

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

# Verona Quartet



May 2, 2021

Jonathan Ong, *violin*  
Dorothy Ro, *violin*  
Abigail Rojansky, *viola*  
Jonathan Dormand, *cello*

# PROGRAM

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*Host*

Rogers Brubaker, Professor of Sociology, UCLA

*Prerecorded Concert*

Reena Esmail (1983–)

**String Quartet (*Ragamala*)**

Fantasie (*Bihag*)  
Scherzo (*Malkauns*)  
Recitativo (*Basant*)  
Rhondo (*Jōg*)

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)

**String Quartet No. 12 in F Major, op. 96, “American Quartet”**

Allegro ma non troppo  
Lento  
Molto vivace  
Finale: Vivace ma no troppo

*Q&A*

Rogers Brubaker

Bruce Whiteman, Clark Librarian Emeritus

Jonathan Ong, Dorothy Ro, Abigail Rojansky, Jonathan  
Dormand, members of Verona Quartet

## PROGRAM NOTES

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### **Reena Esmail (1983– )** **String Quartet (*Ragamala*)**

Reena Esmail was born in Los Angeles in 1983 and studied music and composition at both The Juilliard School and Yale, where she received a Ph.D. She has quickly established an enviable reputation as a composer who combines the conventions of Western classical music and northern Indian (or Hindustani) classical music. She has studied with composers from both traditions, and has already compiled an impressive catalogue of works in many genres, from orchestral and choral scores to instrumental solo and chamber music. During the current concert season she has been the composer-in-residence at the Seattle Symphony, and for the period 2020–2023 she is the artist-in-residence with the Los Angeles Master Chorale.

Esmail's only String Quartet was premiered in 2013 at the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival. It beautifully demonstrates her masterful ability to bring together traditional forms, harmonies, and techniques from both classical and Indian music. The subtitle of the work—*Ragamala*—means “a garland of *ragas*,” the *raga* being the basic building block of Indian music. Western musicologists struggle to define the *raga*, but it is something akin to a combination of a mode and a melody. Performers use *ragas* to create improvised compositions, and Esmail's movement titles (*Bihag*, *Malkauns*, *Basant*, and *Jōg*) are the names of four *ragas* that underlie the music. Improvisation is essential to classical Indian music, and Esmail uses techniques like multiple grace notes, portamenti, and fast repetitions to lend the quartet an Indian improvisational aspect.

Each of the four movements, which are laid out in a conventional slow-fast-slow-fast structure, begins with the cello playing a G–D harmonic interval, with other pitches to follow in the other instruments. Esmail has noted that this is intended to invoke a phenomenon that she hears at concerts in India, when members of the audience would hum softly when they recognized *ragas* that were about to be used for improvisation. The opening movement is entitled *Fantasie*, a word which was used in music beginning in the Renaissance and which denotes a piece that can sound invented on the spot. Here the four instruments seem to improvise long, melismatic themes that are frequently imitated and that contribute to a sense of musical meditation. The second

movement begins without a pause, and continues in the same vein through a brief introductory passage. Then the Scherzo begins in earnest, with the lead taken by the viola. The music is fast, yet it seems rather leisurely, as the highly rhythmic theme passes from the viola to the violin and then back again. There are several instances of chordal punctuation of the quick theme, until a coda has the first violin constantly repeating a figure (primarily a C) as the other instruments gradually move upwards until the final loud unison C. A little unison cadence concludes the movement.

Once again there is no break between the second and third movements, and the open harmony of G and D is sounded to begin the Recitative. After that now familiar open G and D section, the Recitative proper begins in the cello, which dominates this movement. The *raga* used here (*Basant*) is associated with springtime, but as Esmail marks the music to be played “Full and pensive,” perhaps this is spring in its earliest manifestations, before the crocuses and squill have poked up through the earth and everything still looks quiescent. When the final movement breaks out into the Rondo section, the music becomes fast and compelling, with time signature changes in almost every bar. Twice the fast music is interrupted by brief moments of pause; and finally the familiar “Adagio, ephemeral” passage that began each movement now brings the quartet to a close with a long G in the cello.

### **Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)** **String Quartet No. 12 in F Major, op. 96, “American Quartet”**

Dvořák was invited to become the Director of the National Conservatory of Music in America in New York City in 1891, and he accepted after a good deal of soul-searching. His tenure began in the fall of 1892, and his salary was set at \$15,000—an extraordinary amount, equivalent to over \$400,000 today. The following summer, the composer and his family traveled to the small northeastern Iowa town of Spillville, which was dominated by Czech immigrants and where Dvořák quickly settled into composing, an activity that the busyness and responsibilities of his New York life had made difficult. In a matter of days he composed a string quartet in F major (he wrote the dates in the manuscript: June 8–23, 1893), and that summer he would write further chamber pieces as well. The town held only about 400 people, but it had an impressive church (St. Wenceslaus, what else?), a pub where the composer drank his daily ration of beer (bootlegged from elsewhere, as the town was officially dry), and

interesting places to walk, especially along the Turkey River. The Dvořáks lived in a house which still stands and which, over a clock museum, now houses a small Dvořák Museum. Dvořák even managed to have his string quartet performed in Spillville, although the official premiere took place in early 1894 in Boston, and the piece was published back in Europe by Dvořák's usual publisher, also in 1894. The composer said at the time that he wanted to compose something "melodious and simple," and although some musicologists have tried to make the "American" String Quartet into an unobvious example of unusual techniques, it still strikes us as just what Dvořák said it was: melodious and simple, to which one might add "irresistible." It may or may not incorporate elements that are vaguely Amerindian, and it may or may not attempt in the third movement to imitate a Scarlet Tanager (a bird new to the composer whose song he heard in Iowa), but we can agree that it is certainly tuneful throughout.

The opening movement is a sonata form dominated by two melodies: the first, in the home key of F, is brisk and charming and resolutely diatonic; the second, in A, is slower and more reflective, and it is audibly derived from the first, sharing a rhythmic emphasis on the offbeat. The development section contains a surprisingly large component of music in the minor mode—surprising in a piece that overall seems quite happy and unruffled—but the recapitulation is resolutely in F, with six final bars that proclaim the home key like a cawing crow defending its nest. The rather endlessly mournful second movement, in D minor, is dominated by a sad theme that is accompanied by a restless, repetitive passage heard mainly in the inner two voices. The cello is given the final statement of the plangent main theme.

The third movement's scherzo and trio (two trios, in fact) return to F major and to higher spirits. Dvořák uses a great deal of repetition in this quartet, but here the repetitive aspect of the principal theme sounds at times almost minimalist. The lively main melody is contrasted in the first trio with a solemn and rhythmically simple minor-mode theme, although the accompaniment helps to breathe some fire into an otherwise uncomplicated motif. A second occurrence of the trio returns to the F-minor motif, now given a thicker texture in the accompanying voices, after which the main theme is heard one final time. The finale is monopolized by a folk-like tune in F that possesses a relentless rhythmic vitality. It is contrasted with a solemn secondary theme, first introduced by a passage in D-flat major, the flattened sixth of which Schubert was so fond

two generations earlier than Dvořák. The composer integrates both themes into the music, but at the conclusion the principal motif wins out, and, like the ending of the first movement, the finale finishes with an extended and celebratory perfect cadence.

Program Notes © Bruce Whiteman 2021

## ABOUT BRUCE WHITEMAN

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.



## ABOUT VERONA QUARTET

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Acclaimed for its “bold interpretive strength, robust characterization and commanding resonance” (*Calgary Herald*), the Verona Quartet has spellbound audiences worldwide, unlocking the secrets of the music through the “intimate way they communicate with each other and the audience” (*Boston Arts Fuse*).

