



HANCHER AUDITORIUM



ELIAS STRING QUARTET

Thursday, February 15, 2024

7:30 p.m.

*Presented in collaboration with the University of Iowa
String Quartet Residency Program*

Photo: Kaupo Kikkas

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ELIAS STRING QUARTET

SARA BITLLOCH, violin SIMONE VAN DER GIESSEN, viola
DONALD GRANT, violin MARIE BITLLOCH, cello

Thursday, February 15, 2024, at 7:30 p.m.
Hancher Auditorium, the University of Iowa
Strauss Hall / In the Round

PROGRAM

Igor STRAVINSKY

Three Pieces for String Quartet

Danse
Excentrique
Cantique

Felix MENDELSSOHN

String Quartet No. 6 in F Minor, op. 80

Allegro vivace assai - Presto
Allegro assai
Adagio
Finale: Allegro molto

INTERMISSION

Franz SCHUBERT

**String Quartet in D Minor, D. 810
("Death and the Maiden")**

Allegro
Andante con moto (Variations)
Scherzo (Allegro molto)
Presto - Prestissimo

The Elias String Quartet appears by arrangement with David Rowe Artists.

davidroweartists.com
eliasstringquartet.com

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ABOUT THE ARTISTS

The Elias String Quartet take their name from Mendelssohn's oratorio *Elijah*, of which Elias is its German form, and quickly established themselves as one of the most intense and vibrant quartets of their generation. The quartet was formed in 1998 at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester where they worked closely with the late Dr. Christopher Rowland. They also spent a year studying at the Hochschule in Cologne with the Alban Berg Quartet. Between 2005 and 2009, they were resident string quartet at Sheffield's "Music in the Round" as part of Ensemble 360, taking over from the Lindsay Quartet. They are now ensemble-in-residence at the Royal Northern College of Music and regularly return there to teach and perform. This season's North American tour will take them to Houston, TX; Mobile, AL; Tryon, NC; Santa Fe, NM; and Iowa City, IA, where they will participate in the University of Iowa's illustrious string quartet residency program.

In 2009 the Elias was chosen to participate in BBC Radio 3's *New Generation Artists* scheme and was also a recipient of a Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award. With the support of the Trust, the Elias Quartet mounted "The Beethoven Project," studying and performing all of Beethoven's string quartets as cycles whilst sharing their experience through a special website (thebeethovenproject.com) and social media. The project culminated with a cycle at Wigmore Hall, all six concerts recorded for the Wigmore Live label. The quartet has since performed complete Beethoven cycles at numerous venues worldwide, most recently at Tokyo's prestigious Suntory Hall in June 2023.

The quartet is steadily building a recording catalogue that has been met with widespread critical acclaim. They have recorded the Schumann and Dvořák piano quintets with Jonathan Biss, a Britten quartets disc for Sonimage, a Mendelssohn disc for ASV Gold, and Schumann string quartets for Outhere Music. Their two mixed programme recordings for Wigmore Live were praised unanimously, the first winning a *BBC Music Magazine* Newcomers Award. Most recently, they have recorded the complete Beethoven quartets live at Wigmore Hall, released in six volumes to great critical acclaim. *BBC Music Magazine* described their performance as "simply astounding, in the freshness, intensity, assurance, and seeming spontaneity of their playing."

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2023-2024

PROGRAM NOTES

IGOR STRAVINSKY

BORN: June 17, 1882, Oranienbaum (now Lomonosov), Russia

DIED: April 6, 1971, New York City

Three Pieces for String Quartet

WORK COMPOSED: Stravinsky completed these three short movements over four days in the summer of 1914, rev. 1918

WORLD PREMIERE: November 8, 1915, in Chicago, IL

ESTIMATED DURATION: 7.5 minutes

Igor Stravinsky wrote his *Three Pieces for String Quartet* in just four days during the summer of 1914, while he was living in the Swiss Alps. During this time, Stravinsky was also writing *Les Noces (The Wedding)*, and we can hear the similarities between the two works, particularly in the use of Russian peasant melodies and strong rhythmic accents. Each movement was conceived individually, rather than in relation to the others. None of these pieces had titles when Stravinsky originally wrote them; it wasn't until 1928, when Stravinsky arranged them for orchestra, that he gave each the title by which it is now known.



