

THE LYDIAN STRING QUARTET



October 16, 2024
Slosberg Music Center

Brandeis
UNIVERSITY

PROGRAM

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in C major Op. 33, No. 3 “The Bird”

1. Allegro moderato
2. Scherzo. Allegretto
3. Adagio ma non troppo
4. Rondo. Presto

Lembit Beecher (b. 1980)

Juniper and Birch (world premiere)

1. Arriving
2. Gathering
3. In an Old Photo, A Summer Field of Tall, Golden Grasses
4. My Granduncle Stands on a Soviet Tank Graffitied with Flowers
5. Small Joys Out Loud
6. Coda: Departing

**Winner of the 2022 Lydian String Quartet
Commission Prize**

Intermission

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
String Quintet No. 2 in G major, Op. 111

1. Allegro non troppo, ma con brio
2. Adagio
3. Un poco Allegretto
4. Vivace, ma non troppo presto

With guest artist Steven Ansell, viola

*After the concert, please join us in the Slosberg lobby
for refreshments.*



The Lydian String Quartet
Julia Glenn and Clara Lyon, violins
Mark Berger, viola
Joshua Gordon, cello

PROGRAM NOTES

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in C major, Op. 33, No. 3 “The Bird”

The six works comprising Haydn's Op. 33 set were published in 1781 and mark his return to the genre of the string quartet, which Haydn is largely credited for canonizing as the most important chamber music ensemble of the Classical era. Haydn wrote that the new quartets “are written in a new and special way,” which in hindsight could be said about many of his quartet sets. Yet there are characteristics of these quartets that are definitely new, especially for 1781. For example, they are the first to carry the movement title “Scherzo” (literally “joke” in Italian) in place of the conventional Minuet movement.

The first movement begins with a pulsing harmony in the inner voices, above which the first violin floats with four repeated G's, articulated with chirping grace notes. These notes become a recurring motive, likely the reason for the work's nickname. Cast in sonata form, the first movement is filled with many unexpected twists and turns as we have come to expect in Haydn.

The Scherzo which follows is ostensibly a Minuet in all but name. The surprise is the rather reverent tone, with all four instruments playing very softly in their lowest register, marked *sotto voce*. The trio section is a magnificent foil: a plucky duet for just the two violins, who dance around one another in a most charming fashion. The slow movement which follows is a beautiful embellished aria for the first violin.

The spirited final movement begins with the characteristic descending thirds of the cuckoo in the violin melody, launching into one of Haydn's most jovial finales. Contrast is provided by references to Turkish Janissary music but the cuckoos return, effervescently flying away.

—Mark Berger

Lembit Beecher (b. 1980)

Juniper and Birch (world premiere performance)

Winner of the 2022 Lydian String Quartet Commission Prize

Rõõm ja mure kaksikvennad

Kaksiklapsed looduskojas,

Kõnnivad kässi käessa,

Rändavad sammu sammussa.

“Joy and sorrow are twin brothers, children in the house of nature, where they walk, they’re hand in hand, where they go, they walk in step.” - from “Kalevipoeg,” the Estonian national epic, translated by Merike Lepasaar Beecher

“Juniper and Birch” draws its inspiration from a series of trips I made as a child to my mother’s homeland of Estonia, spending the bulk of my time on my granduncle and aunt Uno and Helju’s tiny farm in southern Estonia. In evoking this place and time, I found myself writing music that sat on the edge of joy and sorrow, innocence and age. As I get older, I have an increased appreciation for the ways we are asked to hold emotions simultaneously, and a richer understanding of the way joy and sorrow are intertwined throughout our lives. These childhood trips to Estonia were multi-layered: a sense of magic, the unfamiliar, and home combining for me along with a context and history I didn’t fully understand: the lives of Uno and Helju, Gulag survivors who lived to see a free Estonia in the early nineties.

In this piece I wanted to write music that tried to capture this moment of family reassembly, and the individual worlds of experience and feeling that each of us brought with us—music containing a constant counterpoint of emotions: sorrow lurking behind playfulness, thoughtful wistfulness walking hand-in-hand

with fierce stubbornness, and scattered outbursts of unabashed, deeply felt joy, made more meaningful by the sea of emotions around them.

At the center of the work are two movements inspired by specific photographs from these trips: movement three by a photo of my mother embracing Uno (in many ways her surrogate father) in an Estonian field, with golden grasses radiating light, and movement four by a photo of Uno standing on a Soviet tank, abandoned by the side of a road and covered with graffiti flowers. The second and fifth movements are stitched together out of a jumbled collection of memories from this time, with each movement arriving at a small moment of joy or triumph that seems more significant after the passage of time. And the outer two movements are music for our arrivals and departures, with Uno and Helju standing at their fence gate alongside a gravel road.

I hope for listeners that this piece unfolds a little like a dream, full of buried references, waves of color and emotion, and sharp juxtapositions, leaving behind a warmly elusive feeling, rich with memory and shimmery light. Many thanks to the Lydian String Quartet for commissioning “Juniper and Birch” as well as MacDowell and the Bogliasco Foundation for giving me the space and time to work on this quartet.

—Lembit Beecher

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

String Quintet No. 2 in G major, Op. 111

“I have often reflected on the subject of what happiness is for humanity. Well, today in listening to your music, that was happiness.” ~ Brahms’ friend Theodor Billroth, upon hearing the first rehearsal of the String Quintet No. 2 in G Major, Op. 111

Johannes Brahms wrote the String Quintet No. 2 in G Major, Opus 111, while vacationing in the Austrian Alps at Bad Ischl in the summer of 1890. Despite his successful career, the 57-year-old composer felt that he had exhausted his compositional abilities and, abandoning plans for several new symphonies, resolved to write no more works after the Quintet. He wrote to his publisher, Simrock: “With this note you can take leave of my music, because it is high time to stop.”

Despite Brahms’ intentions to retire, he found himself inspired by the playing of clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld the following year, and returned to composing soon after. The monumental Clarinet Quintet, Opus 115, dates from this period of renewed inspiration.

The String Quintet No. 2 features the composer at the pinnacle of his craft, merging deeply expressive melodies with sophisticated motivic and harmonic exploration.

The first movement, *Allegro non troppo, ma con brio*, begins with a bold cello solo, which soars above the orchestral texture of the upper strings. Soon, the exuberance of the opening section givesway to a gentle, waltz-like second theme featuring the two violas. While the music of the opening returns repeatedly

throughout the movement, Brahms takes a remarkable, dreamy detour at the opening of the development. After the return of the triumphant opening material, a lyrical coda brings the movement to a joyful close.

A somber viola solo begins the second movement, *Adagio*. The dramatic arc of the movement builds slowly, culminating in an anguished cadenza in the viola before retreating quietly. The melancholy mood persists in the third movement, *Un poco allegretto*, though the music has now transformed into an elegant, mysterious dance. The mood brightens as the violins and violas exchange a graceful, singing motive. After this interlude, the opening melody returns, taking an unexpected, light-hearted turn into *Major* at the close of the movement.

The last movement, *Vivace, ma non troppo presto*, begins with a meandering viola solo in the surprisingly distant key of B minor. The entrance of the violins signals a jubilant return to the home key of G Major. Throughout the movement, the mood shifts rapidly, from quiet, chorale-like passages to a dramatic fugue. A unison scale passage launches the movement into a spirited coda reminiscent of Brahms' *Hungarian Dances*, bringing the work to a frenzied, ecstatic finish.

—Andrea Segar

ARTIST BIOS

Steven Ansell joined the Boston Symphony Orchestra as principal viola in September 1996, occupying the Charles S. Dana chair, having already appeared with the BSO in Symphony Hall as guest principal viola. A native of Seattle, Ansell is also a member of the acclaimed Muir String Quartet, which he co-founded in 1979, and with which he has toured extensively throughout the world.

A graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music, where he studied with Michael Tree and Karen Tuttle, Ansell was named professor of viola at University of Houston at age 21 and became assistant principal viola of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra under André Previn at 23. As a recording artist he has received two Grand Prix du Disque awards and a Gramophone magazine award for Best Chamber Music Recording of the Year.

