

*Chamber Music Conversations from the Clark*  
2020 – 21 Season

## Shanghai Quartet



November 2020

Weigang Li, *violin*  
Angelo Xiang Yu, *violin*  
Honggang Li, *viola*  
Nicholas Tzavaras, *cello*

# PROGRAM

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*Host*

Rogers Brubaker, Professor of Sociology, UCLA

*Prerecorded Concert*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

**String Quartet No. 8 in E Minor, op. 59, no. 2, “Razumovsky”**

Allegro  
Molto adagio  
Allegretto  
Finale: Presto

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)

***Crisantemi***

*Q&A*

Rogers Brubaker

Bruce Whiteman, Clark Librarian Emeritus

Weigang Li, Angelo Xiang Yu, Honggang Li,  
Nicholas Tzavaras, members of the Shanghai Quartet

## PROGRAM NOTES

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### Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) String Quartet No. 8 in E Minor, op. 59, no. 2, “Razumovsky”

In the Beethoven catalogue, the three “Razumovsky Quartets” stand in the middle of a group of five extraordinary works: the “Appassionata” Piano Sonata, op. 57, and the Fourth Piano Concerto, op. 58, preceding them, the “Eroica” Symphony, op. 60, and the Violin Concerto, op. 61, following. All of these are among the great works of nineteenth-century music, and three of them (the “Appassionata,” the “Eroica,” and the “Razumovskys”) represent breakthroughs for Beethoven in terms of both formal ingenuity and emotional expressiveness. One can readily annotate that increased expressiveness through technical analysis of a composition like the String Quartet, op. 59, no. 2, in which Beethoven’s use of Neapolitan harmony (F major chords when the home key is E minor), for example, contributes to the piece’s emotional force. Of course, it was an inner compulsion and not dissatisfaction with the harmony textbook that led Beethoven to such a choice in devising the harmonic plan of the work.

The three quartets that make up op. 59—in F major, E minor, and C major respectively—were commissioned by Count Andreas Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador to Vienna, and were written in 1806. Beethoven’s earlier set of string quartets, op. 18, was still somewhat in the mode of Haydn and Mozart. Each quartet could be played by competent amateurs, the likely performers in a world where chamber music was still very much limited to the private realm of salons and family gatherings. The “Razumovsky” Quartets were slow to make their way at first, partly because of their formal expansiveness and partly because of their difficulty. Even Count Razumovsky’s own private string quartet found the op. 59 pieces exceedingly demanding, and when the first violinist, Ignaz Schuppanzigh—an old friend of Beethoven’s who had played in the premiere of the op. 1 Piano Trios as far back as 1792—complained to the composer, the latter famously mounted his highest horse and replied: “Does he really suppose I care about his miserable little fiddle when the spirit speaks to me and I compose?” Beethoven was the first composer to pay no heed to the limitations of executants, and many of his compositions, as a result, were considered unplayable for a period of time.

The E-Minor Quartet is the most compact of the three “Razumovskys,” and it is unusual in Beethoven’s *œuvre* in having

all of its movements in the same key (although the slow movement is actually in the major mode). If ever a movement bore witness to the often-lodged complaint that Beethoven is not a great writer of melodies, the opening Allegro of this string quartet is a prime example; there are really no discernable melodies anywhere in the movement. Drama there is, beginning with the initial two chords that establish a mood of tension and unease; and even without singable tunes, the plan of the movement follows the normal sonata form quite discernibly. Both the exposition and the development and recapitulation are repeated, and the coda plays very effectively with most of the gestures (to call them that rather than themes) of the piece: the dramatic opening chords, the offbeat dominant chord (here made particularly unsettling as a dominant ninth), and the running figure in the first violin that finally provides an unsettled closing cadence.

The slow movement is a beautiful adagio, which Beethoven asks to be played “with a great deal of feeling,” and this feeling is self-confident and unequivocal. Such assuredness is fairly typical of the Beethoven of the middle-period works, as though he is convinced that deep feeling cannot be glum or half-certain. (A similar depth of emotion in later compositions, such as the slow movement of the op. 132 string quartet, is all the more profoundly expressed, for being less cocky in manner.) The scherzo movement returns to a noticeable degree of hesitancy, at least to begin with. The allegretto first section is rhythmically tentative, to say the least, and the harmony works in parallel by focusing on unstable chords and cadences. The trio section, marked “maggiore,” is sweet and straightforward by comparison, with its Russian theme (the “Coronation of the Tsar”) and its canonic and fugal bits that provide some very anchored moments before the repetition of the unsettled allegretto section.

The Finale begins with unexpected high spirits. It bears an E-minor key signature but sets out in C major, and throughout the whole movement the tension between the two keys is kept taut. (C major is the dominant of F major, and so the Neapolitan character of the harmony is always lurking in the shadows. At the highest dramatic point of the movement, Beethoven pushes the harmony to a B-flat major chord, one key beyond F major, and the added tension is palpable.) There is a short coda at the conclusion of the Finale in which the speed is increased (“faster still,” says the score); and with these final twenty-six bars the home key of E minor is emphasized beyond any doubt. The result is that the quartet ends as dramatically as it began.

## **Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)**

### ***Crisantemi***

Unlike the catalogue of orchestral and solo instrumental repertoire, that of works for string quartet contains relatively few short pieces. A recent Clark concert contained one of the most frequently performed of these, Hugo Wolf's *Italian Serenade*, as well as one that is rarely heard, Turina's *Bullfighter's Prayer*. Puccini's *Crisantemi* (Chrysanthemums) is another such work, as it lasts some six minutes only and is usually played, if at all, as an encore. All the same, it was not composed as a bon-bon and deserves to be taken seriously.

Puccini wrote very little non-operatic music and for string quartet, only *Crisantemi* and three short minuets in A major. The former was written in a single day in 1890, to mark the death of Amadeo di Savoia (1845–90), the son of unified Italy's first king, Victor Emmanuel II. Amadeo had been King of Spain but, faced with ministerial intransigence and repeated attempts on his life, had abdicated in 1873, after reigning only three short years.

Chrysanthemums are conventionally associated with death in Italy, and Puccini's little posy is a musical approximation of flowers offered in condolence. The piece is written in ABA form, with the opening and concluding sections dominated by a chromatic theme in C-sharp minor, heard right at the outset. The music has a discernible 1890s harmonic feel to it, and Puccini later incorporated it into the final act of *Manon Lescaut* (1893), his first successful opera.

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## ABOUT SHANGHAI QUARTET

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Over the past thirty-seven years the Shanghai Quartet has become one of the world's foremost chamber ensembles. The Shanghai's elegant style, impressive technique, and emotional breadth allows the group to move seamlessly between masterpieces of Western music, traditional Chinese folk music, and cutting-edge contemporary works. Formed at the Shanghai Conservatory in 1983, soon after the end of China's harrowing Cultural Revolution, the group came to the United States to complete its studies; since then the members have been based in the U.S. while maintaining a robust touring schedule at leading chamber music series throughout North America, Europe, and Asia.

Recent performance highlights include performances at Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Freer Gallery (Washington, D.C.), and the Festival Pablo Casals in France, and Beethoven cycles for the Brevard Music Center, the Beethoven Festival in Poland, and throughout China. The Quartet also frequently performs at Wigmore Hall, the Budapest Spring Festival, Suntory Hall, and has collaborations with the NCPA and Shanghai Symphony Orchestras. Upcoming highlights include the premiere of a new work by Marcos Balter for the Quartet and countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo for the Phillips Collection, return performances for Maverick Concerts and the Taos School of Music, and engagements in

Los Angeles, Syracuse, Albuquerque, and Salt Lake City.

Among innumerable collaborations with eminent artists, they have performed with the Tokyo, Juilliard, and Guarneri Quartets; cellists Yo-Yo Ma and Lynn Harrell; pianists Menahem Pressler, Peter Serkin, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, and Yuja Wang; pipa virtuoso Wu Man; and the vocal ensemble Chanticleer. The Shanghai Quartet appears regularly at many of North America's most prominent chamber music festivals, including annual performances for Maverick Concerts, the Brevard Music Center, and Music Mountain.

The Shanghai Quartet has a long history of championing new music, with a special interest in works that juxtapose the traditions of Eastern and Western music. The Quartet has commissioned works from an encyclopedic list of the most important composers of our time, including William Bolcom, Sebastian Currier, David Del Tredici, Tan Dun, Vivian Fung, Lowell Lieberman, Zhou Long, Marc Neikrug, Krzysztof Penderecki, Bright Sheng, Chen Yi, and Du Yun. The Quartet had a particularly close relationship with Krzysztof Penderecki; they premiered his third quartet – *Leaves From an Unwritten Diary* – at the composer's 75th birthday concert and repeated it at both his 80th and 85th birthday celebrations. Forthcoming and recent commissions include new works from Judith Weir, Tan Dun, and Wang Lei, in addition to a new work from Penderecki.

The Shanghai Quartet has an extensive discography of more than thirty recordings, ranging from Schumann and Dvořák piano quintets with Rudolf Buchbinder to Zhou Long's *Poems from Tang* for string quartet and orchestra with the Singapore Symphony. The Quartet has recorded the complete Beethoven string quartets and is currently recording the complete Bartók quartets.

A diverse array of media projects run the gamut from a cameo appearance playing Bartók's String Quartet No. 4 in Woody Allen's film *Melinda and Melinda* to PBS television's *Great Performances* series. Violinist Weigang Li appeared in the documentary *From Mao to Mozart: Isaac Stern in China*, and the family of cellist Nicholas Tzavaras was the subject of the film *Music of the Heart*, starring Meryl Streep. The Shanghai Quartet is the subject of a full-length documentary film, *Behind the Strings*, that will be released in 2020.

Serving as Quartet-in-Residence at the John J. Cali School of Music at Montclair State University since 2002, the Shanghai Quartet will also join the Tianjin (China) Juilliard School in fall 2020 as resident faculty members. The Quartet also is the Ensemble-in-Residence with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra and visiting guest professors of the Shanghai Conservatory and Central Conservatory in Beijing. They are proudly sponsored by Thomastik-Infeld Strings and BAM Cases.

[shanghaiquartet.com](http://shanghaiquartet.com)

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## ABOUT BRUCE WHITEMAN

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Bruce Whiteman has been writing the program notes for the *Chamber Music at the Clark* series since 1998. He was Head Librarian at UCLA's Clark Library from 1996–2010, and is now a full-time poet, writer, and translator. He lives in Canada.

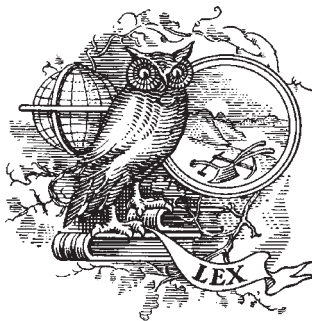


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In 1926 philanthropist William Andrews Clark Jr. donated his library of rare books to the burgeoning UCLA campus in honor of his father, a copper magnate and United States senator from Montana. The William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, a unique resource for the humanities, today includes major holdings in English literature and history (1580–1820) and fine printing, as well as the world's most comprehensive collection of the works of Oscar Wilde, attracting scholars throughout the world. The library hosts a range of activities, including scholarly lectures and conferences, theatrical performances, and music concerts—organized by the UCLA Center for 17th- & 18th-Century Studies. The acclaimed *Chamber Music at the Clark* series honors the musical passion of William Andrews Clark Jr., an accomplished violinist and founder of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.