

The Red Bank
Chamber Music Society
presents

The Escher Quartet

Adam Barnett-Hart, Violin

Brendan Speltz, Violin

Pierre Lapointe, Viola

Brook Speltz, Cello

Mozart • Mendelssohn • Tchaikovsky

Sunday Afternoon

September 19, 2021 • 4:30 PM

Trinity Church Auditorium

Red Bank, NJ

ADVANCE NOTES

PROGRAM

String Quartet in C major, K. 465 "Dissonance" (1785)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

- I. Adagio-Allegro
- II. Andante cantabile
- III. Menuetto. Allegro
- IV. Allegro molto

String Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 44 no. 3 (1838)

Felix Mendelssohn

- I. Allegro vivace
- II. Scherzo: Assai leggiero vivace
- III. Adagio non troppo
- IV. Molto allegro con fuoco)

INTERMISSION

String Quartet in E-flat minor, Op. 30 (1876)

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

- I. Andante sostenuto – Allegro moderato
- II. Allegretto vivo e scherzando
- III. Andante funebre e doloroso, ma con moto
- IV. Finale: Allegro non troppo e risoluto

Welcome Back!

The Red Bank Chamber Music Society is happy to welcome back our musicians and members to in-person concerts.



Based on your responses to our membership survey, most of our members have been vaccinated COVID-19, but for everyone's safety, **we are requiring that all attendees wear masks** while inside the Trinity Church building.

For those who might not be comfortable attending a live concert, we also plan on video recording all our concerts for broadcast on the Brookdale Community cable channel and for posting on YouTube. The recordings will likely be available 2-3 weeks following the concert date. We will notify you when the recorded concerts will be aired and posted.

We are continuing to plan for an exciting additional concert for the upcoming season. This will be a joint project with the T. Thomas Fortune Cultural Center in Red Bank and is currently targeted for Juneteenth 2022 (June 19, 2022). It will highlight Black contributions to chamber music both locally in Red Bank, as well as more broadly.

We would like to thank our members for their generous contributions which have allowed us to continue to offer chamber music concerts at the highest professional level, despite the pandemic. We look forward to another successful season because of your support.

Finally, as a favor to your fellow concertgoers, please remember to turn off your cell phones. If you feel you might have a cough coming on, please try to unwrap any lozenges before the concert begins or between movements.

Enjoy the concert!

Notes on the Program

Mozart Amadeus Mozart (1756 - 1791) Quartet in C major, K. 465 “Dissonance” (1785)

(~30 minutes)



The fact that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Franz Joseph Haydn were friends is well known, but the extent to which that friendship was important in both their lives is significantly less understood or celebrated. Haydn was a generation older than his younger contemporary, and soon after they met he wrote to Wolfgang’s father Leopold: “I tell you before God, and as an honest man, your son is the greatest composer known to me by person and repute – he has taste and, what is more, the greatest skill in composition.” When Mozart struggled to find regular employment and popular recognition in Vienna,

Haydn would write in 1787:

“If I could only impress on the soul of every friend of music, and on high personages in particular, how inimitable are Mozart’s works, how profound, how musically intelligent, how extraordinarily sensitive...It enrages me to think that this incomparable Mozart is not yet engaged in some imperial or royal court! Forgive me if I lose my head. But I love this man so dearly.”

It is then not surprising that Mozart himself worshiped Haydn, who was by that point the most famous composer in Europe, a self-made man with a remarkable rags-to-riches story. He referred to Haydn as “Papa.” In fact, when he wrote his set of six quartets dedicated to Haydn in 1785, in his dedication he referred to these quartets as his “children” he was sending out into the world with the hope that Haydn would become a father figure for them: “Please receive them kindly and be to them a father, guide, and friend...Meanwhile, I remain with all my heart, dearest friend, your most sincere friend.” Especially considering Mozart’s complicated relationship with his own father, the metaphor could not be clearer.