He has appeared on PBS's "In Performance at the White House," has participated in the Tanglewood, Marlboro, Schleswig-Holstein, Newport, Blossom, Spoleto, and Snowbird music festivals, and premiered Ezra Laderman's Concerto for Viola and Orchestra with the Berkshire Symphony. Ansell teaches at Boston University College of Fine Arts. As principal viola of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, he is also a member of the Boston Symphony Chamber Players.

Estonian-American composer and animator **Lembit Beecher** writes “hauntingly lovely and deeply personal” music (San Francisco Chronicle) that stems from a fascination with memories, histories, and stories. Threading together fragments of family lore, distantly experienced legends, imagery, and songs from Estonian folk culture, and explorations of place, migration, natural processes, and ecology, he has created an idiosyncratic and thoughtful musical language full of fragile lyricism, propulsive energy, and visceral emotions, which draws raves for its “astonishing musical invention” (Philadelphia Inquirer) and “exquisite touches” (San Francisco Chronicle).

Speaking Estonian with his mother and English with his father, Lembit grew up under the redwoods of the California Central Coast. Family stories of homeland, migration, and displacement led to an interest in documentary, and beginning with his 2009 documentary oratorio “And Then I Remember,” Lembit has created numerous works incorporating interviews and personal testimonies into his music, both as recorded audio and as sung text. From song cycles like “After the Fires,” based on conversations with residents of his home town of Bonny Doon about the 2020 CZU Lightning Complex Fires, to large-scale pieces like “Say Home,” a 38-minute work for the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra that weaves through the musical texture the voices of almost 50 residents of the Twin Cities speaking about the meaning of home, Lembit’s works are grounded in a sense of empathy, exploring the relationship between individual experience and communal understanding.

Noted for his collaborative spirit and “ingenious” interdisciplinary projects (Wall Street Journal), Lembit has served three-year terms as the Music Alive composer-in-residence of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra and the inaugural composer-in-residence of Opera Philadelphia, working with devised theater actors, poets, ethnographers, and engineers, as well as incorporating Baroque instruments, electronically-controlled sound sculptures, homemade speaker systems, and stop-motion animation into his projects. Lembit’s three operas with noted

Canadian playwright Hannah Moscovitch have drawn particular acclaim. Starring Frederica von Stade and Marietta Simpson and directed by Joanna Settle, his opera "Sky on Swings," which traces the relationship of two women diagnosed with Alzheimer's, was praised as "a monumental achievement" (Parterre), "theatrically true and artistically distinguished" (Philadelphia Inquirer), and "a shattering musical and theatrical evocation of what it feels like to have Alzheimer's disease" (Wall Street Journal). In 2015 he received a major grant from the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage to develop and produce "Sophia's Forest," a chamber opera for soprano Kiera Duffy, the Aizuri Quartet, and a multi-piece sound sculpture, built in collaboration with architects and engineers at the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University's ExCITE Center.

Recent premieres include "Tell Me Again" for cellist Karen Ouzounian and the Orlando Philharmonic, "A Year to the Day," a song cycle with librettist Mark Campbell, written for tenor Nicholas Phan and violinist Augustin Hadelich, and string quartets for the Juilliard, Aizuri and Lydian quartets, in addition to works for cellist Seth Parker Woods, bassoonist Martin Kuuskmann, and mezzo Sasha Cooke. The Grand Prize Winner of the S&R Foundation's Washington Award, Lembit was a graduate fellow at the University of Michigan Institute for the Humanities, served as Visiting Assistant Professor of Music at Denison University, and has been in residence at the Copland House, MacDowell, Bogliasco Foundation, Penn Museum of Archeology and Anthropology, White Mountains Festival, Scrag Mountain Music, and the Decoda Skidmore Chamber Music Institute. Lembit has degrees from Harvard, Rice and the University of Michigan, where his primary teachers included Evan Chambers, Bright Sheng, Karim Al-Zand, Pierre Jalbert, Kurt Stallmann and Bernard Rands. Active also as a pianist and animator, Lembit has created stop-motion animations for the Experiential Orchestra, Aizuri Quartet, Decoda, Music on the Strait, and violinist/composer Michelle Ross. For 2023-24, Lembit served as a Visiting Artist-Teacher at the Hartt School at the University of Hartford. He lives in Washington Heights, New York with his wife, cellist and composer Karen Ouzounian.

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