Stravinsky in the early 1920s

In *Danse*, which lasts less than one minute, the first violin plays a crude, cheerful theme, while the cello executes pizzicato rhythms, the viola sounds double-stop drones, and the second violin “comments” on the first violin’s melody. Stravinsky chose the title *Excentrique* as an homage to a character from the English music hall, a clown known as Little Tich. “The jerky, spastic movement, the ups and downs, the rhythm—even the mood or the joke of the music—was suggested by the art of the great clown,” Stravinsky noted. In *Cantique*, Stravinsky retains the atonal framework of the previous two movements, but sets an altogether different mood. The four instruments intone a somber, murky chorale offset by short single-instrument phrases in higher registers. Stravinsky was especially pleased with this movement, particularly the ending, which he termed “some of the best music of that time.”

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FELIX MENDELSSOHN

BORN: February 3, 1809, Hamburg, Germany

DIED: November 4, 1847, Leipzig, Germany

String Quartet No. 6 in F Minor, op. 80

WORK COMPOSED: Summer 1847

WORLD PREMIERE: Undocumented

ESTIMATED DURATION: 25 minutes

Felix Mendelssohn lived a charmed—albeit too-short—life. His wealthy, cultured family nurtured his precocious musical talent from early childhood, and he had close loving relationships with them, particularly with his older sister, Fanny. True to his name, Mendelssohn also possessed a sunny temperament. The ebullience of the incidental music from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or the sun-drenched joy of the "Italian" Symphony reflect an untroubled soul.



Portrait of Mendelssohn
by Wilhelm Hensel, 1847

On May 14, 1847, Fanny experienced numbness in her hands while rehearsing for an upcoming family concert. Shortly thereafter she suffered a massive stroke and died; she was 41. When Mendelssohn got word of her death four days later, he collapsed.

Mendelssohn remained incapacitated by grief for several months. "I could not at first think of music without experiencing the greatest emptiness and barrenness in my mind and heart," he later wrote. Weakened both physically and emotionally, Mendelssohn and his family went to Switzerland for the summer. At the end of July, he wrote his younger sister, Rebecka, "I force myself to be industrious in the hope that later on I may feel like working and enjoying it." Eventually Mendelssohn recovered enough to compose the String Quartet in F Minor, which he titled "Requiem for Fanny." It was the last chamber work Mendelssohn completed before he died two months later.

The *Allegro vivace assai* opens with agitated tremolo strings which set the unsettled mood of the movement. Mendelssohn's ragged emotional turmoil finds expression in the relentless forward motion of the music; his grief pours out in a raging flood, drowning everything in its path. The second movement *scherzo* continues the tempestuous mood of the first movement, and almost seems to mock the anguish inherent in the sardonic theme. The hushed *Adagio* conveys Mendelssohn's abiding love for Fanny and the depth of his sadness. The first violin's tender melody sings over an understated accompaniment with contrapuntal textures. After a gradual increase of intensity and volume, the music returns to the opening theme's gentle resignation. The *Finale* echoes the distress of the opening *Allegro vivace assai* as breathless trills, sudden dynamic changes, and disintegrating melodies disquiet the listener.

Mendelssohn never fully recovered from Fanny's death; six months later he also suffered a stroke and died at age 38.

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FRANZ SCHUBERT

BORN: January 31, 1797, Vienna, Austria

DIED: November 19, 1828, Vienna, Austria

String Quartet in D Minor, D. 810, ("Death and the Maiden")

WORK COMPOSED: 1824

WORLD PREMIERE: 1826, in a private at-home concert in Vienna

ESTIMATED DURATION: 38 minutes

Franz Schubert wrote more than 600 lieder (songs), and composed most of them during his teens. Many of Schubert's lieder are considered the finest examples of the genre—among lieder's greatest hits, so to speak—and are frequently performed in vocal recitals.

When he was 17, Schubert set a 1774 poem by Matthias Claudius. The short two-verse poem, titled "Death and the Maiden," consists of a dialogue between Death and a frightened young woman. She pleads with Death to pass her by because she is still young—"Do not touch me!" Death reassures her there is nothing to fear, that "you will sleep safe in my arms." The song ends calmly, in D major rather than the agitated opening key of D minor, which suggests a gentle, peaceful ending free from both pain and fear.



1825 portrait of Schubert by Wilhelm August Rieder

Schubert's setting of "Death and the Maiden" is just 43 measures long, but it is essentially a mini-opera, complete with narrative arc and contrasting moods. Schubert was especially drawn to the existential emotions of the drama, which appealed to his overheated teenage sensibilities.

Seven years later, in 1824, Schubert repurposed "Death and the Maiden" by using it as the thematic foundation for his String Quartet No. 14 in D Minor. For Schubert, however, who was now battling the syphilis that would take his own life, the scenario of Claudius' poem now carried a different and especially poignant meaning.

Death announces itself in the opening notes, a vigorous descending scalar passage characterized more by its forceful rhythm than the melodic inventiveness usually associated with Schubert's music. This motif underlies all of the music that follows. In the Andante, Schubert begins with the piano prelude to his lieder setting of "Death and the Maiden," now heard as slow homophonic chords played by the four strings. The rest of the movement is a series of increasingly elaborate variations on the prelude's solemn melody. Just as in the song, Schubert's character study of Death expresses both fear and a sense of comfort, even solace, that Death can bring.

The main theme of Scherzo, like the opening notes of the Allegro, is more rhythmic than melodic. Its sharply accented syncopated rhythms seem to almost assault the

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PROGRAM NOTES

listener in a series of poignard-like thrusts. In contrast, the trio presents a serene, sunny countermelody in D major, a departure from the home key of D minor—before the Scherzo theme returns in a quasi-violent conclusion.

The closing Presto sprints through both D minor and D major in its attempts to outrun the inevitability of Death. The relentless galloping rhythm calls to mind another of Schubert's famous musical night flights, with Death in headlong pursuit: the father and son in "Erlkönig," Schubert's best-known song. As in "Erlkönig," Death is ultimately victorious, but in the Death and the Maiden Quartet, through the alternation of minor and major keys, Schubert hints that Death's triumph is not always, or necessarily, something to fear.

© Elizabeth Schwartz

Elizabeth Schwartz is a musician, writer, and music historian based in Portland, OR. She has been a program annotator for more than 25 years, and writes for ensembles and festivals across the United States, as well as internationally. Ms. Schwartz has also contributed to NPR's *Performance Today*, (now heard on American Public Media). classicalmusicprogramnotes.com

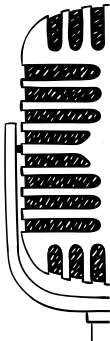
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Hancher Auditorium / Hadley Stage / Onstage Seating

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Composer and vocalist Caroline Shaw returns for a second collaboration this season, this time with the adventuresome Sō Percussion, a quartet that has truly redefined chamber music for the 21st century leading *The New Yorker* to describe the ensemble's music-making as an "exhilarating blend of precision and anarchy, rigor and bedlam."

Together, Shaw and the quartet composed *Let the Soil Play Its Simple Part*, a journey across the soul's landscape undertaken through distinctly contemporary songs. The artists drew inspiration from sources as varied as James Joyce, ABBA, American roots music, plainchant, Christian hymns, and stories from the Old

Testament to create a set of 10 songs that explore working in the soil as a metaphor for collaboration and creativity.

The concert will open with *Go Placidly in Haste*, a new work composed by Sō Percussion's Jason Treuting that will be performed with Iowa Percussion from the University of Iowa School of Music.

TICKETS

Adults \$25

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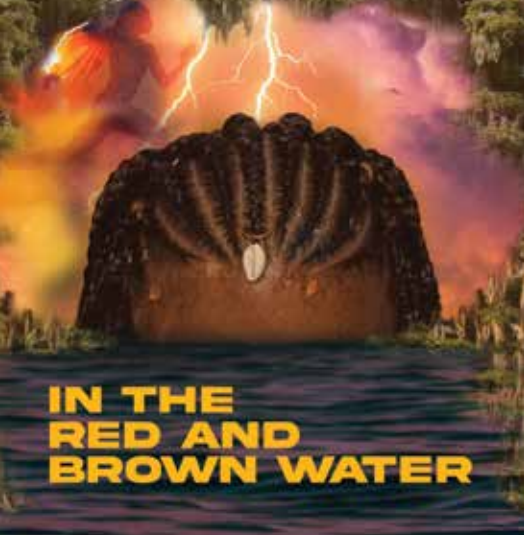
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IN THE RED AND BROWN WATER

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Directed by Caroline Clay

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April 26 & 27

7:30 p.m.

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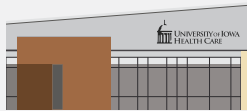
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