

*Chamber Music at the Clark
2021–22 Season*

Schumann Quartet



November 20, 2021

Erik Schumann, *violin*
Ken Schumann, *violin*
Liisa Randalu, *viola*
Mark Schumann, *cello*

This concert is dedicated to those friends and loved ones we lost in 2021.

PROGRAM

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)
String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor, op. 13

Adagio–Allegro vivace
Adagio non lento
Intermezzo. Allegretto con moto–Allegro di molto
Presto–Adagio non lento

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)
String Quartet in F Major

Allegro moderato–très doux
Assez vif–très rythmé
Très lent
Vif et agité

Intermission

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)
String Quartet No. 19 in C Major, K. 465 “Dissonance”

Adagio–Allegro
Andante cantabile
Menuetto. Allegro
Allegro molto

PROGRAM NOTES

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) **String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor, op. 13**

Mendelssohn was eighteen years old when he wrote his A-minor string quartet, the first of his six mature quartets. Beethoven had died recently; and if his influence on Mendelssohn was pervasive (Berlioz once complained that Mendelssohn “was rather too fond of the dead”) his earliest masterpieces are uniquely Mendelssohnian whatever their allegiances to his masters. The op. 13 quartet is surrounded in the Mendelssohn *thematisches verzeichnis* by more famous compositions including the incidental music for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the wonderful Octet, op. 20; and if we extend the context to works written by the age of twenty-one, even the Hebrides overture of 1829, op. 26, is contiguous. The A-minor quartet is much less often heard but it is all the same an extraordinary composition for a late-teenage boy. Nothing that Mozart had written by the age of eighteen was remotely as original, and Saint-Saëns, who was as remarkable a prodigy as either Mozart or Mendelssohn, was an old man of twenty-three before his immensely high-spirited first piano concerto announced to the world that the child who could play the piano at thirty months had become a real composer, the “French Mendelssohn.”

It is hardly surprising that the A-minor quartet should allude to the late Beethoven quartets, which had an all-encompassing influence over the form throughout the whole of the nineteenth century and even beyond. Beethoven’s final string quartet, the op. 135 in F major, had asked “Must it be?” in a bit of unusual musico-literary rhetoric, to which the main body of the finale had resolutely answered “It must!” in a grand gesture of acquiescence to fate and mortality. Mendelssohn’s quartet—in particular the theme of the brief introduction to the first movement—is based on a song he published as part of his op. 9 entitled “*Die Frage*” (“The Question”), in which a young swain asks his inamorata if it is true (“*Ist es wahr?*”) that she waits for him in copses and hurls questions about his love to the moon and stars. So slender a bit of adolescent eroticism supplies a tiny cell of music that lurks not only at the outset of the quartet, but which returns in its rather unusual slow conclusion.

The first movement sonata-allegro begins with an adagio introduction in A major that includes a quotation from the song that gives the quartet its subtitle. The movement is compact, with no repetition of the exposition and two concise thematic groups.

The development section does not stray very far harmonically and uses a good deal of imitation among the parts. (Mendelssohn, as a close student of J.S. Bach, was very fond of imitative counterpoint. If he did not actually hear Goethe make his famous—and very romantic—remark about Bach, he may well have heard something similar from the master’s lips: “As listeners to Bach’s music we may feel as if we were present when God created the world.”)

The second movement is in F major and begins slowly, but it grows quite warm in the middle section. A brief violin solo leads back to the slower theme which, like the opening melody of the third movement, incorporates the dotted rhythm of the thematic material borrowed from “*Die Frage*.” The delightful middle section of the third movement is an example of the unique scherzo music with a light touch that we associate so strongly with Mendelssohn. The finale begins with a dramatic tremolo and then unfolds as a highly expressive presto movement that has its roots in late Beethoven. A fugue emerges in the middle as the theme is developed, and throughout, the deeply romantic melodic material is underpinned with conventional but effective contrapuntal strategies. The adagio conclusion comprises the most extensive quotation of the op. 9 song heard in the entire quartet and provides a moving ending in the major key.

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) **String Quartet in F Major**

Like Debussy, whose String Quartet (op. 10) provided a model for his own single contribution to the genre, Ravel was something of a late bloomer. Only one or two lasting pieces precede Ravel’s Quartet in F Major, which he began in 1902 when he was twenty-seven years old. At that time, he was still informally a student of Gabriel Fauré (the quartet is dedicated to him), and he had not yet quite abandoned all hope of winning the *Prix de Rome*. He tried on four separate occasions to win the prize—which had helped to establish Berlioz and Debussy, among others—but he failed each time. The first movement of the F Major String Quartet was composed as his entry in another competition, and although he did not win that prize either, Ravel nevertheless did complete the work in the spring of 1903. It was premiered the following year, on 5 March, and it has been in the repertoire ever since.

Ravel combined an attraction to antiquity and a classical sense of form with an 1890s aesthetic anchored in sensuality—a preference

he shared with the writer Pierre Louÿs (1870–1925), who was his close contemporary. (Louÿs was the dedicatee of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* and the author of *Aphrodite* [1896], a hugely successful novel that recreated Alexandrian Greece.) *Daphnis and Chloe*, written for Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* and one of Ravel's most famous works, is an excellent example of these qualities: Ravel himself thought of the score as "imagined and painted by the French artists of the eighteenth century." In other words, Ravel was the very opposite of an instinctual composer. Stravinsky notoriously called him a "Swiss watchmaker" for his exactitude and perfectionism. Ravel did indeed value "definitive clarity" above all, despite the fact that he is often classed as an Impressionist composer. He is wonderfully capable of producing the kind of gossamer and muted light effects that we associate in the visual arts with Monet and Renoir; but there is always, with Ravel, a defined armature underneath which leaves nothing to chance.

The opening movement of the quartet is in conventional sonata form, although the exposition is not repeated but flows directly into the middle development section. Two themes dominate the opening pages of the score, and like most of the thematic material in the first movement, they appear later in the quartet in modified versions. A small climax leads to the secondary theme in D minor with its slightly exotic modal character, achieved by using C natural instead of C sharp. The development section begins almost immediately after this D-minor theme is stated, and it sets out on a major seventh chord, one of the chords that gives this work its aural character. (Ravel likes ninths, elevenths, and thirteenths as well.) The development is harmonically unstable, with the themes audible but rather fragmented. It accelerates to a large climax in which the first violin and the viola can be heard playing a compacted version of the opening theme, while the second violin and the cello accompany them in a seemingly unrelated key that produces a bitonal effect. The recapitulation returns the movement to F major, and gradually the music slows down and fades out amid some ethereal harmonic effects.

The wonderfully lively second movement is a scherzo with a slow middle section. The special effects here include counter-rhythms; lots of staccatos, tremolos, and trills; muted strings during the reflective slow section (which sounds a little like Debussy's *Afternoon of a Faun*); and much else besides. The contrast provided by the middle section is striking, though its melodic material is in fact drawn directly from the scherzo. A thirteen-bar introduction leads to the main motif of the slow third movement, a warm, song-

like theme in G-flat major played mostly by the viola. Allusions to thematic material from the first two movements of the quartet are sounded in various places, both in the outer sections of the movement and in the more rhapsodic middle portion.

The finale, in the home key of F major again, begins with what the commentator Melvin Berger has called “a pair of unison snarls”—two five-note tremolo figures followed by diminished-seventh chords. The asymmetrical 5/8 meter of the finale gives it a restless character, and the persistent tremolo adds to the effect of nervous energy. Ravel’s interest in the cyclic use of thematic material, pioneered by Franz Liszt and César Franck, is obvious in this finale. The secondary theme of the opening movement returns here (albeit in a different key) as a secondary theme also, and other earlier themes can be heard again in whole or in part. Moments of rest are rare in this movement; the harmonic rhythm contributes equally with the tempo (“quick and agitated”) to a sensation of constant motion. When the last, glorious F-major chord is sounded, at the peak of a rising series of seventh chords, it is as though we can inhale deeply again after holding our breaths for a very long time.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) **String Quartet No. 19 in C Major, K. 465 “Dissonance”**

The traditional picture of Mozart’s compositional practice that has come down to us is of a man who wrote fully detailed pieces in his imagination, and then had only to write them down, almost note-perfect from the start and with little revision necessary. In a few cases, the manuscripts that survive document a somewhat different story. Those for the six string quartets that Mozart composed in the early 1780s and dedicated to Haydn, now at the British Library, show him often reconsidering, endeavoring to get every single note just right. After all, if Mozart was ever going to experience the anxiety of influence, it was in the presence of Haydn, whose set of quartets, op. 33, inspired Mozart to return to the form in the first place. He was, Mozart wrote in his dedication, his best friend, and he saw the older composer as the godfather of the “Haydn” quartets, as we now call them. In the circumstances, they would have to be perfect.

The C-major string quartet is the sixth and last in the set, and it was finished, according to Mozart’s own catalogue, on January 14, 1785, two weeks before Mozart’s twenty-ninth birthday. Its nickname

