

presents...

ANTHONY MCGILL | Clarinet

PACIFICA QUARTET

Simin Ganatra | Violin
Austin Hartman | Violin

Mark Holloway | Viola
Brandon Vamos | Cello

Tuesday, December 3, 2024 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

DVOŘÁK

String Quartet in F Major, Opus 96 "American"

Allegro ma non troppo

Lento

Molto vivace

Vivace ma non troppo

SHIRLEY

High Sierra Sonata (for clarinet and string quartet)

Buttermilk Morning

Angry Secrets

Reflections on a Day

INTERMISSION

BRAHMS

Quintet in B Minor for Clarinet and Strings, Opus 115

Allegro

Adagio

Andantino—Presto non assai, ma con sentimento

Con moto

This program is made possible in part by the generous support of
Neil O'Donnell and Chris Motley.

Anthony McGill and Pacifica Quartet are represented by MKI Artists
70 S. Winooski Ave., #318, Burlington, VT 05401 mkiartists.com

ARTIST PROFILES

San Francisco Performances presents Anthony McGill for the second time. He first appeared with the Catalyst Quartet in November 2021.

Pacifica Quartet debuted with San Francisco Performances in February 2005 and returns for a fifth recital.



Hailed for his “trademark brilliance, penetrating sound and rich character” (New York Times), clarinetist **Anthony McGill** enjoys a dynamic international solo and chamber music career and is principal clarinet of the New York Philharmonic—the first African-American principal player in the organization’s history. He is the recipient of the 2020 Avery Fisher Prize, one of classical music’s most significant awards, and was named Musical America’s 2024 Instrumentalist of the Year. *American Stories*, his album with the Pacifica Quartet, was nominated for a Grammy® for Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble Performance.

McGill appears as a soloist with top orchestras, including the New York and Los Angeles Philharmonics, the Metropolitan Opera, and the Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, and Detroit Symphony Orchestras. During the 2024–25 season he makes his BBC Proms debut performing Mozart’s *Clarinet Concerto* with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and Gemma New.

He performed alongside Itzhak Perlman, Yo-Yo Ma, and Gabriela Montero at the inauguration of President Barack Obama, premiering a piece by John Williams. As a chamber musician, McGill is a collaborator of the Brentano, Daedalus, Guarneri, JACK, Miró, Pacifica, Shanghai, Takács, and Tokyo

Quartets, and performs with leading artists including Emanuel Ax, Inon Barnatan, Gloria Chien, Yefim Bronfman, Gil Shaham, Midori, Mitsuko Uchida, and Lang Lang.

He serves on the faculty of The Juilliard School and is the Artistic Director for Juilliard’s Music Advancement Program. He holds the William R. and Hyunah Yu Brody Distinguished Chair at the Curtis Institute of Music.

In 2020, McGill’s #TakeTwoKnees campaign protesting the death of George Floyd and historic racial injustice went viral. Since 2023, he has partnered with Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative to organize classical music industry convenings at EJI’s Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama, in which leaders and artists in classical music examine America’s history of racial inequality and how this legacy continues to impact their work. In 2024 he performed at the dedication of the National Monument to Freedom as part of EJI’s Juneteenth celebration.

He is a Backun Artist and performs exclusively on Backun Clarinets. anthonymcgill.com

was previously the quartet-in-residence at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 2021, the Pacifica Quartet received a second Grammy Award for *Contemporary Voices*, an exploration of music by three Pulitzer Prize-winning composers: Shulamit Ran, Jennifer Higdon, and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich.

Formed in 1994, the Pacifica Quartet quickly won chamber music’s top competitions, including the 1998 Naumburg Chamber Music Award. In 2002 the ensemble was honored with Chamber Music America’s Cleveland Quartet Award and the appointment to Lincoln Center’s The Bowers Program (formerly CMS Two), and in 2006 was awarded a prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant. With its powerful energy and captivating, cohesive sound, the Pacifica has established itself as the embodiment of the senior American quartet sound.

The Pacifica Quartet has proven itself the preeminent interpreter of string quartet cycles, harnessing the group’s singular focus and incredible stamina to portray each composer’s evolution, often over the course of just a few days. Having giv-



With a career spanning nearly three decades, the multiple Grammy® Award-winning **Pacifica Quartet** has achieved international recognition as one of the finest chamber ensembles performing today. The Quartet is known for its virtuosity, exuberant performance style, and often-daring repertory choices.

