Sunday, October 12, 2025, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Isidore String Quartet

Phoenix Avalon, *violin*
Adrian Steele, *violin*
Devin Moore, *viola*
Joshua McClendon, *cello*

PROGRAM

Franz Josef HAYDN (1732–1809) — String Quartet in B-flat major, Op. 76, No. 4, *Sunrise* (1797)
- Allegro con spirito
- Adagio
- Menuetto (Allegro)
- Finale (Allegro ma non troppo)

Gabriella Smith (b. 1991) — *Carrot Revolution* (2015)

INTERMISSION

Antonin Dvořák (1841–1904) — String Quartet in G major, Op. 106 (1895)
- Allegro moderato
- Adagio ma non troppo
- Molto vivace
- Finale (Andante sostenuto – Allegro con fuoco)

This performance is made possible in part by an anonymous sponsor.

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FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN
Quartet in B-flat major, Op. 76, No. 4, *Sunrise*

When Franz Joseph Haydn wrote his String Quartet in B-flat Major (*Sunrise*) in 1797, he was well into his sixties and was the preeminent figure in European music. Having already revolutionized almost every genre of composition, Haydn could have remained a polite figure and rested on his laurels. His exploration in musical form and orchestration over the last 20 years of his life, however, reveals a restless intellectual always reaching for more intriguing modes of composition.

The first movement of the *Sunrise* Quartet begins as the nickname would suggest, with a contemplative chord and an upwardly searching melody. When suddenly the Allegro vibrantly emerges, we are thrust into some of Haydn's most expressive music. The instruments never settle into roles for long. While the first violin is the primary keeper of the melody, the responsibility of being the most active voice is frequently passed from one player to another. The melody that began the piece with such serenity is now fuel for restlessness and volatility.

The second movement is one long line, a luxurious Adagio driven by a soaring, rhapsodic melody in the first violin and dense harmonic accompaniment. Although it is strictly structured and reminiscent of themes from the first movement, the entire thing feels improvised, and the effect on the listener is almost hypnotic. Haydn's music is thought by some to be rote, metric, and expected, but in this movement, time feels irrelevant and structure useless.

The third movement minuet is a stark awakening from the Adagio. It is the most metrically strict and conventionally danceable movement of the piece. It strikes one initially as a moment of transition between the second and final movements, but it is hardly perfunctory. Just as the movement settles in, the second section makes the music feel as if it is falling apart—the instruments volley back and forth unsteadily, unfurling to the point that all feels like it all will end with a whimper. Almost as suddenly as in the first movement, Haydn reinvigorates the music by repeating the dance that has come before.

The final movement represents a culmination and is written with Haydn's trademark joviality. The melody that pervades the movement is jaunty, joyfully reprising the motifs from earlier in the piece. Its rondo form feels like a theme and variation, the dance-like melody reappearing again and again between small sections of pure embellishment. In a cheerful conclusion typical of Haydn, the piece ends where it began, in a rush, punctuated, as in the very beginning, by a rising figure in the violin.

GABRIELLA SMITH
Carrot Revolution

Gabriella Smith is a composer whose work has been frequently performed by many of the greatest practitioners of contemporary music. Her compositions are, in her own words, inspired by play, energetically experimental, often giving the impression that performers are improvising and perhaps even dancing while doing so. Her mentor John Adams' music is a helpful reference point—like his music, Smith's works are both referential and boundary pushing, offering listeners imaginative interpretations of music and sounds they are already familiar with. It is music that is joyfully self-reflective and seems to expand infinitely as it devours its own sense of optimism.

Enter her string quartet, *Carrot Revolution*, an expressively positive work about seeing with fresh eyes. Its title comes from a quote misattributed to Cezanne: "The day will come when a single, freshly observed carrot will start a revolution." The premise

Opposite: Isidore String Quartet. Photo: Jiyang Chen.

is simple—what if one of the oldest genres in the classical repertory were used to look at music from a new perspective? What results is a whirlwind globetrotting and time traveling exercise that requires the performers to use a stunning variety of techniques as they reimagine the string quartet.

The quartet has the sense of chiastic rhetoric, its percussive hinge squeaks and acme sirens bracketing the piece and signaling a kind of argument akin to the opening and concluding paragraphs of a political pamphlet. The structure in between, on first acquaintance, might appear haphazard, as if several unrelated things are simply being recounted. When heard in its entirety, however, the piece assembles into something neat and inevitable. And despite the music's feeling of frenetic "newness," its roots are firm: it is essentially an overture. Instead of a collection of themes from an associated show, however, it is a collection of musical memories from Smith herself. It is as tangential as a conversation, but as coherent as one too.

The themes presented in the quartet have an uncanny feeling. Western classical music has had a long tradition—from its very beginning—of composers quoting other works, but here the quotes don't feel recited. Rather, they evoke the feeling of the original, much like the folk music of Bartók's quartets. This is partly because the themes are compressed and collaged. At any given moment, the quartet feels like it is in an identifiable style, and yet, just as the thought comes, the music shifts and becomes something else entirely—once medieval, now modern, once like music played in an Irish pub, then in a rock club. The string quartet is almost doing impressions, as in one section where the musicians play what, to someone's mind, might seem like an evocation of a train from a musical about western life. And so on and so on: one's imagination could wander. It's like a very quick and well-rehearsed variety show. Even the rock band The Who makes a brief showing, improbably, after what appears to be some Georgian folk music. As the piece dissolves into rhythmic oblivion, the listener is left with the feeling of having lived ecstatically through someone else's memories.

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK
String Quartet in G major, Op. 106

Antonín Dvořák's melodies are so ingrained in western culture that it may be difficult to recognize how invigorating composers of the time found his music. His artistry was in the combination of the seriousness of Wagner, the melodic inventiveness of Schubert, and the incandescent clarity of Bach and Mozart. He was neither minimalist or maximalist, but an opportunist—whatever the moment called for was what he wrote, and his intuition was outstanding.

An oft-cited skill of Dvořák's is the transparency of his writing, that each voice never muddies its neighbor's. As a result, the music shimmers and his melodies sing that much more fully. A significant reason for this is his sensitivity to the inner voices. For many composers, this music can be filler texture added after the outer voices are written, with varying degrees of attention given. Dvořák was as attentive as he could be. He spent much of his early career performing as a professional violist and understood better than most how important these voices were for scaffolding the overall composition. In this quartet, the viola part is beautiful—not showy, but obviously imbued with care and joy. It is not the only thing that makes this quartet exceptional, but it is instructive of some of its subtle magic.

Dvořák's polystylistic leanings are apparent from the first notes of the quartet—two opposing phrases, one Classical, proper, and stately, the other Romantic, freewheeling, and forward pushing, setting the quartet on a joyful course of exploration. These two lit-

Jiyang Chen

tle ideas get transformed in true Dvořákian fashion into a bewildering array of irresistibly catchy themes. Though the movement is in standard sonata form, its constant mining of its opening motifs makes it feel like a theme and variations, a formal push and pull that characterizes every movement of the piece.

The second movement features some of the composer's most exceptional instrumental music. Its two themes are distantly related versions of the piece's opening remarks, the first hymnlike and open, the second slithering and tightly wound. Each of these themes is, in turn, given its own set of variations that tumble over each other restlessly until the gleaming denouement.

The third movement is a quintessential Dvořákian folk-inflected dance. The first section, like the best of any dance music, contains two differently counted dances in one—it is both, from its principal theme, a march in two, and, from its overarching feel and tempo, a fast round dance in three. The elegant legato sections that interrupt provide more variation in their contrasting texture.

The fourth movement is an electrifying restatement of what has come before. In general, its function is palindromic, resembling the first movement in its motifs, its unassuming opening section, its energetic primary theme, and its undulating rondo form. It contains the most dramatic shifts in texture and mood of the whole piece, oscillating between the frenetic and the demure, so that its sure, raucous ending feels triumphant to the extreme.

—Connor Buckley

Winner 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 quartet began as an ensemble at the Juilliard School, and has coached with Joel Krosnick, Joseph Lin, Astrid Schween, Laurie Smukler, Joseph Kalichstein, Roger Tapping, Misha Amory, and numerous others.

Along with here at Cal Performances, in North America, the Isidore Quartet has appeared on major series in Boston, New York, Chicago, Ann Arbor, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Durham, Washington DC, Houston, San Francisco, New Orleans, Cincinnati, Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, and has collaborated with eminent performers including James Ehnes and Jeremy Denk. The quartet's 2025–26 season includes performances in Philadelphia, Cleveland, Calgary, Tulsa, Pasadena, Santa Barbara, and New York; at Washington's Library of Congress; and return engagements in Montreal, Houston, La Jolla, Phoenix, Indianapolis, Baltimore, and at Spivey Hall in Georgia. First-time collaborations include concerts with clarinetist Anthony McGill, cellist Sterling Elliott, and the Miró Quartet.

In Europe the quartet has performed at Amsterdam's Concertgebouw and in Bonn (Beethoven Haus), Stuttgart, Cologne, and Dresden, among many other music centers. During 2025–26, the ensemble will make its debuts in Paris (Philharmonie) and London (Wigmore Hall).

Over the past several years, the quartet has developed a strong connection to the works of composer and pianist Billy Childs, performing his Quartets No. 2 and No. 3 throughout North America and Europe. In February 2026, the members will premiere a new Childs quartet written expressly for them.

Both on stage and outside the concert hall, the Isidore Quartet is deeply invested in connecting with youth and elderly populations, as well as with marginalized communities who otherwise have limited access to high-quality live music performances. The musicians approach music as a "playground" and attempt to break down barriers to encourage collaboration and creativity. The name "Isidore" recognizes the ensemble's musical connection to the Juilliard Quartet: one of that group's early members was the 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!