derives from the slow introduction to the first movement, which struck listeners and players then as almost incomprehensibly weird. We can hear those twenty-two bars as what Charles Rosen called “an extended dominant chord within a tonic area”—i.e. a preparatory chord that will resolve pleasingly to a C chord, the harmony with which the fast part of the movement begins. Mozart’s contemporaries heard an A and an A flat sounding almost simultaneously, as they do in the second bar, as intolerable. But weird or not, the introduction is undeniably mysterious and even dark, so that when the main theme that begins in the first violin sets out with irresistible sweetness and lack of harmonic complexity, it is something of a relief. (That is what dissonance is for in classical music: relief and resolution.) A subsidiary theme is mostly a combination of scales and a repeated figure. The development section is substantially more intense, as the music goes through several keys and the rhythms are more jagged. After the recapitulation, a short coda brings the movement to a close. The disquieting music of the opening is long forgotten. The slow movement in F major is both lyrical and luxuriant, with repeated notes and sixteenth-note figures often producing the impression of a heartbeat underlying the main melody. The Menuetto returns to the home key of C. It consists of a fairly boisterous and good-natured dance, with the middle section, in C minor, providing a rather stark contrast. The finale, like the opening movement, is in sonata form. Mozart fills it with charming melodies and rumbustious high spirits. It concludes with a short but compelling coda.

Program Notes © Bruce Whiteman 2021

ABOUT SCHUMANN QUARTET



Front cover and above photo credit: Kaupo Kikkas

The Schumann Quartet has reached a stage where anything is possible because it has dispensed with certainties. This has consequences for audiences, who from one concert to the next have to be prepared for any eventuality: “A work really develops only in a live performance,” the Quartet says. “That is ‘the real thing,’ because we ourselves never know what will happen. On the stage all imitation disappears and you automatically become honest with yourself. Then you can create a bond with the audience—communicate with it in music.” This live situation gains new energy as the Quartet partners with new and forthcoming collaborators including, Albrecht Mayer, Menahem Pressler, Kit Armstrong, Anna Vinnitskaya, and Anna Lucia Richter.

Recent season highlights include an invitation to perform in Tokyo at Suntory Hall. The Quartet has also toured North America and Asia, given guest performances at festivals in Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and held concerts in the musical metropolises of London, Zurich, Madrid, Hamburg, and Berlin. Furthermore, the ensemble engaged in two special programs in Barcelona and Madrid together with the soprano Katharina Konradi.

Most recently the Schumann Quartet expanded its discography with *Fragment* (2020), an examination of one of the masters of the string quartet, Franz Schubert. The Quartet's album *Intermezzo* (2018, Schumann, Reimann with Anna-Lucia Richter and Mendelssohn Bartholdy) has been hailed enthusiastically both at home and abroad and received the award "Opus Klassik." These albums are celebrated as worthy successors to the Schumann's award-winning *Landscapes* album, in which the Quartet traces its own roots by combining works of Haydn, Bartók, Takemitsu, and Pärt. Among other prizes, the earlier album received the "Jahrespreis der deutschen Schallplattenkritik," five "Diapason d'Or de l'Année" awards, and was selected as Editor's Choice by BBC Music Magazine. For its previous CD, *Mozart Ives Verdi*, the Schumann Quartet was accorded the 2016 "Newcomer Award" at the BBC Music Magazine Awards in London.

Brothers Mark, Erik, and Ken Schumann have been playing together since early childhood. In 2012 they were joined by violist Liisa Randalu. Randalu was born in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, and grew up in Karlsruhe, Germany. The strong connection between the Quartet's members is often remarked upon by audiences. The four musicians enjoy wordless communication, a single look conveys how a particular member wants to play a particular passage. Although individual personalities clearly manifest themselves, a common space arises in every musical performance through a process of spiritual metamorphosis. The Quartet's openness and curiosity may, in part, be the result of the formative influence of teachers such as Eberhard Feltz, the Alban Berg Quartet or musical partners such as Menahem Pressler.

Teachers, musical partners, prestigious prizes, CD releases—it is always tempting to speculate on what factors lead many to view the Schumann Quartet as world class. However, the four Schumann musicians regard such milestones as mere encounters, as confirmation of the path they have taken. They feel that their musical development in recent years represents a quantum leap. "We really want to take things to extremes, to see how far the excitement, and our spontaneity as a group, take[s] us," says Ken Schumann, the middle of the three Schumann brothers. They charmingly sidestep any attempt to categorize their sound, approach or style, and simply let the concerts speak for themselves.

Critics approve, Harald Eggebrecht in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* says of the Quartet: “Fire and energy. The Schumann Quartet plays staggeringly well [...] without doubt one of the very best formations among today’s abundance of quartets, [...] with sparkling virtuosity and a willingness to astonish”

Quotes taken from an interview with journalists from the classical music magazine VAN (van-magazin.de)

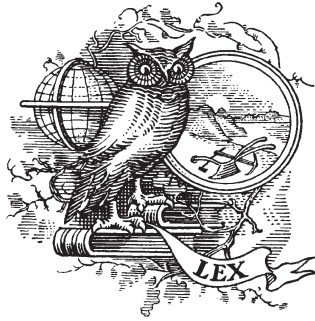
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In 1926 philanthropist William Andrews Clark Jr. donated his library of rare books to the burgeoning UCLA campus in honor of his father, a copper magnate and United States senator from Montana. The William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, a unique resource 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.