SAN FRANCISCO
PERFORMANCES

presents...

ESMÉ QUARTET

Wonhee Bae | Violin
Yuna Ha | Violin
Dimitri Murrath | Viola
Yeeun Heo | Cello

Saturday, October 26, 2024 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

MOZART — **String Quartet in D Major, K.575**
Allegretto
Andante
Menuetto: Allegretto
Allegretto

LIGETI — **String Quartet No. 1 "Métamorphoses Nocturnes"**

INTERMISSION

SCHUBERT — **String Quartet in G Major, D.887**
Allegro molto moderato
Andante un poco moto
Scherzo: Allegro vivace
Allegro assai

San Francisco Performances acknowledges the generosity of Concert Partners: Ann Paras, Ian Hinchliffe and Marjorie Shapiro.

The **Esmé Quartet** appear by arrangement with Christina Daysog Concert Artists
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ENSEMBLE PROFILE

San Francisco Performances presents the Esmé Quartet for the second time. They made their SF Performances debut in March 2022.

Praised for their warm sound and powerful stage presence, the **Esmé Quartet** was formed in 2016 at the Hochschule für Musik in Cologne, Germany by four musicians who had been friends since their youth. They shared common interests and passions in music, the arts, and life. The Esmé Quartet brings together four brilliant and distinct musical personalities to form a cohesive, close-knit group that is passionately dedicated to the string quartet repertoire.

The Quartet has rapidly gained a worldwide reputation as a chamber ensemble of exceptional artistry and achievement. In spring of 2018, the quartet won the first prize as well as sweeping four special prizes at the prestigious Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition in London, and in the same year it became HSBC Laureate of the Académie du Festival d'Aix. This recognition followed prizes at the Trondheim International Chamber Music Competition and the 55th Possehl Musikpreis Lübeck. In October 2020, the quartet was awarded the first Hans Gál Prize by the Academy of Sciences and Literature Mainz and Villa Musica.

The Esmé Quartet was named the first Artists-in-Residence at the Lotte Concert Hall, Seoul, Korea for the 2020–21 season. They have appeared at the Lucerne Festival, at Wigmore Hall and throughout the UK, at the Flagey Musiq3 Festival in Brussels, Auditori Barcelona, Opéra de Lille, and as the quartet in residency at the Aix-en-Provence festival, the McGill International String Quartet Academy in Montréal, the Heidelberg String Quartet Festival and Classic Esterházy in Eisenstadt.

They made their highly acclaimed debut tour of the United States and Canada in Spring 2022 followed by their debut tour of Japan in Fall 2022. Recent highlights include a US tour with 2017 Cliburn gold medalist Yekwon Sunwoo and their highly acclaimed debut Australian tour, both in Spring 2024.

The Esmé Quartet performed John Adams' *Absolute Jest* with the Hong Kong Philharmonic in February 2023 and with the Gyeonggi Philharmonic at the Seoul Arts Center in April 2023. They also recently performed *Absolute Jest* with the Tokyo Metropolitan Orchestra with John Adams, conducting in January 2024. They performed Michel van der Aa's *The Book of Water* with British actor Samuel West at the Hong Kong Arts Festival in February 2023.

Their first international CD *To Be Loved* on Alpha Classics with works by Beethoven, Unsuk Chin, and Frank Bridge was released in January 2020 and was named one of the best classical CDs of 2020 by WQRX Public Radio in New York City. Their second CD *Yessori: Sound from the Past*, also on Alpha Classics, of works by Mozart, Tchaikovsky, and Soo Yeon Lyuh was released in March 2023.

Belgian-American violist Dimitri Murrath joined the Esmé Quartet in April 2023, upon the departure of violist Jiwon Kim.

The Esmé Quartet studied with Heime Müller and also mentored by artists such as Günter Pichler, Oliver Wille, Eberhard Feltz, Andraś Keller, Christoph Poppen, and Jonathan Brown.

The Quartet takes its name "Esmé" from the old French word for "beloved."

PROGRAM NOTES

String Quartet in D Major, K.575

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
(1756–1791)

In the spring of 1789, Mozart made an extended visit to Berlin. His fortunes in Vienna had waned, and he hoped that in the music-loving King Friedrich Wilhelm II he might find a royal patron who would understand his worth and commission new music. Mozart returned to Vienna early in June with the news that the trip had been in all ways a success: he had performed before the king and queen, who were so enthralled by his playing that on the spot the king commissioned a set of six quartets and six easy keyboard sonatas for his daughter. Mozart even had the money in hand to confirm his story.

