molto moderato* arrives, these same elements lead off the principal theme. Schumann enlarges this languishing romantic melody in a series of canons. Under a panting, off-the-beat accompaniment, the cello then introduces a smoother, more forward-moving second theme, which also features the falling fifth.

After a reprise of this exposition comes a rather brief development section that focuses on the falling fifth motive and the unstable chord's ability to move easily into remote harmonies. The recapitulation opens with the cello's second theme; the languishing principal theme only makes its re-appearance in the closing coda.

Movement two is a most ingenious scherzo movement: a theme and variations in which we don't hear the theme until after Schumann has already given us three variations on it. And the opening variation is truly strange: a halting, sighing, off-the-beat melody that also emphasizes—as did the first movement—a dissonant chord. The third variation is a frenzied, high-speed fugato. Then, in a slower tempo, we finally meet the sweetly old-fashioned theme itself, sung in canon between first violin and viola. An exhilarating fourth variation follows before a serenely lovely coda closes this remarkable music.

With its sensuous chromaticism, the ravishing third movement (*Adagio molto*) expresses the pangs of romantic love. Its opening theme features an expressive melody for the viola, leaping upward dramatically before sliding back. Its second theme is a yearning minor-mode dialogue between first violin and viola that may recall Schumann's melancholy during Clara's absence. All these ideas are developed extensively with lavish contrapuntal writing.

The finale is a dancing rondo with an intense and strongly rhythmic refrain, reflecting Schumann's lifelong obsession with dotted rhythms. Three contrasting episodes are clearly marked off by the refrain's returns, the last being a country dance that begins demurely but grows into something vigorous and earthy. Schumann then reprises the whole series in different keys. This vivacious movement ends with a lengthy, blazing development of the rondo refrain: a virtual apotheosis of the dotted rhythm!

—Janet E. Bedell © 2025

Janet E. Bedell is a program annotator and feature writer who writes for Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Los Angeles Opera, Caramoor Festival of the Arts, and other musical organizations.

After concerts by the “four world-class string players from Salzburg” (*Hamburger Abendblatt*), there is “absolute silence for almost minutes, [the audience] conscious of having experienced something extraordinary.” This is how the press describes it. All the listeners have one wish in common: “may it never end.”

During the 2024–25 season, the Hagen Quartet is concentrating on string quartets by Haydn, Schumann, Janáček, and Brahms. (Quintets by Mozart and Brahms with clarinetists Sabine Meyer and Jörg Widmann as well as Schubert with cellists Julia Hagen and Gautier Capuçon are also planned.) In addition to the current US tour, the season will also see performances in France, Norway, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and England. These touring activities will include performances at the Wiener Konzerthaus, the Pierre Boulez Saal in Berlin, Wigmore Hall in London, and the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam.

The Hagen Quartet’s unparalleled career, which has already spanned four decades, began in 1981. The first years were marked by competition successes and an exclusive contract with Deutsche Grammophon. During the decades of collaboration, numerous recordings were made to explore the vast quartet repertoire, from which the group’s unmistakable profile developed. Subsequent recordings on the Myrios Classics label have also received international critical acclaim and major awards. A recording together with Jörg Widmann and clarinet quintets by Widmann and Mozart has recently been released. The ensemble has been an honorary member of the Konzerthaus Wien since 2012 and received the Concertgebouw Amsterdam Prize in 2019 for its many years of artistic contribution.

The Hagen Quartet will be retiring after the 2025–26 season, which marks the group’s 45th anniversary. The current February 2025 tour includes the Hagen Quartet’s final performances on the West Coast.

The quartet’s repertoire consists of intelligently curated programs spanning the entire history of the string quartet literature. In addition, the Hagen Quartet is dedicated to premiering works by composers of its generation. Collaborations with artists such as Nikolaus Harnoncourt and György Kurtág has been just as important to the members



Andrej Gritic

as joint concert performances with Maurizio Pollini, Mitsuko Uchida, Krystian Zimerman, Heinrich Schiff, Jörg Widmann, Kirill Gerstein, Sol Gabetta, and Gautier Capuçon.

For many young string players, the quartet is a role model in terms of sound quality, stylistic diversity, interplay, and serious engagement with the works and composers of their genre. As teachers and mentors at the Salzburg Mozarteum and the Hochschule Basel, and at international master classes, the musicians pass on this wealth of experience to their younger colleagues.

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