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ST. LAWRENCE STRING QUARTET



Geoff Nuttall, Violin | Owen Dalby, Violin
Lesley Robertson, Viola | Christopher Costanza, Cello

“Modern,” “dramatic,” “superb,” “wickedly attentive,” “with a hint of rock 'n roll energy” are just a few ways critics describe the musical phenomenon that is the St. Lawrence String Quartet (SLSQ). The SLSQ is renowned for the intensity of its performances, its breadth of repertoire, and its commitment to concert experiences that are at once intellectually exciting and emotionally alive.

Geoff Nuttall (violin) and Lesley Robertson (viola) met as students while studying music in their native Canada and, in 1989, founded the St. Lawrence String Quartet. Christopher Costanza (cello) joined the ensemble in 2003 after performing for many years with the Chicago String Quartet. Owen Dalby (violin), a founding member of Decoda, the Affiliate Ensemble of Carnegie Hall, joined the group in 2015. The SLSQ quickly earned acclaim at top international chamber music competitions and was soon playing hundreds of concerts per year worldwide. It established an ongoing residency at Spoleto Festival USA, made prize-winning recordings for EMI and earned two Grammy nominations and a host of other prizes before being appointed ensemble-in-residence at Stanford University in 1998.

About the Artists *(continued)*

This year, the SLSQ marks its 30th anniversary season with musical engagements celebrating new compositions alongside cornerstones of the chamber music repertoire. The season kicks off with a new album of all six Haydn Opus 20s, alongside a concert at Wigmore Hall of the same program, which the Los Angeles Times recently hailed as “in-your-face exhilarating”. Recent highlights include recitals at Carnegie Hall and Wigmore Hall, and solo performances with Michael Tilson Thomas and the SF Symphony, Gustavo Dudamel and the LA Philharmonic and Marin Alsop and the Baltimore Symphony in John Adams's *Absolute Jest* for string quartet and orchestra, and the European premieres of Adams's second string quartet.

St. Lawrence String Quartet

Geoff Nuttall, violin | Lesley Robertson, viola
Owen Dalby, violin | Christopher Costanza, cello



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ST. LAWRENCE STRING QUARTET

String Quartet in D minor, K. 421 (1783)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756-1791)

Allegro moderato

Andante

Menuetto (Allegretto)

Allegretto, ma non troppo (Variations)

Quartet No. 1 in E minor, Op. 112 (1899)

Camille Saint-Saëns
(1835-1921)

Allegro

Molto Allegro quasi Presto

Molto Adagio

Allegro non troppo

- INTERMISSION -

String Quartet in A minor, Op. 51, No. 2 (1865)

Johannes Brahms
(1833-1897)

Allegro non troppo

Andante moderato

Quasi Minuetto, Moderato-Allegro vivace

Finale (Allegro non assai)

Programme Notes

CAMILLE SAINT- SAËNS (1835-1921)

Quartet No. 1 in E minor, Op. 112

A masterwork of the French quartet literature, Camille Saint-Saëns' First Quartet was dedicated to the virtuoso violinist Eugène Ysaÿe and premiered by the Ysaÿe Quartet. The first movement opens with a melancholic melody that steadily gains momentum in the accompanying pizzicato and syncopated rhythms. The ensuing *più allegro* strikes any lethargy remaining from the introduction and propels the four voices forward until reaching the lyrical high point introduced by the cello. Brief moments of quiet introspection are punctuated by the emotional turmoil of the main theme. The return of the opening music, sometimes ferocious and at others searching, ends in a flourish of pride and exuberance.

The second movement, a *scherzo* instead of the traditional slow movement, picks up where the first left off in emotional turmoil and élan. Driving pizzicato and syncopations propel the music through a vast array of colors and emotions, never relenting throughout the fugue section where each voice and character struggles for dominance. With the return of the first theme, the movement appears to be on its way to a fiery conclusion. Instead, there is a brief return to lyricism and the music closes among the smoldering embers of the pizzicati and syncopations that opened the movement.

The first violin is the lyrical voice of the *molto adagio*. The melody soars above the lush accompaniment, providing a stark change of pace without letting go of the emotional strife from earlier. The middle section is haunted by the heart beat in the second violin, giving way to a lighter dance-like theme traded between the first violin and cello.

The work closes with an animated finale underpinned by a sense of rhythmic restlessness. The now familiar pizzicato returns for the brilliant coda which makes its way from light and mischievous to fiery and heroic.