Delicate craftsmanship, luminous sound, and a dramatic poise are all hallmarks of the virtuosity that fuses together violinists Jonathan Ong, Dorothy Ro, violist Abigail Rojansky, and cellist Jonathan Dormand to create the Verona Quartet. The group’s singular sense of purpose earned them Chamber Music America’s coveted Cleveland Quartet Award 2020, and a reputation as an “outstanding ensemble...cohesive yet full of temperament” (*The New York Times*). Deeply committed educators, the Verona Quartet serves as Quartet-in-Residence at the Oberlin College and Conservatory in Oberlin, Ohio.

A string quartet for the 21st century, the Verona Quartet champions the storied history of the string quartet alongside music that reflects the current world in which we live. This includes contemporary work written and commissioned for them by composers Julia Adolphe, Sebastian Currier, Corey Dundee, Texu Kim, and Michael Gilbertson. The Quartet

has cultivated a dynamic approach to collaboration and programming that includes cross-cultural and interdisciplinary enterprises. Recent projects feature performances with dancers from Brooklyn's Dance Heginbotham, artistic exchanges with traditional Emirati poets in the UAE, and collaborations with Grammy-winning folk supergroup I'm With Her.

The Verona Quartet has appeared across four continents enchanting audiences at venues such as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Kennedy Center, Wigmore Hall, and Melbourne Recital Hall. They have also appeared at festivals that include La Jolla Summerfest, Chamber Music Northwest, Caramoor, Bravo! Vail, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. As Ensemble-in-Residence with the Chamber Orchestra of the Triangle in North Carolina, the Verona Quartet curates the *UpClose Chamber Music* series, bringing the visceral energy of classical music to diverse audiences in venues that range from concert halls to craft breweries.

In addition to their Oberlin residency, the Verona Quartet holds residency positions at the Lunenburg Academy of Music Performance (Lunenburg, NS), as well as Indiana University Summer String Academy (Bloomington, IN). Each year, reaching thousands of people, the Verona Quartet's community and educational workshops inspire new listeners and performers through the joys of chamber music.

The Verona Quartet rose to international prominence after rapidly sweeping top prizes at the Wigmore Hall, Melbourne, Osaka, M-Prize International Chamber Music Competitions, and the Concert Artists Guild Competition.

The ensemble's "thoughtful, impressive" performances (*Cleveland Classical*) emanate from the spirit of storytelling. The Quartet believe that the essence of storytelling transcends genre and therefore the name "Verona" pays tribute to William Shakespeare, one of the greatest storytellers of all time.

[www.veronaquartet.com](http://www.veronaquartet.com)

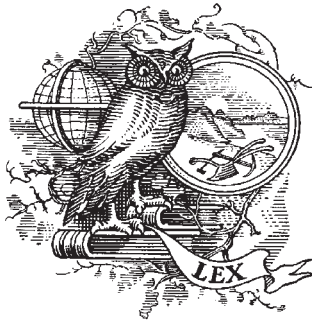
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## FRIENDS OF THE CLARK LIBRARY

Annual membership in Friends of the Clark Library provides essential support to expand the Clark's holdings, support innovative research, offer affordable academic and cultural programs, and sustain the historic Library facility and grounds. For 2020–21, all gifts are fully tax-deductible and include free, unlimited access to online programming, due to uncertainty around hosting in-person events as a result of COVID-19 campus-wide safety precautions. To help the Clark and Center fulfill their mission, please consider joining at any level.

For more details, visit: [www.1718.ucla.edu/giving/friends/](http://www.1718.ucla.edu/giving/friends/)



## CHAMBER MUSIC CONVERSATIONS FROM THE CLARK

Previous performances in this series are available to view for a limited time on the Center for 17th- & 18th-Century Studies' YouTube channel:

[www.youtube.com/channel/UCbqHRq2d7cM5kobB27Hs4vA](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbqHRq2d7cM5kobB27Hs4vA)

Please join us for our final performance of the season, presented by the Jupiter String Quartet on May 16, 2021. For more details and to register: [www.1718.ucla.edu/events/jupiter-quartet/](http://www.1718.ucla.edu/events/jupiter-quartet/)



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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.