Yet this inspiring tale, which has been part of the Mozart legend for two centuries, remains a troubling episode because the evidence suggests that it never happened. There is no record of a royal reception at Potsdam (the king in fact refused to meet Mozart and sent him instead to the court *Kapellmeister*), and scholars have come to the uncomfortable conclusion that Mozart—humiliated and unable to face returning to Vienna in shame—made up the whole story of the commission and borrowed money so that he could pass it off as the king's payment. He made a great show of starting to compose the cycle of quartets, but soon lost interest and wrote only three of the projected six. These were eventually published with no mention of a royal dedication.

These three quartets, inevitably (if ironically) known as the *"King of Prussia" Quartets*, feature unusually prominent parts for the cello. The king was an amateur cellist, and—the story went—Mozart gave that instrument a leading role as a bow to his royal patron. Mozart actually began work on the *Quartet in D Major, K.575* on the way back to Vienna from Berlin and had it done about the time he arrived home. The quartet is full of refined and agreeable music, but the surprise is how restrained this music is. Three of its movements are marked *Allegretto*, a marking that implies not just a tempo slower than *Allegro* but also a more relaxed and playful character; further, both the first and second movements are marked *sotto voce*, suggesting a subdued

presentation. The first violin immediately introduces the main theme of the opening *Allegretto*, and its rising-and-falling shape will recur in a number of forms. The second subject is announced by the cello (characteristically, it is marked *dolce*), and the music proceeds in sonata form, with a fairly literal recapitulation and a short coda. The *Andante* is music of inspired simplicity. Mozart sometimes sets the three upper voices against the cello here, and these unison sonorities contribute to the movement's atmosphere of clarity and simplicity. Both themes of this sonata-form movement sing gracefully, and the *sotto voce* marking at the opening might apply to the entire movement. There is more unison writing in the *Menuetto*, though the second strain breaks the melodic line nicely between the three upper voices in turn. By contrast, Mozart turns the trio section over to the cello, which sings its graceful song as the upper strings accompany.

The concluding *Allegretto* is the most contrapuntal—and the most impressive—of the four movements. It begins with something quite unusual in Mozart's music—a main theme that is clearly derived from the main theme of the first movement. He then offers extended polyphonic treatment of this singing idea, sometimes setting it in close canon between the various voices, at other times varying this simple melody in surprising ways—this music sparkles and seems constantly to be in the process of becoming something new. In its good spirits, intelligence, and utter ease, it is music fit for a king (even if it wasn't actually written for one).

String Quartet No. 1 "Métamorphoses Nocturnes"

GYÖRGY LIGETI
(1923–2006)

The generation of young Hungarian composers coming of age in the decade after World War II faced some very specific—and potentially deadly—problems. In those years artistic life in Hungary was rigidly controlled by the communist government, which insisted that its artists conform to the doctrine of Socialist Realism: art was to serve the people and to support the government, and it should be simple, easily understandable by the masses, and politically correct. Even the music of Hungary's greatest twentieth-century composer, Béla Bartók, was out of favor because of its complexity. Composers were rigidly cut off from developments in the West like serial or electronic music, and as a young composer György Ligeti found that the only musical avenues open to him were patriotic choruses, music for children, and music for school orchestras. Composers could either accept this situation or—if they were lucky—get out, and Ligeti chose the latter path: he escaped from Hungary during the 1956 revolution and eventually became one of the leading voices of avant garde music in post-war Europe.

Even before he left Hungary, Ligeti was writing music that he knew would be unacceptable to Hungarian authorities, and one of these pieces was his *String Quartet No. 1*, composed in 1953–54 and subtitled "Metamorphoses Nocturnes." Formally, this quartet may be thought of in several ways: as one continuous movement spanning about 20 minutes or as a sequence of miniature movements played without pause (the quartet is made up of a series of very short episodes at different tempos). The governing principle in this music is the continuous variation of material introduced at the very beginning (hence the quartet's subtitle). The music begins very quietly (the marking is *Allegro grazioso*): over softly-rising lines from the lower voices, the first violin plays a series of shapes (marked *piano*, *dolce*, and *espressivo*) that will form the basic material for the evolving variations. The music then leaps between a number of very short variations. Sometimes these can be almost brutal in their speed and ferocity, and these episodes demand brilliant playing from all four players. These alternate with slow sequences, and some of these are expressive and quite beautiful: an *Adagio, mesto* ("sad") introduced by the second violin; an *Andante tranquillo* that produces a deep, organ-like sonority; a saucy waltz marked *con eleganza, un poco capriccioso*; and others. Ligeti's harmonic language can be gritty—at some moments the instruments can be clustered a half-step apart, other passages are set in quarter-tones, and the music is often spiked with strident, dissonant chords. At the end, all four instruments create a web of sound made up of barely-audible glissandos played entirely in harmonics, and finally the music fades into silence on reminiscences of the opening material.

One of the impressive things about the *Quartet No. 1* is how good it sounds. Everyone hears the influence of Bartók's quartets on this music, and Ligeti incorporates some of that sound-world into his own music, including "Bartók pizzicatos" (plucked so sharply that they snap off the fingerboard), glissandos, and harmonics. Throughout, there is a freshness, a brilliance, and a clarity to the writing that makes this music exhilarating to hear.

Ligeti knew that this quartet would be unacceptable to the political and musical authorities in Budapest, and he did not try to have it performed there. The first performance of the *Quartet No. 1* was given in Vienna by the Ramor Quartet on May 8, 1958.

String Quartet in G Major, D.887

FRANZ SCHUBERT
(1797–1828)

Schubert wrote his fifteenth and final string quartet in the unbelievably short span of 11 days (June 20–30, 1826)—Mozart himself would have been hard-pressed to get a work of this breadth done in so brief a time. The *Quartet in G Major* is in every way a striking piece of music: in length (it stretches out to 45 minutes even when some of the most important repeats are omitted), in scope (its huge sonorities, often underpinned by violent tremolos, frequently suggest orchestral writing), and key relationships. Schubert was a master of the ingenious modulation, and this quartet's quicksilvery shifts of tonality mirror the flickering moods within the music itself. This is mercurial music—elusive, haunting, and finally very moving.

From a near-silent beginning, the *Allegro molto moderato* suddenly bursts to life on great chords, sharply-dotted rhythms, and jagged thematic edges. Within its first instants, the music pitches uneasily between G major and G minor, and over orchestra-like tremolos the opening idea (derived from the jagged edges of the introduction) is announced *pianissimo* by first violin and cello. The gracefully-syncopated second subject arrives as a chordal melody, and—curiously—the rest of the exposition consists of a set of variations on this theme. The development at first concentrates on the opening idea, then resumes the variations on the second subject. The movement drives to a close that returns to the powerful (and harmonically unstable) manner of the very beginning. The *Andante un poco molto* opens conventionally—the cello tune in the opening measures is pure Schubert—but suddenly come great rips of sound, discordant cries from the first

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violin over harmonically ambiguous tremolos in the lower voices. Agitated, dark, and almost shrill, these passages break in throughout the movement, which finally resolves peacefully.

The *Scherzo,* in B minor, is reminiscent of the scherzo of the *"Great" C-Major Symphony*—it bristles with energy as individual voices leap out of the general bustle. In complete contrast, the trio section is a laendler, and the languorous lilt of its main idea—introduced by the cello—brings an interlude of calm; the sudden jump back to the needle-sharp entrances of the scherzo is dramatic. The finale—*Allegro assai*—has been described as a perpetual-motion movement. Actually, it is a tarantella-like rondo that rides exuberantly along its 6/8 meter. Schubert supplies contrasting episodes along the way (smoothly making the 6/8 meter sound like 3/4 in the process), but it is the dancing opening music that finally takes the quartet to its energetic close.

Schubert apparently never heard this quartet. There is speculation that its opening movement might have been performed at the famous Schubertiad in March 1828, but even the best evidence is conjectural, and there is no convincing suggestion of a performance during his lifetime. The *Quartet in G Major* appears to have been consigned to the silence of dusty shelves, where it remained until it was premiered by the Hellmesberger Quartet in Vienna on December 8, 1850, 22 years after its composer's death.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger