

# The St. Lawrence String Quartet

<http://www.slsq.com>

**Geoff Nuttall**, violin

**Scott St. John**, violin

**Lesley Robertson**, viola

**Christopher Costanza**, cello

**“Celebrating 20 years, this group has matured and deepened without losing its freshness and edge.”**

**–The Globe and Mail, April 2009**

The St. Lawrence String Quartet (SLSQ) has established itself among the world-class chamber ensembles of its generation. Its mission: bring every piece of music to the audience in vivid color, with pronounced communication and teamwork, and great respect to the composer. Since winning both the Banff International String Quartet Competition and Young Concert Artists International Auditions in 1992, the quartet has delighted audiences with its spontaneous, passionate, and dynamic performances. Alex Ross of The New Yorker magazine writes, "the St. Lawrence are remarkable not simply for the quality of their music making, exalted as it is, but for the joy they take in the act of connection."

The SLSQ is celebrating its 20th anniversary with a new recording of Haydn and Dvořák quartets through a partnership with the innovative company ArtistShare.com. ArtistShare offers artists a ground-breaking way to embark on a recording project: the musicians maintain complete creative control, communicate directly with fans, and offer them a way to experience the project from its inception to fruition, as well as participate at the level they wish, from a free download to various membership tiers.

In concert, the foursome regularly delivers traditional quartet repertoire, but is also fervently committed to performing and expanding the works of living composers. In January 2009, they premiered John Adams's "String Quartet," and in Fall 2010 they will premiere a new work by Osvaldo Golijov. Adams penned his "String Quartet" (co-commissioned by The Juilliard School, Stanford Lively Arts, and the Banff Centre) expressly for the St. Lawrence. Golijov's forthcoming new work (commissioned by Stanford Lively Arts) is expected to build on the success of their previous collaboration, which culminated in the twice-Grammy-nominated SLSQ recording of the composer's Yiddishbuk (EMI) in 2002. The quartet also paid tribute to a lineup of Canadian composers with performances of five new string quartets around their native country. The St. Lawrence has active working relationships with numerous other composers, including R. Murray Schafer, Christos Hatzis, Jonathan Berger, Ka Nin Chan, Roberto Sierra, and Mark Applebaum.

The SLSQ has been involved in numerous inventive collaborations, including projects with the renowned Pilobolus Dance Theatre and the Emerson Quartet. In 2007 they joined with soprano Heidi Grant Murphy and pianist Kevin Murphy to premiere Roberto Sierra's "Songs from the Diaspora" – a commission through the Music Accord consortium. They have also performed R. Murray Schafer's Concerto for Quartet and Orchestra "4-40" with Peter Oundjian and the Toronto Symphony, Emmanuel Villaume and the Spoleto Festival Orchestra, and Yuli Turovsky with I Musici de Montreal.

Having been privileged to study with the Emerson, Tokyo and Juilliard String Quartets, the St. Lawrence are themselves passionate educators. Since 1998 they have held the position of Ensemble in Residence at Stanford University. This residency includes working with students of music as well as extensive collaborations with other faculty and departments using music to explore a myriad of topics. The foursome's passion for opening up musical arenas to players and listeners alike is evident in their annual summer chamber music seminar at Stanford and their many forays into the depths of musical meaning with preeminent music educator Robert Kapilow.

Violist Lesley Robertson is a founding member of the group, and hails from Edmonton Alberta. Cellist Christopher Costanza is from Utica, NY and joined the quartet in 2004. Violinists Geoff Nuttall and Scott St. John both grew up in London Ontario; Geoff is a founding member and Scott joined in 2006. Depending on concert repertoire, the two alternate the role of first violin. All four members of the quartet live and teach at beautiful Stanford University, in the Bay Area of California.

The SLSQ is deeply committed to bringing music to less traditional venues outside the classroom or concert hall. Regardless of the venue, the St. Lawrence players maintain a strong desire to share the wonders of chamber music with their listeners, a characteristic of the foursome that has led them to a more informal performance style than one might expect from chamber musicians. "Play every concert like it's your last; every phrase like it's the most important thing you've ever said," Geoff Nuttall asserts. "Remember that the only reason you're there is to make people cry and sweat and shiver, and give them that incredible sense of creation happening before your eyes. That's the reason we all play. Otherwise there's no point."

*October, 2009* – please destroy any previously or undated versions.

## Notes on the program

### **LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)**

*String Quartet No. 5 in A, Op. 18 No. 5 (1801)*

The young Beethoven thought long and hard before publishing his earliest string quartets. Haydn and Mozart had wrestled with the medium and triumphed; Beethoven knew that the bar was set very high. He had moved from his hometown of Bonn in 1792 “to receive the spirit of Mozart at the hands of Haydn,” as his friend and patron Count Waldstein put it. Although his few lessons with Haydn taught him little, Beethoven soon came to terms with the music of Mozart and Haydn. He copied out several of their quartets to better study them. His earliest publications explored territory that they had visited (but not built their reputations on) comprising piano sonatas, piano trios, string trios and accompanied keyboard sonatas for violin and for cello. When it came time to publish his six new string quartets in 1801, Beethoven took care to put the most adventurous and striking works at the beginning and end of the set. This way he could capture the attention of the novelty-crazed Viennese public. At the same time, he was careful not to throw caution to the winds and made sure that the music maintained a feeling of continuity with the tradition of Haydn and Mozart.

With the A major quartet, the fifth quartet in both composition and publication, Beethoven explicitly acknowledges his debt to Viennese tradition. He models the work on Mozart’s quartet K. 464, also in A major, also with sonata-form opening and closing movements, a minuet placed second and a slow movement set of variations third. Some of his themes are even related to those of Mozart. As his pupil Carl Czerny reported: “Once Beethoven came across the score of Mozart’s six quartets in my house. He opened the fifth, in A, and said: ‘That’s what I call a work! In it, Mozart was telling the world: *Look what I could do if you were ready for it!*’” Beethoven primarily pays homage in external matters only; internally, his music is his own. The opening movement is lightly scored, supple and dance-like. The first theme soars high on the first violin and sets a serene tone. There is abundant counterpoint as the themes are passed from one instrument to another. The gracefulness continues into the minuet, which is again lightly scored and transparent, with the sort of rustic trio that Schubert would soon be writing.

The third movement variations are the focal point of the quartet. Based on the simplest of melodies, a gentle, descending then ascending D major scale, the first three variations begin by exploring the theme’s canonic potential, then its melodic potential and then its tonal and textural contrasts, when the theme is in the lower two instruments against increasingly quicker accompanying figures. The fourth variation presents the theme *pianissimo*, in new and striking harmonies, while the fifth opens it up first into an exuberant march, then into a prolonged coda.

The quicksilver finale draws much of its energy from the viola’s opening triplet. It immediately springs from the other three strings in a burst of contrapuntal vigor that continues to the end. Here in the finale, Beethoven comes closest to emulating the spirit of Mozart.

**FELIX BARTHOLDY-MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)**

String Quartet No. 6, in F minor, Op. 80 (1847)

The F minor Quartet by Felix Mendelssohn opens and closes with anything but a smile. Intense and urgent, its agitated tremolo opening is punctuated only by the suspended agonies of the first violin, often poignantly poised high above the other three strings. This is not the Mendelssohn of the Biedermeier drawing room, the Mendelssohn whose volumes of *Songs Without Words* were placed — and often played — as ornaments, decorating the pianos of middle-class Europeans. The F minor Quartet is “late period” Mendelssohn. Highly subjective music, it strains at the constraints of the medium of the string quartet itself.

In May 1847, Mendelssohn learned of the death of his 41 year-old sister Fanny, with whom he had maintained a close and productive relationship since childhood. She collapsed while rehearsing her brother’s music. Mendelssohn was devastated. He, too, collapsed on the spot and became so distraught that he was unable to attend her funeral. “I cannot think of work, or even music, without feeling the most intense emptiness and barrenness of mind and heart,” he wrote. His wife Cécile arranged for him to take the waters at Baden-Baden. His insomnia continued. Traveling to Switzerland, he found some relief. “I force myself to be industrious, in the hope that later on I may feel like working and enjoying it,” he wrote in July to his younger sister Rebecca. By September, the F minor Quartet was complete.

Structurally, Mendelssohn looks back to the classical sonata form of Beethoven in his middle-period. In each of the four movements, his attention is focused on emotion and passion, underpinned by a recurring thematic use of the notes of the F minor home key. By the end of the opening movement, after an increasingly intense coda, the anger and fury of the inner storm in the music has not abated. In the second movement, Mendelssohn presses on urgently with more music in the dark, foreboding home key. The movement is a scherzo. But it has none of the lightness and grace of the famous scherzi of the Octet and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Here, all is sardonic and angry. The biting harmonies are prescient of the symphonic scherzi of Mahler. Economy of means is again a hallmark in the slow movement and little respite is offered. In the finale, the music turns back to F minor with a vengeance. The restlessness of the opening movement returns. Again, Mendelssohn works with fragments and motifs rather than full-blown melodies. The anguish and drive continue relentlessly to the end. Mendelssohn does not give himself — or the listener — the consolation of a subdued close. The work ends angrily, despairingly, with no hint of catharsis, leaving the listener emotionally drained.

A few weeks after he completed the quartet, on October 3, 1847, Mendelssohn wrote: “Now I must gradually begin to put my life and my work together again, with the awareness that Fanny is no longer here; and it leaves such a bitter taste that I still cannot see my way clearly or find any peace.” Mendelssohn himself died just one month later, after a series of strokes, November 4, 1847, at the age of 38.

## JOHN ADAMS (b. 1947)

### *String Quartet*

*String Quartet* is John Adams' second full-sized work for the medium and his first without electronics. His first string quartet, *John's Book of Alleged Dances* (1994), was composed for the Kronos Quartet and is accompanied by pre-recorded CD, and his second string quartet, *Fellow Traveler* (2007), is a five-minute piece written for Peter Sellars' birthday.

A stunning St. Lawrence String Quartet performance of *Alleged Dances* at Stanford University in 2007 inspired Mr. Adams to compose a piece for them, leading to the world premiere at The Juilliard School and a subsequent tour. *String Quartet* was commissioned by The Juilliard School with the generous support of the Trust of Francis Goelet, Stanford Lively Arts Stanford University, and The Banff Centre.

At the time of the Canadian première of the quartet at the Banff Centre, John Adams told the audience:

"It's perfectly OK if you leave this experience not really having an idea what you've heard! I recently heard a performance of the Bartók First Quartet for the first time in my life – I knew the other quartets, but did not know the First. It took me about *ten* hearings to get a rough feel for the shape of it – and I'm a composer! So, that's why we do art. Art pushes the limits and says something complex. It's not a soundbite. It's not a television commercial, or something you can get on first encounter. But you get parts of it on the first encounter.

"This piece was inspired by this wonderful quartet, the SLSQ. I was reminded how much the sound of the string quartet is like elevated human discourse. It's like speech brought to the highest, most sublime level in the hands of a great composer. So I wanted to attempt to express my own voice in the medium of the quartet.

"I started out as a young composer very influenced by American minimalism and you can still hear vestiges of this in the quartet. You can hear a very strong sense of beat. The first movement starts in a very ticking, energized way and then lyrical shapes start filtering in and out. That basic sense of pulsation - a regular ticking - is present throughout the piece. As far as the form of the work goes, it's in two movements. The first is twice as long as the second and is a sequence of movements. There's an energized first part. Then come moments of reflection and recitative, followed by a crazy little scherzo which finally fades out into a quiet ending. The last movement is a very driven and heavily pulsated movement.

"What's extraordinary about SLSQ is that they can both play as an absolute unity and also play with four individual personalities that are so extraordinary and so differentiated. [In the quartet], I take advantage of this quite a bit. I usually work on a large canvas - operas and symphony orchestras. . . . It's so rare to have a piece of music that has been played many times over more than a year and so internalized by such extraordinary musicians."

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