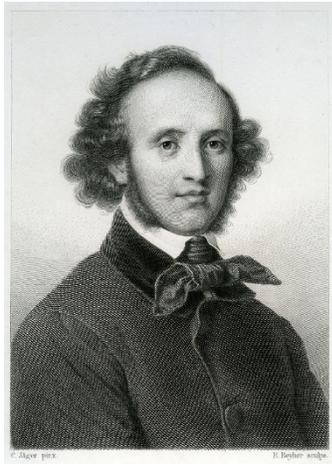
In Vienna, Mozart and Haydn played in a string quartet together with two other composers, and they would often bring their own compositions to read through with the group, like a “show and tell.” This final string quartet of the six dedicated to Haydn (nicknamed the “Dissonance”) must have perplexed the group greatly for the first minute and a half or so! An ambiguous, chromatic, and uncommonly, well, dissonant opening practically explodes into a boisterous, joyful C major first movement. In fact, the discordance of the movement’s opening seems to contain all

elements of “dissonance” the piece can hold, as the rest of the work is unfailingly brilliant (first movement), lyrical (second movement), playful (third movement), and celebratory (fourth movement). One of Mozart’s best-known works of chamber music, Haydn must have had an absolute blast playing this exuberant piece.



Felix Mendelssohn (1809 - 1847)
Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 44 no. 3 (1838)

(~33 minutes)



The title of “best-known child prodigy in music history” must go to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, in no small part due to this *wunderkind*’s depiction in the movie *Amadeus*. But even more precocious was Felix Mendelssohn, who also excelled in languages, mathematics, history, and astronomy, all while also writing astonishingly emotionally mature works at a young age (to speak nothing of his brilliance as a virtuoso performer). The crown of his youthful compositions was his stunning Octet, written when he was only 16 years old – truly a musical miracle that has never been rivaled by a composer so young.

However, despite the fact that his family converted and assimilated into Protestant society, Felix Mendelssohn’s Jewish ancestry was a perceived impediment his father repeatedly hammered into him from early childhood. Even when achieving his greatest early successes, young Felix was admonished to always fly under the radar, never to be too *avant garde* or provocative in his musical taste. This very much informed his later compositions, and modern assessments of these rarely take that into account. The most common contemporary criticism is that Mendelssohn’s early promise never developed into a fully mature style, but rather that he stagnated creatively while other composers like Liszt, Berlioz, and especially Wagner took the reins of the new Romantic style.

While Mendelssohn’s youthful compositions were very much influenced by Beethoven and therefore appear to be more musically daring, works of Mendelssohn’s maturity, such as his set of three Op. 44 Quartets, show more of a hearkening back to the works of earlier Classical masters such as Mozart and Haydn. (One might even say that Mendelssohn “worked backwards,” as he eventually took J.S. Bach and G.F. Handel as primary influences and inspiration for his famous oratorios from his later years.) This, however, does not make these works somehow inferior or unworthy, despite their reactionary tendencies. They are, in fact, quite

remarkable in their celebration of all the best qualities of Classical and Baroque composition while still maintaining their footing in Romantic territory. They are expressive, deeply personal, and, most importantly, instantly recognizable as the culmination of Mendelssohn's own unique style.

The least often played of these three Op. 44 String Quartets is the third in Eb major, perhaps because it lacks the brilliance of the first and the contrasting dark, brooding quality of the second. But it stands on equal footing with both its companion works, with a heroic, tautly composed first movement built around the simplicity of a five-note figure that scarcely stops being heard in some way throughout the entire movement. The following movement has that "Mendelssohnian," elfin scherzo quality we associate with so many of his works, and yet it is somehow different – more serious and intellectual. Complex counterpoint under the guise of an essentially monochromatic texture gives this movement a unique quality of its own. The most "Romantic" of the four movements is the expressive third; like a love letter, it is a deeply personal statement, no doubt having something to do with the fact that it was composed soon after Mendelssohn's marriage. The inexhaustible Finale is in the style of a *moto perpetuo*, relentlessly pushing the individual instruments of the quartet to their limit and returning to the heroism of the first movement for a triumphant, exciting conclusion.



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840- 1893)
Quartet in E-flat minor, Op. 30 (1876)

(~38 minutes)



Today, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky is an incredibly popular composer, well known for only a handful of his many works, but he is scarcely known at all for his chamber music. And while the works for which he is most celebrated are entirely deserving of their standing, it has sadly caused some of his absolute masterworks to be overlooked for inclusion in the "standard repertoire." Of his three string quartets, the first, Op. 11, is the only one that is played with any frequency, at least outside of Russia. It is an infectiously charming piece, brimming with virtuosity, brilliance, and uncomplicated, straightforward emotions. This, as

well as its brevity and famous *Andante cantabile* second movement, has likely contributed to its enduring popularity.

When one then considers the emotional, sprawling, intense Third String Quartet, Op. 30, it is no wonder that it has always been more of an “acquired taste” for audiences. It was written *in memoriam* for Tchaikovsky’s good friend Ferdinand Laub, who was a fellow professor at the Moscow Conservatory and also the first violinist of the string quartet that premiered Tchaikovsky’s two previous works in the genre. A solemn character that permeates much of this quartet is present from its opening measures. A long, somewhat directionless introduction sets up a moderately paced first movement in the dark, rather awkward and unidiomatic key of Eb minor with most of the movement’s material concentrated in the middle ranges of the quartet sonority. Contrast this with the first movement of Tchaikovsky’s First Quartet – within the bright D major tonality, a short introduction with an accordion-like quality bursts into a display of pure, exuberant virtuosity from all four quartet musicians. It’s a much easier sell of an opening, to be sure.

This may have been on Tchaikovsky’s mind when composing the second movement of his Third Quartet, as it is far removed from the mournful mood of the preceding movement. Light, playful, and engaging, the tight interplay of the four voices here anticipates moments in Tchaikovsky’s string sextet from 1890, *Souvenir de Florence*, and is a much-needed respite, however brief. The third movement, however, is the heart of this quartet. Its heartbreaking opening proclamations in unison rhythm set up what is essentially a “funeral march,” with solemn, emotional passages in the first violin complimented by same-note punctuations by the second violin that are undoubtedly meant to sound spoken – almost like a priest saying a prayer graveside.

The Finale, for all its joy and nimbleness, still skews towards the darker colors a string quartet can produce, giving this quartet as a whole an air of grief, even in its brighter moments. In truth, Tchaikovsky’s popular First Quartet was composed purely as a money-grab, and its uncomplicated, carefree showpiece-like quality no doubt stems from that as much as the Third Quartet’s deeply personal subtlety is a result of Tchaikovsky’s grief over the death of his friend. It is a shame that the Third Quartet is so seldom played. The style of writing here is much more in keeping with some of Tchaikovsky’s greatest orchestral works (*Francesca da Rimini*, the “Pathétique” Symphony, etc.), and is certainly deserving of a closer look by listeners and performers of chamber music.

Program Notes by Luke Fleming



Artists

The **Escher String Quartet** has received acclaim for its profound musical insight and rare tonal beauty. A former BBC New Generation Artist, the quartet has performed at the BBC Proms at Cadogan Hall and is a regular guest at Wigmore Hall, London. In its home town of New York, the ensemble serves as Season Artists of The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, where it has recently performed quartet cycles of Beethoven and Zemlinsky.

The 2021-22 season finds the Escher Quartet touring the U.S. extensively, performing in numerous cities and venues including Lincoln Center and Rockefeller University (both in NYC), La Jolla, Detroit, Buffalo, Palm Beach (with soprano Susanna Phillips), New Orleans, and Savannah, among others.

The Escher Quartet has made a distinctive impression throughout Europe, with recent debuts including the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Berlin Konzerthaus, London's Kings Place, Slovenian Philharmonic Hall, Les Grands Interprètes Geneva, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and Auditorium du Louvre. With a strong collaborative approach, the group has appeared at festivals such as the Heidelberg Spring Festival, Budapest's Franz Liszt Academy, Dublin's Great Music in Irish Houses, the Risør Chamber Music Festival in Norway, the Hong Kong International Chamber Music Festival and the Perth International Arts Festival in Australia. The 2021-22 season sees the quartet return to its long time London home of Wigmore Hall, following debuts in Bilbao, Spain and recordings in Vienna, Austria, with the pianist Andreas Haefliger.

In the Fall of 2021 the Escher Quartet released its latest album, the complete quartets of Charles Ives and Samuel Barber (BIS). Recordings of the complete Mendelssohn Quartets, released on the BIS label in 2015-2017, were received with the highest critical acclaim. The Escher's most recent recording - quartets of Dvorak, Borodin, and Tchaikovsky, was met with equal enthusiasm. The quartet has also recorded on the Naxos label, the complete Zemlinsky String Quartets in two volumes to accolades including five stars in The Guardian with "Classical CD of the Year", a Recommendation in The Strad, "Recording of the Month" on MusicWeb International and a nomination for a BBC Music Magazine Award.