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ALEXANDER STRING QUARTET | Ensemble-in-Residence

Zakarias Grafilo | Violin
Yuna Lee | Violin

David Samuel | Viola
Sandy Wilson | Cello

ROBERT GREENBERG | Music Historian-in-Residence

Saturday, April 27, 2024 | 10am

Herbst Theatre

Music as a Mirror of Our World: The String Quartet from 1905 to 1946

Program 6: United Kingdom

BRITTEN

String Quartet No. 2 in C Major, Opus 36

Allegro calmo, senza rigore

Vivace

Chacony: Sostenuto

INTERMISSION

WALTON

String Quartet in A Minor

Allegro

Presto

Lento

Allegro molto

**The Saturday Morning Series is sponsored in part by the
Mark D. Kaplanoff Lecture Fund of San Francisco Performances' Endowment.**

The **Alexander String Quartet** is Ensemble-in-Residence with San Francisco Performances.

The **Alexander String Quartet** is represented by Christina Daysog Concert Artists
PO Box 529, Alameda, CA 94501 daysogconcertartists.com

The Quartet frequently performs and records on a matched set of instruments by the San Francisco-based maker Francis Kuttner, circa 1987.



ARTIST PROFILES

The Alexander String Quartet celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2021. The Quartet has been Ensemble-in-Residence since 1989 with San Francisco Performances. Starting in 1994, the Quartet joined with SF Performances' Music Historian-in-Residence, Robert Greenberg, to present the Saturday Morning Series exploring string quartet literature.

The Quartet has appeared on SF Performances mainstage Chamber Series many times, collaborating with such artists as soprano Elly Ameling and mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato; clarinetists Richard Stoltzman, Joan Enric Lluna and Eli Eban; pianists James Tocco, Menahem Pressler, Jeremy Menuhin, and Joyce Yang; and composer Jake Heggie.

Robert Greenberg, in addition to his programs with the Alexander String Quartet, lectures frequently for SF Performances.

The **Alexander String Quartet** stands among the world's premier ensembles, having performed in the major music capitals of five continents. The quartet is a vital artistic presence in its home base of San Francisco, serving since 1989 as Ensemble-in-Residence of San Francisco Performances. Widely admired for its interpretations of Beethoven, Mozart, and Shostakovich, the quartet's recordings have won international critical acclaim. Founded in New York City in 1981, the ensemble quickly captured attention, initially winning the Concert Artists Guild Competition in 1982, and then becoming the first American quartet to win

the London (now Wigmore) International String Quartet Competition in 1985. The members of the Alexander String Quartet are recipients of honorary degrees from Allegheny College and St. Lawrence University, and Presidential medals from Baruch College (CUNY).

Since its inception, the Alexander String Quartet has maintained an unyielding and passionate commitment to education. For decades, the ensemble has trained generations of gifted performers, emerging string quartets, and talented young musicians destined to pass on their knowledge and love of music as teachers in schools across the globe. The 2023–24 season marks the beginning of a new initiative that brings together the quartet's expertise in education and devotion to its community. Partnering with schools, arts organizations, and community institutions in the Bay Area and beyond, the Alexander String Quartet will be hosting a series of innovative workshops, performances and collaborations that are designed to support and bolster chamber music awareness and education for individuals from all walks of life.

The Alexander String Quartet has performed at Lincoln Center, the 92nd Street Y, the Metropolitan Museum, Jordan Hall, the Library of Congress, and appeared as guests at universities including Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Lewis & Clark, UCLA, and many more. Numerous overseas tours include the U.K., the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal,

Switzerland, France, Greece, the Republic of Georgia, Argentina, Panamá, and the Philippines. Their visit to Poland's Beethoven Easter Festival is beautifully captured in the 2017 award-winning documentary, *Con Moto: The Alexander String Quartet*.

Joyce Yang, Marc-André Hamelin, Richard Stoltzman, Joyce DiDonato, Midori, Lynn Harrell, Branford Marsalis, David Sánchez, Jake Heggie, Augusta Read Thomas, Tarik O'Regan, Wayne Peterson, and Samuel Carl Adams are only a few of the many distinguished instrumentalists, singers, and composers with whom the Alexander String Quartet has collaborated in performance and recording projects crossing genres from classical to jazz, rock, and folk in its more than four decades of music making. Their most recent collaborative project, "British Invasion," brings the Quartet together with guitarist William Kanengiser to explore the music of Sting, Led Zeppelin, John Dowland, and the Beatles by way of contemporary composers Ian Krouse, Dušan Bogdanović, and Leo Brouwer. The quartet continues to enjoy a long-standing collaboration with the richly entertaining composer-lecturer, Robert Greenberg, with whom it presents series of concerts every season with San Francisco Performances and at the Mondavi Center at the University of California in Davis. These concerts provide a deep dive into the history and essence of the works being presented in addition to a full performance of each piece.

