

The Red Bank
Chamber Music Society

presents

The Lark Quartet

with Todd Palmer, clarinet

Deborah Buck, violin

Basia Danilo, violin

Kathryn Lockwood, viola

Caroline Stinson, cello

Wolf • Debussy • Long • Brahms

Sunday Afternoon

April 2, 2017 • 4:30 PM

Trinity Church Auditorium

Red Bank, NJ

ADVANCE NOTES

PROGRAM

Italian Serenade (1887)

Hugo Wolf

String Quartet in G minor, Op. 10 (1893)

Claude Debussy

- I. Animé et très décidé
- II. Assez vif et bien rythmé
- III. Andantino, doucement expressif
- IV. Très modéré - En animant peu à peu - Très mouvementé et avec passion

INTERMISSION

Chinese Folk Songs (2002)

Zhou Long

- I. Lan hua-hua
- II. Driving the mule team
- III. A single bamboo can easily bend
- IV. Leaving home
- V. A horse herd's mountain song

Clarinet Quintet in B minor, Op. 115 (1891)

Johannes Brahms

- I. Allegro
- II. Adagio
- III. Andantino - Presto non assai, ma con sentimento
- IV. Con moto - Un poco meno mosso

Notes on the Program

Hugo Wolf (1860-1903)

Italian Serenade (1887)

(~6 minutes)



The "Italian Serenade" is a short, one-movement work written in the space of only 3 days. The main theme is based on an old Italian melody which was played on an obsolete form of oboe called the "piffero". It is also thematically linked to Eichendorff Lieder – songs that Wolf was writing at the time and specifically the song Der Soldat I (The Soldier). The song is about a young musician, a violinist, who having left his country home and his grumbling father to seek his fortune, soon charms everyone with his gifts, or antagonizes them with his

inconsequence.

In a letter by the composer, Wolf wrote about his compositions: "If I were to define my musical goal, it would be to try for an emotion truly and clearly felt, and caught forever in a formal perfection." Interestingly, Wolf was primarily known as a composer of songs, yet this 6-minute work for string quartet, which was later arranged for chamber orchestra by him, is one of his most popular, most often performed and most often recorded works.



Claude Debussy (1862–1918) String Quartet in G minor, Op. 10 (1893)

(~25 minutes)



“There is no theory. You have only to listen. Pleasure is the law. I love music passionately. And because I love it I try to free it from barren traditions that stifle it.” – Debussy

The oldest of five children, Achille-Claude Debussy was born on August 22, 1862 in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France. At age ten, he was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire, where he would spend the next eleven years absorbing the instruction of France’s finest musical minds – and ruffling a few ears with his penchant for dissonant intervals. In 1884, Debussy was awarded the Prix de Rome, which led to his relocating to Italy and parts elsewhere for the next five years. By the time he returned to Paris in 1889, he had embraced and later rejected the striking harmonic language of Richard Wagner. Debussy believed that the principles of French Impressionism transcended the visual arts and could also be applied to the world of sound; in his music. As he put it, “Any sounds in any combination and in any succession are henceforth free to be used in a musical continuity.”

Considering Debussy’s affinity for the unconventional, the name of today’s work is an anomaly. Indeed, his ‘First String Quartet’ was the only work for which he assigned an opus number – or, for that matter, a key signature. Why Opus 10? It wasn’t his tenth composition. Debussy himself remained silent on the significance of it all, but one can only assume he was paying his respects to the German chamber music tradition. He certainly followed a number of conventions, casting the work in the traditional four movements, with the first movement in a loose sonata form and the placement of the scherzo and slow movement reversed. It is apparent from the harmonic complexity of the very first notes that Debussy’s quartet was “focused more on the exotic and aurally pleasing, rather than the cleanly formulated structures of the classical style.” (Halpin, 2014)

Another aspect that sets the quartet apart from its Germanic predecessors is in the composer's use of cyclic form – a compositional technique in which a theme, melody or thematic material occurs in more than one movement as a unifying device. While it was not unprecedented for composers to revisit certain themes within a given work, Debussy's string quartet took this compositional technique to an entirely different level. Marked *Animé et très décidé*, the first movement's sinuous opening statement, with accents so cleverly placed that the listener may quickly experience a state of rhythmic weightlessness, contains the motivic cell from which much of the entire work will unfold. Shadows of this elusive melody and the secondary themes that follow it will be heard in all four movements.

The second movement, a scherzo marked *Assez vif et bien rythmé*, features lively pizzicato effects which still put today's ensembles through their paces. One can imagine how Debussy's exposure to Indonesian gamelan music in previous years influenced the composer's musical thinking here. Others have noted the Iberian character of this movement, with its flamenco-like rhythms. After the scherzo's headlong rush, the andantino emerges almost as a lullaby. Some have suggested that the gentle melodies of this movement likely derive from Debussy's travels in Russia in his youth and his exposure to native music there. The Finale supplies its own new variations as well as a cyclic reprisal of the previous movements in reverse order, leading the quartet right back to the beginning. In contrast to the 'misty trailing off' which characterizes most of the composer's later works, Debussy opted for a grand-chord ending to this early composition.

It was for a Parisian chamber music society that Debussy composed his first and only string quartet in 1893. The reception was mixed at best. One critic opined that the piece was 'an example of the shapelessness of everything today.' Even Ernest Chausson, to whom the work was dedicated, could offer little praise for it. With the passage of time, however, the quartet has been recognized as a musical landmark, heralding the transition of the string quartet from the classical tradition started by Haydn to the bold innovations of 20th century composers such as Béla Bartók.

Zhou Lang (1953 -)
Chinese Folk Songs (2002)

(~10 minutes)



These songs are based upon Chinese mountain songs, work songs, and popular tunes. Folk songs mirror people's daily lives, their thoughts and sentiments, local customs and manners. In China, folk music and songs have traditionally crisscrossed the established boundaries between high and low culture. Folk songs were historically valued by China's officialdom as expressions of regional culture and transmitters of timeless value. Early dynasties promoted the collection and study of such songs. The Book of

Songs, a Confucian classic dating back to ancient times, is a comprehensive anthology of songs and poems that has profoundly influenced Chinese literature for more than 2000 years.

There are three main forms of Chinese folk songs: *shan ge*, or mountain songs, are sung in the open air, often with long trills that can carry over great distances; *hao zi*, or working songs, are simple tunes with strong rhythms sung by workmen to accompany their labour; *xiao diao*, more structured and sophisticated, are arranged and performed by professional and semi-professional musicians for entertainment.

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Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Clarinet Quintet in B minor, Op. 115 (1891)

(~37 minutes)



Brahms' Clarinet Quintet is one of his final works, written as part of a surprising re-emergence from retirement. In 1890, with the completion of his superb Viola Quintet in G, he declared that his creative output was at an end, and that (at age 57) he would spend his remaining days ordering his affairs and his earlier compositions, and relaxing. However, on a visit to Meiningen, he heard an amazing clarinetist, Richard Mühlfeld, and was inspired by this artist to return to composing. It is to Mühlfeld, whom Brahms affectionately named "*Fräulein Klarinette*", that we owe the Clarinet Trio, the Clarinet Quintet, and the two Clarinet Sonatas, and the other music from this time – the sublime piano music of opp. 116-119 and the Four Serious Songs.

Many have argued that the Clarinet Quintet is Brahms' most profound chamber work, despite a number of awe-inspiring rival claimants (the Horn Trio, the G Major Sextet and the C minor Piano Quartet spring to mind, among others). The work as a whole possesses a unique collection of effects. It is an oversimplification to describe it as melancholy and autumnal, although this is part of the truth; in fact, there is a great depth of sadness in the piece, which may not be felt in every bar but is never far from the surface. At the same time, though, the music is constantly energized by rhapsodic, wild gestures and flickering textures; our tragic hero, if there is one, is driven to wander restlessly, not stay at home. The most obvious example of this energy is the extraordinary "Gypsy" section in the middle of the slow movement, where the clarinet rhapsodizes over tremolandi in the strings; but this element is elsewhere as well — quicksilver arpeggios in the third movement, buzzing triplet textures in the first movement — and the agonized climax at the end of the first movement is anything but autumnal.

Another striking feature of the work is its constant sliding between major

and minor modes. Even at the opening, it is not immediately clear if we will be in D major or B minor, and in fact the first entrance of the clarinet is a tantalizing, upward D major arpeggio, a gleam of light in a minor phrase. Later in the movement, before the return of the opening material, a phrase between the clarinet and cello in B major offers a brief Elysian vision before the two instruments spiral hopelessly downwards to the parallel-minor home key, and we are back where we started. The major-minor dialectic of the second movement speaks for itself, the luminous major outer section contrasted with its wild-eyed, Bohemian alter ego in minor. In the uniquely structured third movement we are treated to a major-key idea and then immediately presented with a free variation, in minor on that material. The way in which this minor section dances its way back to its major counterpart, slipping right into the final cadence of the movement without a formal divide or sense of return, underscores Brahms' conception, in this piece, of how close the major and minor "states" are, how poignantly they symbolize different aspects of the same situation.

Perhaps most amazing of all, in spite of the freedom of gesture and emotion, in spite of the immense textural palette that is brought to bear, there is no mistaking the tightly bound quality of the work, the sense that there is no escaping fate here. The main themes from all four movements can be seen to be closely related in their basic contours – particularly the first and last movements – and the middle movements are each monothematic, as the middle sections of each are variations on the opening materials. The key structure, also, has a rigorous feel — the movements are in B minor, B major, D major (strongly tending towards B minor) and B minor, respectively. Most dramatically, the final movement, a carefully unfolding set of variations, reverts suddenly and shockingly, at the end, to the music of the first movement; and after a recitative-like passage where a crucial question seems to be asked, ends almost exactly as the first movement ends. Thus, we have no sense of having arrived at any kind of solution or victory—the usual idea in an evolving four-movement 19th-century form – but quite the opposite, of having been brought fatefully back to earth, where we started, albeit deeper and richer for the experience.

ARTISTS

The Lark Quartet continues to delight audiences with its energy, passionate commitment and artistry since its inception in 1985. The Lark has performed in many of the world's great cultural centers including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, The Library of Congress, London's Wigmore Hall, L'Opéra de la Bastille in Paris, and appeared at international festivals including Lockenhaus, the Schleswig-Holstein Festival, Mostly Mozart, Istanbul Festival, Wolftrap and the Beethoven Festival in Moscow. Promising to deliver "a performance of grace, proportion and burnished brilliance" (The Washington Post), The Lark Quartet offers audiences new insights into the art of chamber music through programs that begin with the ensemble virtuosity of the western tradition and continue into recent music from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, all while regularly sharing the stage with dynamic collaborators.

The Lark has a distinguished tradition of working closely with the country's most celebrated composers and commissioning new works, many of which have become mainstays of the chamber music repertoire. This history includes works such as *Billy in the Darbies* by William Bolcom with Stephen Salters, baritone; *Scenes from the Poet's Dreams* by Jennifer Higdon with Gary Graffman, piano; *Quartet no. 1 Musica celestis* and *Quartet no. 2 Musica instrumentalis* (winning the 1997 Pulitzer Prize) by Aaron Jay Kernis; *Piano Quintet* by Paul Moravec with Jeremy Denk, *Quartet no. 2 In Memoriam* and *Piano Quintet no. 2*, by Peter Schickele; *Early That Summer* by Julia Wolfe; *Viaggio in Italia* by Giovanni Sollima; *Intarsio* by Glen Velez and *Big Time* by Nico Muhly (commissioned by the Central Vermont Chamber Music Festival) for Lark and Yousif Sheronick, percussion. The Quartet continues to build on its commitment to providing free concerts of great music presented with intelligence and vitality through its series *Lark About Town*. These family concerts, free to all and open to the public, will be held throughout the city of New York, Westchester and New Jersey.

With a discography comprising more than a dozen CDs, the Lark has recorded for the Decca/Argo, Arabesque, Bridge, ERI, Endeavor, Koch,

Point and New World labels. Lark Quartet: Composing America, comprising works by Adams, Bolcom, Moravec and Copland, was released on Bridge Records in 2014 to international acclaim. WQXR of New York said of the quartet's 2013 release of An Exaltation of Larks: Music of Jennifer Higdon: "the strings soar as a single entity" and chose it as Album of the Week upon its release in March of 2013. The Lark served as Quartet-in-Residence at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst from 2004-08 and has performed and taught as part of residencies across the United States. The Lark Quartet members, **Deborah Buck** and **Basia Danilow**, violins, **Kathryn Lockwood**, viola and **Caroline Stinson**, cello, all live in the New York City area with their families.

Todd Palmer (clarinet) has appeared as soloist, recitalist, chamber music collaborator, educator, arranger, and presenter in a variety of musical endeavors around the world. A three time Grammy nominated artist, he was a winner of the Young Concert Artist International Auditions and grand prize winner in the Ima Hogg Young Artist Auditions. He has made solo appearances with the Atlanta, Houston, BBC Scotland orchestras; St. Paul, Cincinnati, Montréal, and Metamorphosen chamber orchestras. His recital performances include Weill Hall and 92nd St. Y in New York, the Kennedy Center, and Suntory Hall in Tokyo. He has collaborated with some of the world's finest string ensembles such as the St. Lawrence, Brentano, Borromeo and Pacifica quartets; sopranos Kathleen Battle, Renée Fleming, Elizabeth Futral, Heidi Grant Murphy and Dawn Upshaw; in addition to many other notable instrumentalists. He's championed Osvaldo Golijov's klezmer quintet The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind; premiered David Bruce's Gumboots at Carnegie Hall with the St. Lawrence Quartet, and commissioned Ricky Ian Gordon's theatre work, Orpheus and Euridice, which premiered at Great Performers at Lincoln Center. In 2013 he premiered Crosswalk, choreographer Mark Morris' work for clarinet and dance and currently plays in Lincoln Center's revival of "The King & I".