Notes by Alessandra Rose Aquilanti

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) String Quartet in D minor, K. 421

Mozart composed this quartet in June 1783, and continued writing while in his wife's room during the birth of his first son, Raimund Leopold! Although many have searched for a correlation between this situation and this profoundly melancholy quartet, most have concluded that this quartet shows Mozart's amazing power of detachment.

The opening, a rather restrained *Allegro*, is deeply passionate. The principal theme in the first violin is characterized by leaps both up and down and by a plentitude of individual motifs. A somewhat uneasy subsidiary theme with faster-moving notes follows. At the end of the exposition, the first violin presents an isolated little figure ending with three repeated notes. This motto reappears later in every movement, and acts as a unifying device. While the remainder of the movement is in traditional sonata form, the music is far from ordinary.

The *Andante*, in ABA form, is almost tender but with the bustle and agitation of many individual motifs and changes of dynamics. The first violin presents the three-note motto of the previous movement, although in a slower tempo. The B section also is dominated by the three repeated notes. Two loud outbursts are said to reflect Constanza's screams.

The three-note motto appears again in the *Menuetto's* main theme. The contrasting Trio is sunny and light with the first violin presenting a jesting tune over a simple pizzicato accompaniment, after which the movement ends with a repeat of the *Menuetto*.

The mood brightens in the finale, which presents a set of four variations and coda on an ingenuous theme with the rhythm of a *Siciliana*, an old moderately fast Italian dance. In the first variation, the first violin substitutes an elaboration for the rhythmic pattern of the dance tune. The two violins share the lead in the next variation, enlivening the melody with sharp offbeat accents while the viola, plaintive and doleful, sets the tone for the third variation. While the first three variations drifted away from the starting theme, the fourth turns back to the original and adds a flowing countermelody in the cello and viola. The coda, which is slightly faster in tempo, comes even closer to the opening theme. The three-note figure reappears and the quartet ends with three repetitions of the unifying motto.

Notes provided by Early Music Vancouver

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I am not at all surprised to see the St. Lawrence String Quartet back again in White Rock. I've known them since the year they won the first Banff International String Quartet competition. They have always been very special in the Canadian chamber music firmament. Not only do they play in the great cities of the world - New York, Paris, Tokyo, Moscow, Rome, Barcelona, Frankfurt - but they will always find time in their schedule to include smaller Canadian venues.

Today's blog, however, is not about the Quartet itself but, rather, about the great river after which they take their name.

Twenty-five years ago, I undertook a remarkable tour along the North Shore of the St. Lawrence. It was also with a quartet, but a very different combination: violin, clarinet, bassoon and portable keyboard.

The Côte Nord is home to some of the oldest fishing villages in Canada. There are 11 scattered settlements spread along 400 kilometres of boreal forest and wild tundra,

George's Blog *(continued)*

with a total of 5,000 people of French, Acadian, Innu and English origin. We had undertaken to play for all of the schools in the region.

This posed an immediate problem. Most of the villages were not accessible by road. Only one of them had an airport. We abandoned our rental car at Havre St. Pierre and completed the tour to Blanc Sablon on the Labrador border aboard the rugged coastal steamer *Nordic Express*.

On board the ship we were at the mercy of the tides. Sometimes, the vessel could only stop long enough to deliver and load freight. In Tête à La-Baleine, instead of going ashore to play, we invited the entire school population of 21 aboard. We played until the ship's horn drowned us out - a signal to the audience to hurry ashore.

None of us were particularly good sailors, and we suffered grimly from seasickness. Still, the schedule worked perfectly, and we managed to play for each of the schools along the route.

All of this occurred in February, and I constantly worried about the possibility of being stranded in the ice. For how long? Three months, perhaps? There was always the risk that we might become a veritable Franklin expedition, ice-bound in the frozen grip of the St. Lawrence.

I thought it was a good idea to take precautions in my Canada Council application, which normally provided a per diem allowance for each day away from home. Not entirely seriously, I reworked the grant application to allow for a possible 173 days of per diem. Naturally, the auditors rejected the request! However, the Director of the Council actually phoned to ask whether we wouldn't prefer to make the journey in May when even the icebergs have disappeared from the estuary of the St. Lawrence.

GZ October, 2019

May contain
scenes of
violins



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