Having served as quartet-in-residence at Indiana University’s Jacobs School of Music for the past decade, the Quartet also leads the Center for Advanced Quartet Studies at the Aspen Music Festival and School, and

en highly acclaimed performances of the complete Carter cycle in San Francisco, New York, Chicago, and Houston; the Mendelssohn cycle in Napa, Australia, New York, and Pittsburgh; and the Beethoven cycle in New York, Denver, St. Paul, Chicago, Napa, and Tokyo (in an unprecedented presentation of five concerts in three days at Suntory Hall), the Quartet presented the monumental Shostakovich cycle in Chicago, New York, Montreal, and at London’s Wigmore Hall. The Quartet has been widely praised for these cycles, with critics call-

ing the concerts “brilliant,” “astonishing,” “gripping,” and “breathtaking.”

In 2008 the Quartet released its Grammy Award-winning recording of Carter’s *Quartets Nos. 1 and 5* on the Naxos label; the 2009 release of *Quartets Nos. 2, 3, and 4* completed the two-CD set. Cedille Records released the group’s four-CD recording of the entire Shostakovich cycle, paired with other contemporary Soviet works, to rave reviews: “The playing is nothing short of phenomenal.” (*Daily Telegraph*, London) Other recent recording projects include Leo Ornstein’s rarely heard piano quintet with Marc-André Hamelin with an accompanying tour, the Brahms piano quintet with the legendary pianist Menahem Pressler, the Brahms and Mozart clarinet quintets with clarinetist Anthony McGill, and their Grammy Award-winning *Contemporary Voices* album.

The members of the Pacifica Quartet live in Bloomington, IN, where they serve as quartet-in-residence and full-time faculty members at Indiana University’s Jacobs School of Music. Prior to their appointment, the Quartet was on the faculty of the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana from 2003 to 2012, and also served as resident performing artists at the University of Chicago for 17 years.

For more information on the Quartet, please visit pacificaquartet.com.

PROGRAM NOTES

String Quartet in F Major, Opus 96 “American”

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK
(1841–1904)

During his three-year tenure as director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York (1892–95), Dvořák was fascinated by life in the New World, but he missed his family—four of his six children had remained in Bohemia—and his homeland. Dvořák’s secretary in New York City was a young violinist named Josef Jan Kovařík, who had grown up in the Czech community of Spillville, Iowa. Kovařík invited Dvořák to spend the summer of 1893 in Spillville, and the composer gladly accepted. There, with his wife (and now all his children), Dvořák spent a happy and productive summer, surrounded by familiar language, customs, and food. He was amazed by Iowa’s vast prairies and forests, he played the organ in the Spillville church, he heard native

birds, and he watched as local Indians came into the village to sell herbs and dance.

Dvořák also composed that summer. He sketched the *String Quartet in F Major* in only three days (June 8–10, 1893) and had it complete in fifteen. Dvořák’s comment was concise: “Thank God. It went quickly. I am satisfied.” Early audiences were more than satisfied. The Kneisel Quartet gave the official premiere in Boston on January 1, 1894, and performed it 50 times over the next several seasons. The quartet quickly acquired the nickname “American.” The source of that nickname is uncertain, but it has become an inescapable part of how we think of this music, and nationalistic Americans were quick to claim that here at last was an authentic American classical music based on American materials. Dvořák would have none of that. He would later denounce any “nonsense about my having made use of original American melodies. I have only composed in the spirit of such American national melodies.” He himself offered a useful introduction to his quartet: “When I wrote this quartet in the Czech community of Spillville in 1893, I wanted to write something for once that was very melodious and straightforward, and dear Papa Haydn kept appearing before my eyes, and that is why it all turned out so simply. And it’s good that it did.”

Part of the charm of this quartet is precisely that it did turn “out so simply” and that it is so “melodious and straightforward.” The *Quartet in F Major* is full of instantly memorable tunes and boundless energy, and its sunny surface is seldom clouded by harmonic or textural complexities. One might not readily identify “Papa Haydn” as the father of this quartet, but that older master’s cheerful spirits and sophisticated writing for strings are very much part of this music.

It is the viola that leads the way into the opening of the *Allegro ma non troppo*, and that sharply inflected, rising-and-falling theme will give shape to much of the material that follows. A songful second subject in the violin has a rhythmic snap that some have felt to be American in origin, though such a snap is typical of the folk music of many lands. The development concludes with a brief fugal passage derived from the opening viola melody.

Many regard the *Lento* as the finest movement in the quartet—and one of the finest slow movements Dvořák ever composed. It is virtually a continuous flow of melody, as the violin’s lamenting theme—marked *molto espressivo*—sings hauntingly over undulating

accompaniment. At the close the cello takes up this theme as the other instruments alternate pizzicato and bowed accompaniment.

The scherzo rips along cheerfully, its main theme sharing the rhythm of the quartet’s opening theme. About 20 measures into this movement, Dvořák gives the first violin a melody he heard a bird singing outside his window in Spillville (this bird was long identified as the scarlet tanager, though recent research suggests that it may have been the red-eyed vireo). The scherzo alternates this cheerful opening section with interludes that are minor-key variants of its opening theme.

The most impressive thing about the rondo-finale, marked *Vivace ma non troppo*, is its rhythmic energy, in both the themes themselves and the accompanying voices. The rondo theme, introduced immediately by the first violin, is one of those sparkling melodies that are impossible to forget. The central episode in this rondo is a quiet chorale, and some have heard it as a reminiscence of Dvořák’s experience of playing the tiny organ in the church at Spillville. Some of this movement’s interludes recall the shape of themes from earlier movements, and the blazing rush to the close is one of the most exhilarating Dvořák ever wrote.

Many have been quick to argue against the notion that there is anything distinctly “American” about this quartet, claiming instead that it is music composed by a thoroughly Bohemian composer while on vacation in this country. And perhaps they are right. But do we hear the influence of spirituals in the long, plaintive violin melody in the *Lento*? The rhythms of Indian drums in some of the accompaniment figures of the quartet’s outer movements? The song of an American bird in the scherzo? The gentle remembrance of a church organ in the finale?

Listeners may decide for themselves whether the nickname “American” is fitting for this quartet.

High Sierra Sonata

BEN SHIRLEY
(Contemporary)

Born in Berlin, Ben Shirley grew up in Texas and California and fell in love with music as a child. He became a double bassist and played for many years in rock bands, but addiction to alcohol and drugs eventually forced him into homelessness, and he spent more than two years on Skid Row in Los Angeles. The charity Midnight Mission helped Shirley get back on his feet,

and he earned a scholarship to the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Shirley currently lives in Newark, Ohio, where he works as a composer (and has a passion for running marathons all over the world). He serves on the board of directors of the Newark-Granville Symphony Orchestra.

On his website, the composer has provided an introduction to his *High Sierra Sonata*:

"In the summer of 2019, I was invited by a friend, Ryan Navales, to join him in serving as a volunteer at an aid station on the course of the Bishop High Sierra Ultra-marathon. It marked my second trip to the Owens Valley, to visit my friend, who I'd met while we were both beginning the process of recovering from drug and alcohol addiction, while living at a homeless shelter in Los Angeles' notorious Skid Row.

"Way up in the Eastern Sierras, I soon learned that the weather, much like life, can change on a dime. As the mountains wake up, it is clear, cool, and sparkling with life. But within minutes, it is sleeting, freezing, howling, and ultimately covered in snow. The sun returns, and the rain returns, and on it went, before relative calm set in at the end of our 12-hour shift. Every season came and went through the course of a single day, which couldn't help but remind me of the seasons of life, and in some cases the seasons of emotions we all go through, in a day, a week, a month, or a year. But regardless of the circumstances beyond my control there in the Eastern Sierras, the majestic beauty, the camaraderie amongst volunteers, the perseverance of the runners, and a decade-long friendship rooted in a shared experience remained as rock solid as the mountains we stood on." (benshirleymusic.com)

Quintet in B Minor for Clarinet and Strings, Opus 115

JOHANNES BRAHMS
(1833–1897)

Brahms intended that his *Viola Quintet in G Major* of 1890 should be his last work. At age 57, he felt that he was done composing. In December of that year he sent his publisher some corrections to that quintet with a brief message: "With this note you can take leave of my music, because it is high time to stop." But it was not to be. In March 1891 Brahms traveled to Meiningen to hear that orchestra under the direction of Fritz Steinbach, one of the leading interpreters of Brahms' music. And then

something entirely unexpected happened: Brahms heard the orchestra's principal clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld perform Mozart's *Clarinet Quintet* and Weber's *Clarinet Concerto*. He was so impressed by Mühlfeld's playing that he came out of retirement and wrote four works for Mühlfeld that have become the heart of the clarinet literature.