Recording for the Foghorn Classics label, the Alexander String Quartet's extensive recording catalogue includes complete string quartet cycles by Bartók, Beethoven, Brahms, Kodály, and Shostakovich. Their most recent release is the third installment of a Mozart chamber music project, *Apotheosis Volume 3*, featuring the string quintets of Mozart with violist Paul Yarbrough. *Apotheosis Volumes 1 & 2*, released in 2018 and 2019, featured the late string quartets and piano quartets (with Joyce Yang) of Mozart. Both recordings received critical acclaim ("These are by far, hands down and feet up, the most amazing performances of Mozart's two piano quartets that have ever graced these ears." —*Fanfare*). Other major recordings include the 2020 release of the Mozart and Brahms clarinet quintets (with Eli Eban) and the 2019 release, *Locale*, featuring Dvořák's "American" quartet and piano quintet (with Joyce Yang). Their recording catalogue also includes the Mahler Song Cycles in transcriptions for mezzo-soprano (with Kindra Scharich) and string quartet by the Quartet's first violinist, Zakarias Grafilo.

The Alexander String Quartet performs on Michael Fischer and unlabeled circa 1800 Italian violins, a Hiroshi Iizuka viola, and a Francis M. Kuttner cello. They have also had the distinct honor on numerous occasions to record and perform on a matched set of instruments known as the Ellen M. Egger Quartet, made in San Francisco by the late Francis M. Kuttner.



Dr. Robert Greenberg was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1954 and has lived in the San Francisco Bay Area since 1978. He received a B.A. in Music, magna cum laude, from Princeton University in 1976 and a Ph.D. in music composition, *With Distinction*, from the University of California, Berkeley in 1984.

Greenberg has composed more than 50 works for a variety of instrumental and vocal ensembles. Performances of his works have taken place across the United States and Europe.

Dr. Greenberg has received numerous honors, including commissions from the Koussevitzky Music Foundation in the Library of Congress, the Alexander String Quartet, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, San Francisco Performances, and the XTET ensemble. His music is published by Fallen Leaf Press and CPP/Belwin and is recorded on the Innova label.

Greenberg is a Steinway Artist.

Dr. Greenberg is currently the Music Historian-in-Residence with San Francisco Performances, where he has lectured and performed since 1994. He has served on the faculties of the University of California, Berkeley; California State University, East Bay; the Advanced Management Program at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business; and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where he

chaired the Department of Music History and Literature from 1989 to 2001.

Dr. Greenberg has lectured for some of the most prestigious musical and arts organizations in the United States, including the San Francisco Symphony (where for 10 years he was host and lecturer for the symphony's nationally acclaimed Discovery Series), the Chautauqua Institution (where he was the Everett Scholar-in-Residence during the 2006 season), the Ravinia Festival, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the Van Cliburn Foundation, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, Villa Montalvo, the Phoenix Orchestra, the University of British Columbia (where he was the Dal Grauer Lecturer in September 2006), and Philadelphia's College of Physicians (where he has been the Behrend Lecturer since 2017).

In addition, Dr. Greenberg is a sought-after lecturer for businesses and business schools and has spoken for such diverse organizations as S. C. Johnson, Deutsche Bank, the University of California/Haas School of Business Executive Seminar and the Goldman School of Public Policy, the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, Harvard Business School Publishing, Kaiser Permanente, the Young Presidents' Organization, the World Presidents' Organization, and the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco. Dr. Greenberg has been profiled in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Inc. Magazine*, the *Times of London*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, among other publications.

For 15 years, Dr. Greenberg was the resident composer and music historian for NPR's *Weekend All Things Considered* and *Weekend Edition, Sunday* with Liane Hansen. His show *Scandalous Overtures* can be seen on www.ora.tv/shows.

In May 1993, Greenberg recorded a 48-lecture course entitled "How to Listen to and Understand Great Music" for The Great Courses/The Teaching Company. (This course was named in the January 1996 edition of *Inc. Magazine* as one of "The Nine Leadership Classics You've Never Read.") Dr. Greenberg has since recorded 30 additional courses. The most recent, "The Great Music of the 20th Century," was released in January 2018.

In February 2003, Maine's *Bangor Daily News* referred to Dr. Greenberg as the Elvis of music history and appreciation, an appraisal that has given him more pleasure than any other.

Dr. Greenberg is currently "blogging, vlogging, performing, Zooming, reviewing, opining, and bloviating 4-6 times a

week" on his subscription site at [Patreon.com/RobertGreenbergMusic](https://www.patreon.com/RobertGreenbergMusic).

PROGRAM NOTES

String Quartet No. 2 in C Major, Opus 36

BENJAMIN BRITTEN
(1913-1976)

On November 21, 1945, an unusual concert took place in London's Wigmore Hall. That day was the 250th anniversary of the death of Henry Purcell, universally acclaimed England's first great composer, and one of those represented on the program was Benjamin Britten. Britten, whose opera *Peter Grimes* had been triumphantly premiered six months earlier, had a lifelong passion for Purcell's music. The following year he would write his *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, based on a great Purcell theme, and he would make arrangements of Purcell's vocal music throughout his career, as well as a string orchestra version of Purcell's *Chaconne in G Minor*. That anniversary concert saw the premiere of an original work by Britten that paid tribute to the earlier master, the *String Quartet No. 2*. Britten's tribute to Purcell in this quartet is oblique: he quotes no music of Purcell, but the last movement—which dominates the structure—makes use of a technique that Britten associated with the earlier composer.

The quartet is in three movements, and it is original from its first instant. Rather than adopting a standard sonata form, which opposes and contrasts material, Britten builds the opening *Allegro calmo senza rigore* on three themes, all of which are announced in the first few measures and all of which are similar: all three themes begin with the upward leap of a tenth. The movement is centered around the key of C major, and the first statement of the theme begins on middle C, with each successive statement rising higher in the quartet's register. The exposition of these three themes becomes so complex that a clear division of the movement into development and recapitulation is lost, and at the climax Britten is able to make all three themes coalesce into one simultaneous statement before the music falls away to a quiet close.

The *Vivace* is a blistering—and very brief—scherzo in ternary form. Britten mutes the instruments throughout and moves to C minor for the outer sections;

the music feels consciously nervous, skittering and driving constantly ahead. The central section, in F major and based on a variant of the scherzo theme, brings little relaxation—the sense of nervous energy continues even in the major tonality.

The massive final movement—nearly as long as the first two movements combined—brings the tribute to Purcell. Britten calls this movement *Chacony*, the English name for the *chaconne*. This is a variation form: a ground bass in triple time repeats constantly while a composer spins out variations above each repetition. As noted, Britten very much admired Purcell's *Chaconne in G Minor*, and in tribute to the older composer he writes a chaconne as his finale. It is built on 21 repetitions of the nine-bar ground bass, which is presented in unison (in B-flat major) at the start of the movement. Britten groups his variations imaginatively: the first six are followed by a cello cadenza, the next six by a viola cadenza, the next six by a violin cadenza, and the final three drive to a conclusion that ringingly affirms C major.

String Quartet in A Minor

WILLIAM WALTON

(1902–1983)

Walton spent World War II writing film scores, including the music to *Henry V* (he had originally wanted to serve as an ambulance driver, but after he landed several ambulances in the ditch, the government decided that he would be more useful as a composer). In the summer of 1945, months after the end of the war in Europe, Walton set to work on a string quartet. He had

written no major works since the *Violin Concerto* of 1939, and Walton—a careful craftsman—required nearly two years to complete the quartet. The first performance, by the Blech String Quartet, took place on a BBC broadcast on May 4, 1947.

All of Walton's considerable virtues are evident in the *String Quartet in A Minor*: a clear sense of form, incredible rhythmic energy, and virtuoso instrumental writing. The quartet is remarkable for the central role it assigns to the usually-neglected viola—much of the characteristic sonority of this quartet originates with the mid-range sound of that instrument, which announces a number of the quartet's main ideas. The opening *Allegro* is in sonata form. It begins with the two central voices—second violin and viola—in two-part counterpoint, from which the viola spins out the long and haunting main idea that will dominate this movement. At some points this music spills over with a nervous, almost pointillistic energy, and for extended periods Walton changes meters every measure. The development is built around a fugato introduced by the viola and derived from that instrument's opening statement. In its closing moments, this movement seems to lose its energy and glides to silence on the lonely sound of the second violin's sustained fourth.

The second movement, a scherzo, goes by like a streak. Marked *Presto*, it is barred in 3/8, and each of those brief measures seems to whip past in a micro-second. This is virtuoso music, full of leaps, trills, and accidentals; its pace broadens slightly at the ringing climax, and suddenly it has vanished. Walton mutes his instruments

for the *Lento*, with the viola laying out the long opening idea, marked *espressivo*; over pizzicato accompaniment from the cello, the viola also introduces the theme of the central episode. This is an extended movement, and matters play up to a great climax, performed without mutes, before falling away to the quiet close. The concluding *Allegro molto* returns to the energetic manner of the second movement, but there is a hard-edged brilliance about this finale: long passages are written in unison, and the blistering pace of nonstop sixteenth notes gives this music the feel of a perpetual motion, with the melodic line whipping around between the four instruments. This is a ternary-form movement, with the lyric central episode (quite brief) introduced by the second violin. The opening material quickly returns, and the *Quartet in A Minor* flies to its exciting close on unison hammered A's.

Listeners may discover that they already know this music, but in another form. In 1972, a quarter-century after it was written, Neville Marriner asked Walton to arrange the quartet for string orchestra. This he did (with considerable revision of the first movement), and it is performed and has been recorded under the name *Sonata for Strings*. Also, Walton wrote a string quartet as a teenager, and as a result the *Quartet in A Minor* is sometimes referred to as the *String Quartet No. 2*. That early quartet made something of a splash at the 1923 ISCM festival, but Walton withdrew it, pronouncing it “full of undigested Bartók and Schoenberg.” The *Quartet in A Minor* is the only one he wanted performed.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger