

ESTABLISHED 1941 • OUR 84TH SEASON

CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY *of* UTICA

with generous support from Jan and Pat Moore

presents

Escher String Quartet

Adam Barnett-Hart, violin • Brendan Speltz, violin
Pierre Lapointe, viola • Brook Speltz, cello

PROGRAM

- String Quartet in B Minor, Op. 11, (1936, rev. 1943)Samuel Barber
Molto allegro e appassionato (1910–1981)
Molto adagio
Molto allegro (come prima) - Presto
- String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor (1935) Florence Price
Moderato (1887–1953)
Andante cantabile
Juba. Allegro
Finale. Allegro

INTERMISSION

- String Quartet No. 14 in A-flat Major, Op. 105, B. 193 (1895) Antonín Dvořák
Adagio ma non troppo - Allegro appassionato (1841-1904)
Molto vivace
Lento e molto cantabile
Allegro non tanto

Sunday, 23 February 2025 • 2:30 PM
Munson Art Museum • Sinnott Family Bank of Utica Auditorium
310 Genesee Street, Utica NY 13502

PROGRAM NOTES

String Quartet in B Minor, Op. 11, (1936, rev. 1943).....Samuel Barber

Samuel Barber grew up in West Chester, Pennsylvania and showed a strong musical gift from an early age. Encouraged by his uncle, the composer Sidney Homer, Barber enrolled at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia during its inaugural year. His time at Curtis afforded him the chance to travel to Italy during the summers to study with Rosario Scalero, and even after he graduated, he continued to return to Europe as often as he could. It was in the summer of 1936, on a Pulitzer fellowship at the American Academy in Rome that Barber commenced work on his Quartet in B Minor.

The B Minor quartet's first movement belies the serene melancholy of the famous adagio to come. The first motive sounds almost reminiscent of Beethoven in his fist-clenching middle period. Barber innovates by adding an extra beat to some phrases and dropping a beat from others, making the music subtly unpredictable.

The second movement of the quartet almost needs no introduction or explanation. It is so widely beloved and frequently heard as the Adagio for Strings that describing it in words distracts from the emotional force with which it speaks on its own. There is one feature worth noting to appreciate it as the middle of this quartet, and not just as the Adagio with fewer players. It shares the first movement's penchant for adding occasional extra beats. This is not incidental to its effect. The famous opening gesture that returns with more aching beauty every time it repeats always begins with a long tone that feels slightly longer than you might expect. This lingering, singing, beautiful melody is presented in the original quartet version with much more intimacy, and yet still just as much strength as when this music is heard with a string orchestra.

The brief third and final movement begins immediately after the end of the adagio, bringing back almost the exact same figure that opened the first movement. This undisguised symmetry of form across the multiple movements is a remarkable structural feature not commonly heard in quartet literature. This quartet can be felt as three separate movements, but it can also be felt as one continuous idea with contrasting sections. While Barber was sometimes accused of eschewing both an American nationalist sound and a fully contemporary European sound, his own Romantic-leaning, subtly innovative musical voice is on full display in this quartet.

String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor (1935).....Florence Price

Florence Beatrice Price was raised in Little Rock, Arkansas. Her father was a well-respected dentist and for a time, her family lived a relatively charmed upper middle-class life, rare for African American families in the 19th - century American south. She graduated from high school at the age of 14 and enrolled at the New England Conservatory in Boston to study organ performance and music education. She also studied composition with George Chadwick, who directed the conservatory during the years she attended. After her graduation and a short stint teaching at Clark University in Atlanta, she moved back to Arkansas. The Little Rock she returned to was not the place she had grown up in, as Reconstruction optimism had given way to cynical Jim Crow laws and a repressive atmosphere that she could not abide for long. She relocated to Chicago in 1928 and spent her remaining years there.

The first movement of Price's Quartet No. 2 in A Minor begins with a nervous ostinato in the second violin, but that figure is less a theme and more an environment into which various vocal-like melodies tell their story. The melodic dialect is unmistakably American, full of pentatonic figures and occasional flattened blue notes, but the music never sounds like a pastiche of folk materials. It is a confident statement of an artist speaking in her own voice.

Price's second movement further accentuates the singing quality that had been evident in the first movement. It is a warm, luxuriant wash of sound. There are moments of slight melancholy, but never of despair. The overall effect is of a deep breath for the soul between the more serious statement of the first movement and the playfulness of the dance that is about to come.

The third movement of Price's quartet is titled "Juba," and it is modeled after an African American dance of the same name. This part of the piece taps into the deepest historical roots of both the European and the African influences that have shaped American music. Besides the highly syncopated juba dance having traceable African roots, it honors the place that Mozart or Haydn would have put a dance movement. Price also placed a juba dance as third movement of all three of her extant symphonies, establishing a pattern that she really did intend this as a replacement for the minuet, suitable to the music's American setting.

Having ended the dance movement with a genuflecting smile of a final gesture, Price's finale begins in a flurry of activity. Its first couple of minutes generate the momentum toward a finish line that finales often do. But then a moment comes when the violins and

cello all hold long tones and the viola plays an arching melody upwards, the momentum comes to a halt. Having signaled that it has something to say, the viola is given the floor, and it lets out a wail. This melody bears a family resemblance to Barber's Adagio theme, with a single long tone swelling toward a spinning out of faster tones that have a lyrical, almost speechlike quality. Once the viola has said its piece, there is a hushed reverence about the way the other three instruments reenter. It sounds almost as if the first violin whispers – through glassy harmonics – that what the viola said was right and ought to be acknowledged. Then the first violin restarts the momentum and the quartet spins out the energizing ending that was promised.

Steven Eiler, © 2024

String Quartet No. 14 in A-flat Major, Op. 105, B. 193 (1895).....Antonín Dvořák

Born of rustic peasant stock, Antonín Dvořák began life as an apprentice butcher in a small Bohemian village near Prague. Although he grew to be one of the world's most celebrated and admired composers, he never forgot his humble roots. For all of his worldliness, sophistication, and inexhaustible gifts, Dvořák remained firmly rooted in the soil of his native Bohemia throughout his life.

The first movement begins in a deceptively somber mood. A portentous, A-flat Minor motive is passed sequentially from the cello upward through the ranks to the first violin, only to be interrupted by fierce, dissonant chords. The ominous atmosphere is suddenly ameliorated by the first violin, which whips the motive into a bright A-flat Major, immediately transforming the mood into one of jaunty good cheer. One can easily envision Dvořák strolling contentedly down the streets of his beloved Prague. From this point on, the movement sails forth in a dancing, lighthearted mode. The melancholy opening cello motive returns for a moment at the end of the movement but is now transformed teasingly into a subtle musical joke by Dvořák's sophisticated use of harmony.

A lively Scherzo and Trio follows, with the Scherzo cast in the taut, snapping rhythms of a Furiant, a popular Czech folkdance featuring shifting accents and alternating metrical groupings. The contrasting Trio is smooth and lyrical, with long, arching melodic duets between various instrumental combinations played over a gently sustained accompaniment.

Dvořák offers in the third movement a tender, deeply felt hymn of thanksgiving. The atmosphere of consolation and religiosity gradually devolves into a disconcerting moment of silence, which is followed by a pensive, chromatic interlude over a pulsing pedal tone

in the cello. The intensity and emotional temperature rise until a fortissimo climax has been reached, after which the music gradually returns to the tranquil, prayer-like melody of the first section, now accompanied by gentle pizzicatos in the viola and bass and skittering filigree in the second violin. The movement ends in a moment of transcendent reconciliation, as the unsettled music of the interlude is subtly blended with the consoling hymn of thanksgiving.

The last movement begins with a breathless melodic fragment in the cello. The 2nd violin and viola pounce on it in a startling burst of tremolo, but the first violin again corrals the music back into a sunny A-flat Major, defusing the tension and transforming the mood into one of pure joy. Dvořák builds an exuberant finale out of humble components, just as he embraces his rustic Bohemian roots and uses them as the basis of a work of unsurpassed sophistication and maturity. At the end he throws the music into the highest gear of intensity and races to an ebullient, virtuosic conclusion.

Michael Parloff



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ESCHER STRING QUARTET

Escher String Quartet has received acclaim for its profound musical insight and rare tonal beauty. A former BBC New Generation Artist and recipient of the Avery Fisher Career Grant, the quartet has performed at the BBC Proms at Cadogan Hall and is a regular guest at London's Wigmore Hall. In its hometown of New York, the ensemble serves as season artists of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

Highlights of the 2024-2025 season find Escher String Quartet performing in many of the great venues and organizations in the United States, including Alice Tully Hall, Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Shriver Hall Concert Series, Chamber Music Pittsburgh, University Musical Society at University of Michigan, Spivey Hall, and Chamber Music Houston, among others. In addition to their North American engagements, the quartet returns once again to Wigmore Hall for a BBC live broadcast recital as well as other engagements in Germany and continental Europe.

Alongside its growing European profile, Escher Quartet continues to flourish in its home country, performing at the Aspen Music Festival, Bravo! Vail, Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, Bowdoin Music Festival, Cape Cod Chamber Music Festival, OKM Festival, Chamber Music San Francisco, Music@Menlo, and the Ravinia and Caramoor festivals.

Escher String Quartet achieved critical success last season in their performances of the entire cycle of string quartets by Bela Bartok in single concert format, both at Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival. Their Bartok project was featured in *The New Yorker* in a substantial report by Alex Ross.

Beyond the concert hall, Escher String Quartet is proud to announce the creation of a new nonprofit entity, ESQYRE (Escher String Quartet Youth Residency Education). ESQYRE's mission as a nonprofit classical music organization is to provide a comprehensive educational program through music performance and instruction for people of all ages.

Escher String Quartet takes its name from the Dutch graphic artist M.C. Escher, inspired by Escher's method of interplay between individual components working together to form a whole.

Escher String Quartet appears by arrangement with Arts Management Group, Inc.

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