Mühlfeld (1856–1907) was an interesting musician. He joined the Meiningen orchestra at age 17 as a violinist but taught himself to play clarinet and became the orchestra's principal clarinetist at age 23, later serving as principal of the Bayreuth orchestra. So impressed was Brahms by his playing that he sat for hours listening to him practice and gave Mühlfeld several pet nicknames, including "Fräulein Klarinette," "my dear nightingale," and "my prima donna." In the summer of 1891, six months after he had officially announced his retirement, Brahms retreated to his favorite summer vacation spot—Bad Ischl, high in the Alpine lake district—and wrote the *Clarinet Trio*, Opus 114 and the *Quintet*, Opus 115; two sonatas for clarinet followed in the summer of 1894. These four pieces, all written for Mühlfeld, were Brahms' final instrumental works.

The *Clarinet Quintet* has been universally acclaimed one of Brahms' late masterpieces. Rather than writing a display piece to spotlight Mühlfeld's playing, Brahms—newly sensitive to the sound and possibilities of the clarinet—carefully integrates it into the texture of the music. This is extremely concentrated music, with materials extended and combined in ingenious ways. Is the very beginning Brahms' act of homage to Mozart's *Clarinet Quintet*? Both quintets begin with the opening idea fully stated by the quartet, and only then does the clarinet rise from the depths, climb into its upper register, and assume its central role. Brahms opens this *Allegro* with a violin duet that hovers uncertainly between D major and B minor—this tonal ambiguity will mark the entire quintet. Brahms introduces all his thematic material in the first moments of this movement: the undulating theme of the first two bars gives way to the slightly swung shape of the third and fourth bars, followed by the clarinet's rising entry in the fifth. These three theme-shapes will appear in some form throughout the entire movement. At the stormy climax, the theme of the first two bars is heard over fierce swirls in the clarinet, and the movement dies away to conclude with the quiet of the beginning.

The *Adagio* is in ABA form, beginning with a simple clarinet theme over quiet accompaniment from the strings. Yet this subdued opening brings extraordinarily complex rhythmic textures. The clarinet sings its simple song in quarter-notes, the first violin (also in quarter-notes) is syncopated against this, the second violin and viola trade the collision of triple and duple pulses, and beneath all this the cello has a complex line all its own—simply holding this music together presents all sorts of challenges for the performers. The middle section brings a sound that is, by Brahmsian standards, exotic. Brahms was very fond of Hungarian gypsy music, and this section, marked *più lento*, shows that influence: the clarinet leaps and swirls while the accompanying strings whirl beneath it (in imitation of the Hungarian cimbalom?) before the opening material returns.

The principal themes of the final two movements are closely related, giving the *Quintet* an even greater feeling of unity. The *Andantino* opens with a breezy, intermezzo-like tune for clarinet, but at the center section—*Presto non assai, ma con sentimento*—the music rushes ahead impetuously and never returns to the easy flow of the opening material. The finale, like the finale of Mozart's *Clarinet Quintet*, is a set of variations. Marked only *Con moto*, it offers five variations on the opening theme, stated in turn by the violins and clarinet. Of particular interest is the very end, where the final variation gives way to the theme that opened the first movement, and Brahms' *Clarinet Quintet* winds its immensely concentrated way to the quiet unison B that concludes this moving music.

The *Clarinet Quintet* was given its public premiere in Berlin by Mühlfeld and Joseph Joachim's quartet on December 12, 1891, almost a century to the day after Mozart's death. There is no record of the public reactions to the premiere of Mozart's quintet in 1789, but the response to Brahms' was ecstatic, both from critics and the public, and today many consider it the finest of his late works. Brahms was usually the fiercest critic of his own music, but in the face of this glowing reception he relaxed a little and was willing to concede that his *Clarinet Quintet* was a "very decent" piece of music.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger