Danish String Quartet

"The Danish are remarkable, as ever – capable of intense blend, extreme dynamic variation (in which they seem glued together), perfect intonation even on harmonics, and constant vitality and flow."
– *Gramophone*

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The Danish String Quartet
2023-24 Biography
Frederik Øland (Violin); Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen (Violin);
Asbjørn Nørgaard (Viola); Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin (Cello)

The GRAMMY®-nominated Danish String Quartet continues to assert its preeminence among the world's finest string quartets. Celebrated for their "intense blend, extreme dynamic variation (in which they seem glued together), perfect intonation even on harmonics, and constant vitality and flow" (*Gramophone*) and renowned for the palpable joy they exude in music-making, the Danish String Quartet has become one of today's most in-demand classical quartets, performing to sold-out concert halls around the world. The Danish Quartet celebrated their 20th Anniversary in 2022-2023, having formed when violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørenson and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard were teenagers under the mentorship of Tim Frederiksen of Copenhagen's Royal Danish Academy of Music. In 2008, the three Danes were joined by Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin.

The Danish Quartet's inventive and intriguing programming and repertoire choices have produced critically acclaimed original projects and commissions as well as popular arrangements of Scandinavian folk music. This season, the Quartet will complete its DOPPELGÄNGER series, an ambitious four-year international commissioning project pairs world premieres from four composers—Bent Sørensen, Lotta Wennäkoski, Anna Thorvaldsdottir, and Thomas Adès—with late major chamber works by Schubert. Each season, the Quartet has performed a world premiere on a program with its doppelgänger—the Schubert quartet or quintet that inspired it—culminating in 2024 in the premiere of a quintet by Adès, after the String Quintet in C Major. The DOPPELGÄNGER pieces are commissioned by the Danish String Quartet with the support of Carnegie Hall, Cal Performances, UC Santa Barbara Arts & Lectures, Vancouver Recital Society, Flagey in Brussels, and Muziekgebouw in Amsterdam.

In summer 2023 the Quartet performs at Ravinia and at Tanglewood's Seiji Ozawa Hall. The 2023-2024 season sees them on tour in eighteen cities in the USA and Canada and venues in Norway, Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, Brussels, Italy, and their home of Denmark.

The Danish String Quartet's most recent recording project is PRISM, a series of five discs on ECM New Series that explores the symbiotic musical and contextual relationships between Bach fugues, Beethoven string quartets, and works by Shostakovich, Schnittke, Bartók, Mendelssohn, and Webern. The final disc, PRISM V, was released to great acclaim in April 2023,

with *The Strad* praising the quartet's "refined, coherent and erudite performances, which combine an exhilarating sweep with minute attention to details of phrasing and timbre." The Quartet's discography reflects the ensemble's special affinity for Scandinavian composers, with the complete quartets of Carl Nielsen (Dacapo, 2007 and 2008) and Adès, Nørgård & Abrahamsen (their debut on ECM in 2016). They also released two discs of traditional Scandinavian folk music, *Wood Works* (Dacapo 2014) and *Last Leaf* (ECM 2017), which was chosen as one of the top classical albums of the year by NPR, Spotify and *The New York Times*. A third folk recording is planned for release in 2023 on ECM.

The Quartet takes an active role in reaching new audiences through special projects. In 2007, they established the DSQ Festival, which takes place in intimate and informal settings in Copenhagen. In 2016, they inaugurated a concert series, Series of Four, in which they both perform and invite colleagues to appear.

The Danish String Quartet has been the recipient of many awards and appointments, including *Musical America*'s 2020 Ensemble of the Year and the Borletti-Buitoni Trust. The Quartet was named in 2013 as a BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artist and appointed to the Bowers Program (formerly CMS Two). The Quartet was awarded the 2010 NORDMETALL-Ensemble Prize at the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Festival in Germany, and, in 2011, received the Carl Nielsen Prize, the highest cultural honor in Denmark. www.danishquartet.com.

"...these [PRISM] releases must qualify as some of the most essential listening of the past decade. No recording could quite capture what makes the Danish so special in concert, could make indelible the fleeting aura of rapt, intense concentration that settles in a hall when they are at their best. But the five "Prism" releases come close..."
— David Allen, ***The New York Times***

"What they do know is how to be an exceptional quartet, whatever repertory they play."
— Anthony Tommasini, ***The New York Times***

"But nothing could have truly prepared me for the tornado of energy that the quartet unleashed with its performance of Schubert's String Quartet No. 14, "Death and the Maiden."… So what is it about them that prompts such acclaim? …For my part, I've got to give it to two things: their commitment to connecting and contextualizing music from all areas of the concert music tradition and beyond, and the unbridled joy they take in playing with one another."
— A.Z. Madonna, ***Boston Globe***

"The Danish String Quartet stand out: not because they're shinier or plusher or pushier than the rest, but because of their nimble charisma, stylish repertoire and the way their light and grainy shading can turn on a dime."
— Kate Molleson, ***The Guardian***

“They could be grounded in their tone or mystical. They allowed time to stand still, and they could assume the pose of excitingly aggressive rockers. They did it all.”
— Mark Swed, ***The Los Angeles Times***

“The Danish are remarkable, as ever – capable of intense blend, extreme dynamic variation (in which they seem glued together), perfect intonation even on harmonics, and constant vitality and flow.”
— Andrew Mellor, ***Gramophone***

"This is one of the best quartets before the public today."
— Robert Battey, ***The Washington Post***

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The Danish String Quartet

Critical Acclaim

"What they do know is how to be an exceptional quartet, whatever repertory they play."

Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*

"Most of the music in this concert was of the kind that makes its musical points when performed with ultra refinement, pliancy of phrasing and tone, and a sense of reflection. In music of this type, the Danish Quartet has no peer."

Kenneth Delong, *Calgary Herald*

"The Danish are remarkable, as ever – capable of intense blend, extreme dynamic variation (in which they seem glued together), perfect intonation even on harmonics, and constant vitality and flow."

Andrew Mellor, *Gramophone*

"The Nielsen seldom appears in our concert halls, but proved a brilliant, dramatic work in the Beethovenian tradition, and was projected by these players with vividness and ardour."

Paul Driver, *The London Times*

"A concert that was as comprehensively rewarding as any chamber-music performance in recent memory… Do not lose track of this group: Even by today's high standards, it offers something very special."

David Weininger, *The Boston Globe*

"...One of the most powerful performances of Opus 132 I've heard live or on disc. The musicians, acutely attuned to one another, didn't appear to be on autopilot for even a millisecond, with every nuance, phrase and gesture beautifully wrought."

Vivien Schweitzer, *The New York Times*

"I can't imagine a more involving performance."

Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*

"They could be grounded in their tone or mystical. They allowed time to stand still, and they could assume the pose of excitingly aggressive rockers. They did it all."

Mark Swed, *The Los Angeles Times*

"This is one of the best quartets before the public today."

Robert Battey, *The Washington Post*

“The Danish String Quartet is in a different league altogether, and one that should be attended every time they're in town.”

Christina Strynatka, *Examiner.com*

"They bring a freshness and energy plus a level of sheer accomplishment that I don’t ever remember hearing in these works."

David Fanning, *Gramophone*

“…It was good to encounter the rampaging energy of the Danish Quartet, at the Scandinavia House, on Park Avenue. Whether in Mozart’s D-Minor Quartet, Ligeti’s First, or Nielsen’s Fourth, these shaggy-haired Danes, who look as though they could be manning some inscrutable boutique in deepest Brooklyn, seemed to sing, dance, strut, and glide their way through the music. For the Dacapo label, they’ve recorded a superb survey of the Nielsen quartets; in zest and twang, it out-does even vintage accounts by the Koppel Quartet , which had links to the composer.”

Alex Ross, *The New Yorker*

“[The Danish String Quartet] plays with an urgency that can feel dangerous, and with a unity of intention that makes familiar material stand out in bold relief, as if it were brand new territory…_This is a group that makes you listen.”

San Jose Mercury

“…A suitably dramatic and rhythmic performance which caught one's attention from the start… [a] lively and fresh-sounding ensemble.”

Seen and Heard International

"My introduction to this group was as dramatic as one could have. It was in the absolutely inhuman and unforgiving scenario of the audition, where they came all the way over from Copenhagen to audition at Lincoln Center. When somebody comes from overseas at their own expense to do an audition, you feel bad for them already. And we had this panel of judges sitting there, all incredible musicians; been through it all. And these guys walked out to play, and they looked like Scandinavian bandits or Old West bandits. They were wearing vests and white shirts, and they had this wild, spiky blond hair. We looked at them and thought, 'Wow, this is really off the wall.'
And they sat down, and they started to play. I think they started with Haydn and then they went to Beethoven Op. 127, the slow movement, one of the most profound pieces. And they started to play it, and I looked down the length of this long table of judges; there wasn't a pencil moving. They were all just sitting there, transfixed; one of the most beautiful things I've ever heard. I think they have really a profound effect on people who hear them play. I'm just so excited that they're coming."

David Finckel, *Artistic Director, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center*

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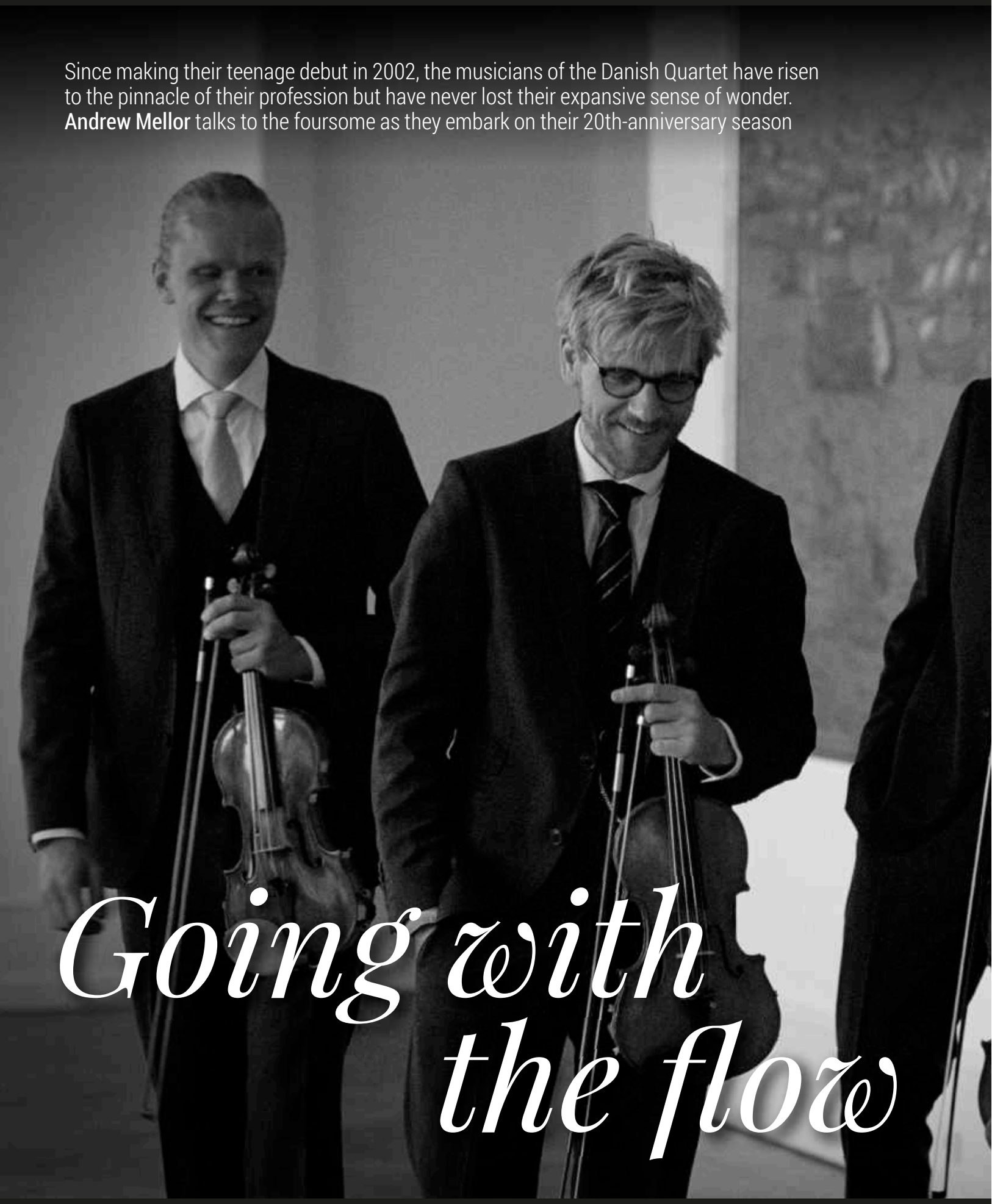
DANISH QUARTET

AS THEY CELEBRATE 20 YEARS TOGETHER, THE SCANDINAVIAN FOURSOME REFLECT ON THEIR UNIQUE MUSICAL BOND

Since making their teenage debut in 2002, the musicians of the Danish Quartet have risen to the pinnacle of their profession but have never lost their expansive sense of wonder. **Andrew Mellor** talks to the foursome as they embark on their 20th-anniversary season



Going with the flow

The Danish Quartet (*l–r*) Frederik Øland, Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, Asbjørn Nørgaard and Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin

MAIN PHOTO CAROLINE BITTENCOURT. 2002 PHOTO COURTESY OF THE QUARTET

It was an unusually hot afternoon in Copenhagen in July 2002 when four adolescent boys hurtled on to a stage at the Charlottenborg gallery to present themselves as a new string quartet. 'Our coach told us to walk on stage quickly,' remembers one of them. In fact, the velocity of their entrance became one of the concert's unintended talking points. 'It was like we really needed to show some authority,' says another of the four with a laugh. '"Here we are!" We certainly took that advice literally.'

This was the debut of what called itself the Young Danish String Quartet, 'young' being the operative word. Three of the four had yet to enrol at a conservatoire. They knew each other from summer courses and football kickabouts – a group of teenagers discovering, in tandem, a burgeoning passion for playing music written many decades before they were born; four kids caught in the slipstream of an esoteric tradition considered the preserve of far older, more serious and more experienced musicians.

'My mum just sent me this,' says violist Asbjørn Nørgaard, proffering his phone, which displays a photo of the occasion: four red-faced lads in sweat-patched white shirts. 'It felt like Carnegie Hall to us,' he says. 'We took it so seriously, writing our biographies in the formal style even though there was nothing to put in them. Very cute! I remember Rune [Tonsgaard Sørensen, violinist] leaning over to me just before we went on stage and asking me if I ever got nervous. "No, I never get nervous," I said, though of course I got super nervous. He looked at me and just said: "Good. It's good to have someone who doesn't get nervous."'

The wonder of the Danish Quartet is how little has really changed. They still appear 'young' but have long since dropped the word from their name – and are all fathers. These days, the venue might really be Carnegie Hall. The schoolboy white shirts have gone and the tempo of the stage entry has calmed. But in its 20th season (2022–3), the Danish Quartet is somehow still just four guys going with the flow of their exceptional talent. Different levels of refinement and connective imagination have altered everything while apparently altering nothing. ▹

The Danish Quartet at its 2002 debut (with cellist Carl-Oscar Østerlind)

CAROLINE BITTENCOURT

We meet in the quartet's lair, a workshop in the bowels of the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen – a landmark Functionalist building that once headquartered Danish state radio. The group has been quartet-in-residence at the academy since 2015, an arrangement that involves plenteous performing and teaching while giving the ensemble the luxury of a bolthole in the city.

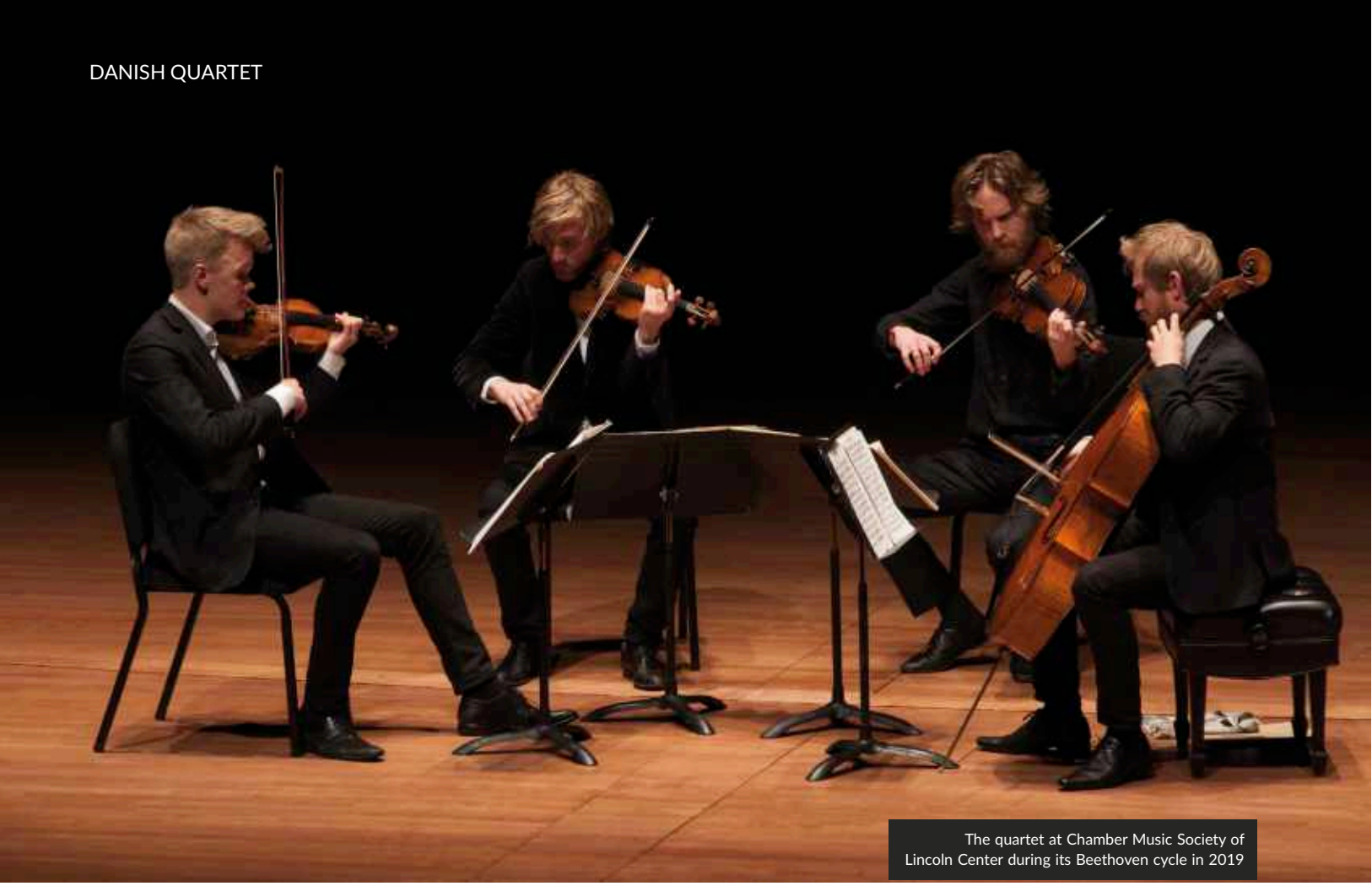
The atmosphere is unashamedly man cave. 'You want a beer?' asks violinist Frederik Øland, gesturing towards a crate of Pilsners on top of a Steinway as I'm ushered into the room (it's 10am, so no thanks). Nørgaard more fittingly plunges the filter down on a fresh pot of coffee as his colleagues gravitate on to three of four chairs that replicate their stage formation. When they're all seated, Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, who replaced Carl-Oscar Østerlind in 2008, is to my right; Sørensen is on the left, with Øland to his left and Nørgaard to his. A Persian-style rug lines the floor underneath them. On a wall hangs *The Strad*'s 2022 calendar.

Anyone who owns that calendar is likely to know something of the Danish Quartet's trajectory. Early victories at competitions in Trondheim and London alerted the wider world to its existence, while stints on the BBC New Generation Artists scheme and the Lincoln Center's Bowers Program sealed its reputation. Just as the ensemble was pricking up ears with its extreme clarity of articulation and supremely considered blend, it punctured its classical bubble by recording folk music. It enjoys a residency at Wigmore Hall while curating its own genre-bending festival in Copenhagen. Its latest recording project, *Prism*, a series of discs for ECM each linking a Bach fugue with a Beethoven string quartet and a later work (often modernist), has been vigorously discussed and highly acclaimed. (The latest, and final, release in the series, *Prism V*, is out this month.)

> 'WE WERE AMBITIOUS IN THE WAY WE PREPARED, BUT NOT ABOUT WHERE WE WANTED TO BE'
> – *FREDERIK ØLAND, VIOLIN*

Was any of this part of the plan in 2002? 'We weren't thinking like that,' says Øland. 'We were ambitious in the way we prepared, but not about where we wanted to be.' Were there milestones, at least? Sjölin uses a different word: corners. 'Every time we turned a corner, it was the result of something that had already happened. We did well in the first competitions because we'd played the programme twenty times. It wasn't the victories that counted. It was how we worked for them.' Øland picks up: 'We never went to a competition to win. We went to get experience, to build repertoire, to travel a bit – to enjoy each other's company.'

The same stimuli sustain them two decades on, they claim. This is a group whose personal bonds have always had musical implications (Øland describes his fellow players as 'brothers'). Sjölin recounts the story of one competition in particular, when Sørensen left the full score of Thomas Adès's *Arcadiana* on a plane. 'That's when we really learnt how to listen to each other,' the cellist says. 'I would say that the most important tool we have as a quartet is that we've become very specialised at listening to each other – it's something that, if I may say, we're particularly good at.' ▹



The quartet at Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center during its Beethoven cycle in 2019

His claim leads to a discussion of the group's trademark sound: a blend of such distilled purity that it can work even at minuscule dynamics, coupled to intense unity of ensemble, the four players seemingly bound like schooling fish. 'We used to vibrate more and we used to swing much more in and out of tempo,' says Nørgaard, 'but we never made decisions about any of this. It was always based on a long listening process. Other people noticed which one of us was vibrating and which one was not. For us it was about feeling what sounded right.' The journey to this sound, they say, is one they consistently struggle to explain to students. Øland returns, time and again, to the subconscious: 'Our ears changed. Simple. I used to be the romantically inclined one, playing with lots of vibrato. That was my upbringing. But we gathered around a sound. It happened without us noticing – certainly without me noticing.'

The 19th-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard observed that life must be lived forwards but can only be understood backwards. In retrospect, it seems logical that the search for a purer, more natural sound would be turbocharged by the group's interest in folk music (spearheaded by Sørensen). And that folk music, in turn, would lead the group from the dense spiritual bracken of Beethoven's chamber music into the aerated plateau of Schubert's. They are pairing the composer's last three quartets and string quintet with four specially commissioned 'partner' works (by Adès, Bent Sørensen, Anna Thorvaldsdottir and Lotta Wennäkoski) for their continuing Doppelgänger series, which is touring in spring 2023.

'IN BEETHOVEN THERE ARE SO MANY OBSTACLES. SCHUBERT'S IS A NATURAL BEAUTY. HE IS FAR CLOSER TO FOLK MUSIC' – *RUNE TONSGAARD SØRENSEN, VIOLIN*

Schubert has clearly refreshed the ensemble after a ten-year Beethoven cycle in which brilliance was apparently stalked by frustration. 'We were climbing the Beethoven mountain for a decade…' says Nørgaard, before Sørensen finishes his sentence with a laugh: 'and Schubert has liberated us from it!' Sørensen continues: 'In Beethoven there are so many obstacles. It's so full of tension that I got a little fed up with it. Schubert's is a natural beauty. He is far closer to folk music; more organic, more liberating, more satisfying to play. And he touches me more deeply.'

Nørgaard describes Schubert's chamber works for strings as 'musicians' music'. The composer 'creates a canvas', he says, 'and you have to engage in it as an artist, to swim around in it. You can't just chill. You need to be telling a story all the time.' It came at the right time, says Øland, 'because we're a little bit more at peace with our music making. It doesn't feel like we're trying to prove anything with Schubert, we're just in it – and relaxing in it.'

Those statements reveal a contradiction in these four individuals' idea of this music, and there's clearly a dichotomy between the detail and delicacy of the sound they make in

TRISTAN COOK

For the Danish Quartet, music making is both about an ongoing process and being in the moment

Schubert and the idea that they kick back while playing it. Nørgaard contextualises it: 'When we did the Schubert G major Quartet, an esteemed musician analysed what we did in the second movement in loads of detail: "You did a tiny crescendo here, a hairpin there, then a little comma…" I had no idea we did all that. I mean, can you imagine how stressful it would be to endure 60 minutes of that sort of musical accountancy?'

Even more than Beethoven, says Nørgaard, Schubert lives and dies by listening. That comes with its own meta-challenges. 'When we're playing Schubert, I dream about it,' says Sjölin. 'I think about the themes in the shower. It's constantly with you, and that is hard. I mean, if you just make a ton of decisions about how to play something, then it's easier to go home and leave it all behind – you make dinner and see your kids and everything's fine. But this way, when you are constantly searching, it actually takes its toll.'

Of the four Scandinavians, Nørgaard speaks with the deepest voice – a default sense of authority possibly lined with rawness (he is nursing two sprained ankles when we meet, one leg propped up on a piano stool). Øland seems the most boyish and polite, Sørensen sensible but steely. Sjölin speaks the least, but with the most simmering passion. Like their playing, the clarity of thought and descriptive sensitivity of each musician – the lightly worn intellect – is remarkable. They have the wisdom to know how little PR will count for, in the end.

And they *want* to talk, they want to reveal themselves – apparently as much for their own creative sustenance and introspection as for my tape recorder. I raise the process of preparing a score, but even that seems anathematic to them. 'That process is going on in the concert,' says Nørgaard, bluntly. 'The music is never ready. This idea that you practise in a box and then present a perfect cake for the audience went in the trash can 15 years ago. We start work and at some point we continue that work in front of an audience. And the audience feels it – they feel that we're searching for something rather than hitting markers and colours we've already decided on.' Øland, who has a habit of affixing neat verbal codas on to what colleagues have just said, picks up: 'It's the process that's interesting. And that's what's both super frustrating and really, really wonderful about our craft. We never get to a result.' What you do get more of, says Sjölin, are 'those musical moments that arrive like gifts – that you can't really force, but you always hope will come. Maybe I had a stage in my life when I took this whole existence for granted. Maybe when you're more grateful for what you do, it's easier to receive these gifts, these great moments.' Nørgaard takes up the theme: 'It's not necessarily the summit of a movement. It might just be hitting one chord super nice with the second violin – and nobody in the hall notices, but you're thinking, "Yeah, that felt good."' He refers to Timothy Gallwey's book *The Inner Game of Tennis*, which expands the metaphor of the tennis player who has the creative discipline not to rejoice in overt success, nor to be frustrated by overt failure, but rather observes all with equal openness. It is, says Nørgaard, 'literally easier to nail those hard shifts when you are not constantly evaluating your performance'.

What about their perspective on their own playing style in a broader context: can they recognise it as being 'of its time' – of the 2020s? 'It's a third wave going back to Harnoncourt,' says Nørgaard. 'That revolution in the 1980s didn't really reach the quartet world because the Amadeus Quartet was still teaching. Then Leonidas Kavakos came along with this very pure sound, and we listened a lot to the Artemis Quartet – that regally pure sound, which, yes, is how you might describe us and the Doric and some others playing today. Perhaps when we look back in 20 years we'll say, "OK, it got a bit fast sometimes. It lost a bit of the soul."'

The sound, counters Sjölin, comes less from notions of tonal purity than from personal equality. 'The thing about the Amadeus Quartet is that Norbert Brainin was very much the leader and even sounded a little vulgar compared with the others, who actually didn't vibrate that much. Today, the roles are just evened out more, which gives the impression that we're not vibrating that much; I actually think we do vibrate, it's just not as obvious. And by the way, if you took that idea of a ▹

CAROLINE BITTENCOURT

'I HOPE THAT WHAT WE CAN GIVE THE NEXT GENERATION IS THE CALMNESS TO KNOW THAT YOU CAN BE YOURSELF AND STILL MAKE IT TO CARNEGIE HALL' – *ASBJØRN NØRGAARD, VIOLA*

hierarchy into any human relationship, a friendship or a romantic relationship or whatever, it just wouldn't work.'

Even as teenagers, the debutants of the Young Danish String Quartet were conscious of the weight of that name. The moniker 'Danish Quartet' has passed down generations of players, through the ensemble led by Arne Svendsen (1949–83) and that established in 1985 by their own coach, Tim Frederiksen (whose father, Knud, played in Svendsen's ensemble). No matter how many more years this Danish Quartet keeps playing, a major anniversary can't help but prompt thoughts of impact and legacy. We talk of the new sound ideals propagated by the likes of Patricia Kopatchinskaja. But the group is reluctant to align itself with any parallel shift in quartet playing. 'It's different for soloists,' says Sjölin. 'These people are going to the extremes of their own mind. If four people tried to do that, it would sound constructed.'

'We've never tried to be pioneers, actually,' suggests Øland. 'But perhaps you can be pioneers in different ways. I hope and believe that we have helped develop the idea of what a string quartet can be. There are kids all over the world playing our folk-song arrangements, and on all sorts of instruments.'

We discuss the ensemble's free-form concert season at the academy, Series of Four, and its cross-disciplinary DSQ Festival, just a few weeks away at the time we speak in October 2022. On the menu is Ligeti's *Poème symphonique* (the piece for 100 metronomes) and String Quartet no.2, as well as performances with the songwriter Gabriel Kahane and madrigals by Marenzio from chamber choir Musica Ficta. 'We hope that when people come to our concerts they never quite know what they're going to experience, what story we will tell, what weird constellations we will come up with,' says Øland.

The difference, believes Nørgaard, is that these days a world-leading quartet can do those things. 'We play at Carnegie Hall but we also do folk music, perform with actors and so on. When we started out, the quartets that did that stuff were the ones who sucked, that couldn't deal with the competition. I hope that what we can give the next generation is the calmness to know that you can be yourself and still make it to Carnegie Hall.' In that sense, have they lived up to the Danish Quartet name? 'Sorry,' says Nørgaard, 'but yes: I think we have.' ●

CAROLINE BITTENCOURT

Danish String Quartet

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

October 25, 2022

The String Quartet's Best Hope

With its technique, unity and wide-ranging repertoire, the Danish String Quartet—currently on a U.S. tour—gives new life to a faded form.

By David Mermelstein

The Danish String Quartet, which this season celebrates its 20th anniversary, isn't the sort of group that toots its own horn, if you'll pardon the expression. Beyond their abundant qualities on stage, its members exude typically Scandinavian modesty when not performing. So they're not going to tell you how they are today's best hope for the future of the string quartet—though I will. But you can judge for yourself if you happen to be in San Francisco on Wednesday or New York on Oct. 30, or in any of the seven other stops the quartet is making on its current U.S. tour, in which works by Purcell, Mozart, Schubert, Schumann, Benjamin Britten and the Finnish composer Lotta Wennäkoski will, variously, fill the bills. (In addition, the quartet returns to the U.S. in January and again in April, achieving an unusual, but welcome, omnipresence here.)

If you didn't realize the dire straits in which string quartets now find themselves, you may not be alone. But this season marks the last for the Emerson Quartet, after more than 40 years. And, in even sadder news, North America's finest string quartet, the St. Lawrence, just lost to cancer its first violinist and co-founder, the prodigiously gifted Geoff Nuttall. Others, like the Juilliard and Takács, have changed personnel so frequently as to alter their particular sound. And, yes, plenty more continue to plug away, but

when was the last time any made headlines?

The 20th century was the string quartet's great golden age. During the two previous centuries, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Dvorák had written some of their best music for it. Then Bartók and Schoenberg enriched the options in entirely new ways. None of that would matter if there hadn't been ensembles to breathe vibrant life into those scores, but there were. And in abundance.

Many—the Bush, Pro Arte, Budapest, Amadeus and Guarneri among them—have passed into legend. And as legions of recordings attest, there were others whose excellence rivaled theirs, even if their fame didn't. But that was then. In the 21st century? Not so much. This quartet is the exception.

So what accounts for their anomalous success? Great technique, naturally. Longevity, too—the quartet's configuration has been unchanged since 2008, when a Norwegian cellist, Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, joined the Danish-born Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, Frederik Øland (violins) and Asbjørn Nørgaard (viola) to form the current roster. Even more important is the group's ability to unify in a way that doesn't stifle individual character. It's often said of string quartets that listening to one at its best is like eavesdropping on four intelligent people engaged in a scintillating conversation. And that's been true every time I've heard this ensemble perform over the past five or so years.

Their special qualities surface forcefully in both live performance and on their excellent, smartly programmed recordings—all since 2016 on the prestigious ECM label. But what emerges only in person is something hard to convey in print: their utterly unpretentious bearing, or, more precisely, their ineffable ability to make chamber music—traditionally, classical music's stuffiest genre—seem totally involving and even fun. They achieve this in several ways, though principally by preceding most of the music with informed yet self-deprecating remarks. This is especially helpful for their "concept" programs, namely the Prism and Doppelgänger series—another of their appealing innovations. Then there's the music itself.

The group makes no apologies—nor should it—for performing landmarks of the string-quartet repertory, like Beethoven's Op. 131. But the players not infrequently fill out programs with their own arrangements of folk tunes from their native Scandinavia, as well as, more recently, from the British Isles. A mix of laments, ballads and high-stepping drinking songs, the often-anonymous tunes leaven the high-mindedness of other works on the program without diminishing the integrity of either.

On a fairly typical program I heard in August in Boulder, Colo., Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" Quartet (D. 810), a chamber-music pinnacle, was preceded by Britten's arrangement of Purcell's Chacony in G minor and a clutch of folk material. Perhaps the "more accessible" first half somehow prepared the audience for the demands of the second. Or maybe it was the robust tone and unflagging concentration of these hardworking musicians. Whatever the reason, the effect was mesmerizing—just as another crowd had been similarly transfixed the night before in Vail, when a new piece by Ms. Wennäkoski was juxtaposed with the Schubert on a Doppelgänger program.

Some will insist that chamber music isn't facing quite the reckoning I've suggested. But even if that is true, the manner in which string quartets and similar forms are presented to the public requires significant refreshment. Yet appeals to wider audiences mustn't alienate those already partial to chamber music. The Danish String Quartet appears to have hit on the perfect formula for satisfying both camps. Whether it can be more broadly applied is unclear. But the quartet's success thus far is cause for optimism and, we hope, another 20 years of rigorous, vigorous music making.

Danish String Quartet

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ARTS & CULTURE | VANCOUVER

April 10, 2023

Danish String Quartet's daring Doppelgänger pairs old and new music

Coming to Vancouver, the Grammy-nominated ensemble combines world premieres by contemporary composers with late major chamber works by Schubert

By Gail Johnson

DOPPELGÄNGER IS THE name of an ambitious series by Danish String Quartet, a four-year international commissioning project culminating in 2024 that pairs world premieres by four brilliant contemporary composers—Bent Sørensen, Lotta Wennäkoski, Anna Thorvaldsdottir, and Thomas Adès—with late major chamber works by Schubert. Each season, the Grammy-nominated ensemble performs a world premiere on a program with its doppelgänger: the Schubert quartet or quintet that inspired it. This season's new work, *Rituals* by Iceland's Thorvaldsdottir, has been matched with Schubert's 1824 *String Quartet in A Minor, "Rosamunde"*. Each piece is co-commissioned by the Vancouver Recital Society—which brings the quartet to the Orpheum on April 16—along with Carnegie Hall, Cal Performances, UC Santa Barbara Arts & Lectures, Flagey in Brussels, and Amsterdam's Muziekgebou.

The series is as daring in its scope as it is invigorating not only for the artform but also for audiences and the artists themselves. Formed when the musicians were in their teens after they met at summer camp, the ensemble—which is artist in residence at London's Wigmore Hall—is celebrating its 20th anniversary this season and consists of Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen on violin, Asbjørn Nørgaard on viola, and Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin on cello (or as they call themselves, "three Danes and a Norwegian cellist", making for a truly Scandinavian and "relatively bearded" endeavour). For this year's Doppelgänger, the quartet is performing 28 concerts across North America over the course of three separate tours.

"The Doppelgänger programs are a continuation of many of our earlier programs where we love to mix and match stuff," Danish String Quartet violist Asbjørn Nørgaard shares in an interview with Stir. "We love to curate programs. In Copenhagen we are running our own festival and concert series, and it is a great feeling to put together a program where very old things can walk hand in hand with new things. In music and art there is simply a power in contrast and juxtaposition, and it is a good way to present all that old classical music in a

somewhat fresh way. And we are happy that these amazing living composers wanted to take part in the Doppelgänger programs."

Thorvaldsdóttir is considered one the most original voices in contemporary music, whom *The New York Times* described as having "seemingly boundless textural imagination". The composer in residence with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, at the Suffolk-based Aldeburgh Festival, and at the Boston Symphony Orchestra's Tanglewood Festival of Contemporary Music, Thorvaldsdóttir writes music as "an ecosystem of sounds", as she puts it, often inspired by nature, "where materials continuously grow in and out of each other".

"Anna Thorvaldsdottir's 'Rituals' can maybe be seen as a journey through different types of rituals, or maybe as an entire ritual in itself," Nørgaard says. "A ritual is an action that is repeated. It can be a 'good' ritual, like making a coffee the same way each morning. But rituals can also be dark and unhealthy. Maybe some religious rituals are on the darker end of the spectrum. Anxiety and OCD could also be considered unhealthy rituals, I guess. In Anna's piece, one can feel the repetition all over.

"Some of the rituals and repetitions have a dark, unhealthy character," he explains. "Others are good, comfortable rituals. I feel there is a connection to Schubert's *Rosamunde* quartet that Anna's piece is paired with. In *Rosamunde*, there are as many repetitions as in Anna's piece. It is probably one of the more repetitive pieces in the entire quartet repertoire. It almost finds an expressive power in all these repetitions and where this brings the musicians and the audience in a performance."

Also on the program is Schubert's *String Quartet No. 12 in C minor, D. 703 "Quartettsatz"*, written in 1820, and the 1814 *Gretchen am Spinnrade, Op. 2, D. 118* (lied arranged by the Danish String Quartet).

"We decided quite late to add Schubert's *Quartettsatz* to the program," Nørgaard says. "It is a standalone movement by Schubert, sort of typical Sturm und Drang music with stormy and lyrical sections. We put it in the program as a portal to the second half and also because we felt it deserved a place in the general project as an important part of the late chamber music of Schubert and it is simply a high point of romantical string quartet writing.

"The lied we put at the tail-end of the program is the way we are framing all of the Doppelgänger programs: We open the concerts with a major piece by Schubert, then we have the contemporary 'reaction' and then we end with Schubert again," he adds. "Schubert is more than anything a composer of songs, so it felt natural to give some space to his songs in these programs."

Named *Musical America*'s 2020 Ensemble of the Year and recipients of the 2011 Carl Nielsen Prize, Denmark's highest cultural honour, Danish String Quartet has released multiple recordings, including two discs of traditional Scandinavian folk music, with one more coming out this year. The group performs in sold-out concert halls around the globe, always keeping their "why?" in mind.

"Performing a concert is an extreme thing to do," Nørgaard explains. "We are asking the audience to put their phones away and give us their undivided attention for several hours. Whether we are playing new works or older pieces, we feel we have to earn this attention. A concert is something out of the usual, and it should never feel normal and institutionalized. It is not enough to simply present some old music as if we are showing a piece from a museum. It is not enough to play beautifully and perfectly.

"A string quartet is an extremely powerful medium—there is a reason why all major composers have written masterpieces for these four instruments," he says. "Ideally, a string quartet concert is a meeting between some of the highest

intellectual achievements of humanity and some raw emotions. Our ‘why?’ is that we are actually asking ‘why?’ all the time. We ask ourselves, we ask the classical music industry, and we ask all the music we are performing, old and new, and if we don’t reach good answers, we shouldn’t waste anyone’s time performing. We are on the same side as the audience, even if we are sitting on the stage.”

Danish String Quartet

StarTribune

November 4, 2021

What does Beethoven have to say to us now?

We asked that of the Danish String Quartet, who'll play the complete Beethoven quartets in St. Paul starting Friday.

By Ron Hubbard

In March 2020, the Danish String Quartet was just stepping into the spotlight of classical music stardom, having been named "Ensemble of the Year" by Musical America.

The foursome launched the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth year by performing all 16 of his string quartets at New York City's Lincoln Center. They were slated to repeat the feat in Minnesota that May, but COVID had other ideas.

At last, the quartet arrives this week in St. Paul to perform the complete Beethoven cycle over the course of six concerts in seven days, starting Friday evening, as Schubert Club artists-in-residence.

So why Beethoven and why now? What does a composer who died 194 years ago have to say to us in this age of pandemic, fear, conflict and racial reckoning?

We asked that question of the Danish String Quartet. The four musicians talked about loss, grief, being present and staying curious.Each cited one of the 16 Beethoven quartets that holds particular resonance for them and for our times.

Violinist Frederik Øland:

"My father used to run a small music society in the heart of Copenhagen. As soon as we had risen to a somewhat presentable level, we'd play there every year. In November of 2011, we played one of the late Beethovens, Op. 132. This was one of my father's favorite pieces and, luckily, he liked the way we played it, so much so that he asked us to play it again in November of 2012.

"Afterwards, we went out together and had a wonderful evening with discussions about music, music appreciation, our quartet and the emotional depth of Op. 132. This evening was also the last evening I saw my father awake. He had a stroke the next day, spent a week at the hospital in a coma, after which he passed away.

"Now, whenever I perform it, there is no way I can think of anything else than my father. I feel him when I perform it. Not only in a spiritual way, but also physically. I sense his smell, I feel the way his skin felt when he was in the hospital, I hear his laugh and I see his tears — a rare sight, but there when we performed Op. 132. For many years, I could not play this piece without crying on stage.

"Even without this story, this piece of music is almost too much for anyone to bear. But it is not only sad and dark. It is sadness within the most radiant light. Or beauty within the confines of sorrow. To me, the third movement became like a requiem for my father. I feel in the music how he was lying in the hospital. Alive but unreachable. Somewhere between life and death.

"And while we are mercilessly moving towards the end of the movement, I feel how his body gave up and his soul or spirit lifted ever so slowly. In the end, it leaves and fades in the most painfully beautiful way. My mind tries to follow him, but there is no way I can. We are left alive on Earth with love, gratitude, pain and loss."

Cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin:

"In the original score of the last movement of the Op. 135, the three first notes have the text, 'must it be.' Later, the next theme

has the text, 'it must be.' Quartet players and scholars have wondered about the meaning of this ever since, and probably will for the eternal future. What is the answer? Is there an answer?

"All of Beethoven's quartets are full of question marks and unfinished sentences that he left open for us to dwell on and think about. Which makes his music forever modern, since the inspiration for curiosity can relate to you and your surroundings no matter who, where or when you are."

Violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen:

"Beethoven was not known for being a master of writing captivating melodies the same way as Schubert or Brahms. But one movement where he really struck gold is the third movement of Op. 59, No. 1, a lament for his brother who died when the composer was 12 years old. The music is dark and sorrowful, but also incredibly beautiful. Losing a relative or a close friend is something we can all relate to, and often we can find comfort in music."

Violist Asbjørn Nørgaard:

"To most people, Beethoven is an intense composer. He can create the big, epic moments, he can shake his fist at the sky, he is powerful and deep. And the Op. 131 quartet is a huge, busy quartet. Nonstop music for 40 minutes, big moments, big solos, big emotions. It is a mountain to climb for any string quartet (and audience).

"But, for me, the defining moment of this quartet is actually the moment where everything stops in the sixth movement. The musical train that has been pumping nonstop for a long time hits a portal, and out of the silence comes a simple song. For once, we are not actively playing our instruments, we are just silent and still together. It is a short moment. With the blink of an eye, we return to the hurricane of the seventh movement, music to ride into the abyss.

"To me, this tiny movement has more impact than all the loud and powerful events that surround it. Often, I find that in the moments that really matter, it is not so much which actions we take; more about our presence. Like when it is night, and one of my girls is with a fever, and I have done everything I know and can to help them. There is nothing left to do other than being there, being present and together with them in the fever, so they are not alone."

Los Angeles Times

October 14, 2021

For those needing a U.S. visa, how bad is the backlog? Ask the Danish String Quartet

By Jessica Gelt

The cello was large and curvy. Like a human passenger, it needed its own seat on the airplane. Unlike a human passenger, the cello did not have a passport or visa for international travel. And the cello was not allowed on the plane.

The cello's owner, Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, a member of the Danish String Quartet, remained behind with his instrument while the rest of the group flew from Copenhagen to San Francisco. It would take Sjölin more than six hours and a personal escort through security before he and his cello could get on a flight routed through Chicago to join his friends in California at midnight.

It was the day before the start of a U.S. tour that had been canceled six times because of COVID-19 shutdowns. And the trouble with the cello was just the latest in a string of bureaucratic barriers overseas performers are encountering as they attempt to tour the States.

"This tour almost felt doomed," said violinist Frederik Øland, whose quartet plays Santa Barbara on Thursday, Seattle on Friday and the Broad Stage on Saturday — the Santa Monica venue's return to live, in-person performances after almost two years of pandemic closure.

The Danish String Quartet's difficulties began mounting in June when the group tried to make appointments with the U.S. Embassy in Copenhagen for the interviews needed to obtain their visas. These interviews, said viola player Asbjørn Nørgaard, are extremely straightforward but must be conducted in person. The quartet has toured the U.S. many times and never had trouble obtaining the necessary P1 visas granted to entertainers.

But things have changed during the pandemic.

"There's a huge backlog in the global visa system to get to the U.S., and the next available appointment in Copenhagen wasn't until November," Nørgaard said. The tour was to start in October.

But it was still early summer, and the musicians figured they had time to sort out the visas. The quartet's management team hired an immigration lawyer to speed the process.

"At one point, there was talk about us going to Poland because there were some available interviews. There was also talk about us going to the Dominican Republic and staying one week to get the visa there," Nørgaard said. "We almost gave up, but suddenly

there was an opening in Frankfurt, Germany."

The men ended up taking three different flights to Frankfurt for their appointments — with only a little more than a week to spare before their departure. The men needed to leave their passports in Germany because when the visas were approved, they were to be affixed to the inside pages.

Passports are not required for travel within the European Union, so the musicians could return home to Denmark, but there was another catch: The passports (with visas attached) could be mailed only to an address inside of Germany.

The group ended up having the passports sent to an affiliate of their management's lawyers in Berlin. The last two passports arrived on the afternoon of Oct. 7. A helper flew from Berlin to Copenhagen with all four passports the following morning because there was little faith in a courier service delivering the passports in time for a Saturday morning flight.

"It all worked out in the end so we were quite happy about that," said violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, adding that he hopes the pandemic winds down soon — and with it the related travel woes. "Because we do love traveling in the U.S. We come three or four times a year on a tour, and it feels like our home court."

The Grammy-nominated quartet has already made quite an impression in Southern California. After a 2014 concert in Santa Barbara at which they performed Beethoven's C-Sharp Minor string quartet, Times classical music critic Mark Swed called the players "marvelous" and wrote, "Their command of the quartet's challenging arch-shape formal structure was complete. They could be grounded in their tone or mystical. They allowed time to stand still, and they could assume the pose of excitingly aggressive rockers. They did it all."

Three of the group's four members met as schoolboys at a summer camp for aspiring musicians and have been playing together since. The fourth member, the cellist Sjölin, who is the sole Norwegian in the mix, joined in 2008.

The quartet is known for its flexibility, including a mastery of chamber music by Beethoven and Mozart as well as a firm grasp of folk music.

The touch-and-go journey to be here has made performing all the sweeter, the men said.

"It was incredible sitting on the stage," Øland said of the tour's first stop at UC Berkeley. "Finally being back here after two years is wonderful."

After the Berkeley show, he added, he almost tripped on a microphone cable as he was walking offstage. Nothing will be easy this time around.

Danish String Quartet

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ARTS & CULTURE | VANCOUVER

October 12, 2021

The Danish String Quartet doubles the musical pleasure, pairing Schubert with new companion pieces

Vancouver Recital Society brings back the great Danes, live, with a Doppelgänger project that's earning high praise

By Alexander Varty

FOR INSPIRED musicianship, spectacular sonics, and visionary programming, it would be difficult to top *Prism I*, *Prism II*, and *Prism III*, the most recent recordings from Copenhagen's Danish String Quartet.

The concept behind these three ECM releases is simple: take one Johann Sebastian Bach fugue, meditate on how its light is refracted through the prism of Ludwig van Beethoven's prodigious imagination, and then bring that beam into the near-present with a Beethoven-inspired work by a great modernist composer. The effect is both literally and figuratively enlightening: through these illuminating sequences, listeners can discover historical continuities that cross from century to century, while gaining insight into how a composer's mind can digest and process old music to arrive at something personal and new. That these lessons are delivered with uncommon joie de vivre is merely a bonus—as is the news that there are two more volumes in the series still to come.

But violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, violist Asbjørn Nørgaard, and cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin have further gifts to

bestow. Not content with simply reshaping the past, they're moving into creating the future, with a new commissioning project that will pair four of their favourite living composers with four of Franz Schubert's monumental string quartets. The premieres will be designed to reflect, in some way, the old masterpieces, hence the new project's title: Doppelgänger.

"We've done so much Beethoven over the last many years, with the Prism project and also with the Beethoven year last year, that we were sort of looking for some of this other major repertoire that you can do as a string quartet," Nørgaard explains, in a phone call from a San Francisco hotel. "We've been interested in the Schubert quartets for a while, the late Schuberts. And then we were quite happy with the way the Prism project worked out, so we wanted to do something a little bit like that, where we would put contrasting works next to each other.

"We thought it would be an interesting thing to also commission some more music," the violist continues. "We've done commissions before, but not as many as we maybe wanted to. So we thought it would be a nice framework where we could have those classical masterpieces sort of live side-by-side with the commissioning endeavour. We're sort of covering a lot of bases at once, you might say, but also making the Schubert quartets more accessible to some people, and maybe also making the commissions more attractive to promoters."

The plan appears to be working. Promoters worldwide, including our own Vancouver Recital Society, have signed up to present the full four-concert cycle, and advance reports are more than promising.

"Rich and elegant," the *San Francisco Chronicle*'s Joshua Kosman said of the Danish String Quartet's October 11 concert in Berkeley, describing the musicians' approach to Schubert's *String Quartet No. 15 in G major* as "a beautiful rendition that encompassed both the music's serenity and anxieties". Their countryman Bent Sørensen's accompanying *Doppelgänger*, in contrast, felt "sunnier", but "sometimes a haunted house feels all the more arresting for having a light shine upon its interior."

We'll hear the same program at the Orpheum this Sunday (October 17); future Doppelgänger installments will feature composers Lotta Wennäkoski, Anna Thorvaldsdottir, and Thomas Adès responding to three different Schubert masterworks.

"We didn't want to give the composers too much of a feeling that they *had* to do anything," Nørgaard says of the commissioning project. "They sort of accepted the premise that their piece would be played side-by-side with a specific Schubert quartet. But I don't know if they will quote the Schubert, if they will write something that's similar to Schubert, something that's completely different to the Schubert....It can be quite a personal thing, and they are the creators of the art. We just wanted to create a framework, and we are also curious to see how they will respond to that."

Nørgaard reports that Sørensen's *Doppelgänger*—the first of the four commissions they've received—makes specific musical allusions to the *String Quartet No. 15 in G major*, but the relationship between the two pieces is perhaps more impressionistic than quote-based.

"These late Schubert quartets, they are huge pieces of music," he notes. "They're long, and all of them have in common this feeling of timelessness. For instance, in the *G Major Quartet* that we'll do in Vancouver, it's very long, and often it's very repetitive. When you perform it or you listen to it, you're almost sucked into a sort of meditation on music. The same melody comes 20 times in a row in very similar ways, and you sort of lose your sense of time perception. And I think this is the feeling that Bent has been trying to reach in his quartet as well. He's playing around with the feeling of changing time all the time;

there's almost never two bars in a row that have the same time [signature]. It's always changing; it feels like it's always sort of slowing down, most of the piece, and then at the very end it speeds up and brings us back into reality.

"So I think he's responding [to Schubert] in these ways: some specific quotes, something in the overall language, but maybe mostly in the feeling that we and the audience are going together into sort of a vacuum where the regular time doesn't exist any more. That's something that's quite unique to the late Schubert, and that Bent maybe is also reaching for in his own quartet."

A voyage out of time and into a sunny but slippery musical atmosphere? After the year-and-a-half that we've all shared, that sounds like a most enticing prospect.

Danish String Quartet

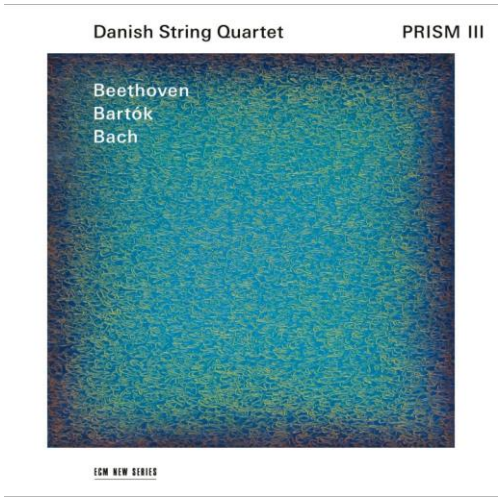
The New York Times

April 1, 2021

5 Classical Albums to Hear Right Now

'Prism III'

Danish String Quartet (ECM)



I had thought that after a year of concentrated Beethoven celebration, I was in need of a break. Then came the Danish String Quartet's latest album — a reminder, like any great Beethoven performance, that there is still so much to learn from and listen for in this music.

"Prism III" is the third installment in what this quartet describes as a beam of music through a prism, tracing connections across centuries by juxtaposing Bach fugues, late Beethoven and works of the 20th century. Minor keys color this album with a darker beauty than its predecessors, the tone set by the slow, mournful fugue at the start of Beethoven's Opus 131. This recording isn't eager to please. For all the mood swings of the work's seven uninterrupted movements, the Danes are judicious about the emotions. The stark fugue thus aches more naturally than in other readings; pizzicatos, without added sweetness, ring with irony.

Bartok's First Quartet begins like a continuation of the Beethoven, yet by its finale brings the genre firmly into the 20th century. The two previous "Prism" albums opened with Bach, but this one closes with the Fugue in C-sharp minor (BWV 849), from Book I of "The Well-Tempered Clavier." The group treats it as a searching, sorrowful colloquy, both an echo and an ancestor of the Beethoven and Bartok, ending with an exhalation of harmonious resolution. JOSHUA BARONE

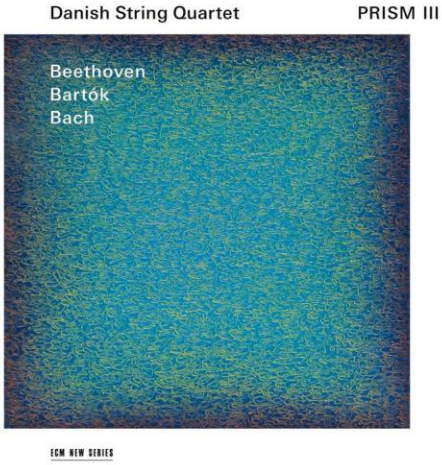
Danish String Quartet

GRAMOPHONE

THE WORLD'S BEST CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEWS

March 12, 2021

This Week's Essential New Albums



The Danish String Quartet's 'Prism' series has juxtaposed Beethoven's quartets with music by other composers and has been extremely well-received by our critics.
Volume 1 paired Beethoven's Twelfth with Shostakovich's Fifteenth, plus an extract from Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* an concluding his review Richard Bratby wrote: 'These aren't warm interpretations; they repel as readily as they attract. But they're thought-provoking, and often startlingly beautiful.' (Read the review in the Reviews Database)
Volume 2 featured Beethoven's Thirteenth Quartet and Schnittke's Third and this Third Volume includes Beethoven's Fourteenth Quartet and Bartók's First Quartet.

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TheDanishStringQuartet

The New York Times

December 2, 2020

Best Classical Music of 2020

A host of livestreamed concerts, the sounds of silence,
time-hopping quartets and at-home divas were among the highlights.

2. Danish String Quartet
Also in February, the Danish String Quartet performed Beethoven's 16 quartets in six concerts over 12 days at Alice Tully Hall, presented by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Maybe classical music is too obsessed with greatness and the canonical composers. Still, this series offered artists from a new generation in fresh, insightful and exciting accounts of seminal pieces that drew capacity audiences and showed why this music matters so much.

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Danish String Quartet

PLAYBILL®

February 4, 2020

Danish String Quartet Will Perform Complete Cycle of Beethoven String Quartets

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center hosts the ensemble, whose concerts run February 7–18.

By Tim Munro

David Finckel, co-artistic director of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, noticed their style first. Four men, walking onto the stage of CMS's Rose Studio in 2012, had a wildness about them. "They looked like Scandinavian cowboys," Finckel recalls. These "cowboys" were the Danish String Quartet (DSQ), auditioning for a place in CMS's young artist program (now called The Bowers Program). Soon it became clear that the players offered more than just style. As they sank into a Beethoven slow movement, "everyone on the jury put their pencils down," Finckel says, "and just listened. The quartet brought a love and reverence and magic and selfless dedication—it was so powerful and so intense, you stopped judging and gave yourself over."

The DSQ have since become regulars on the CMS stage. From February 7–18, 2020 they return for perhaps their greatest challenge: performing a complete cycle of Beethoven's string quartets over six concerts. The DSQ has performed the cycle once before, as part of their chamber music festival in Denmark. Frederik Øland, one of the quartet's violinists, says they anticipated many challenges. He knew the group would experience physical fatigue. He

knew there would be anxieties. “This thought would pop into my head: What if I turn the page and I have not looked at the page?” he admits. “It would have been impossible—but those thoughts creep into your mind.”

What Øland did not expect was how emotionally tough the experience would be. Speaking with Playbill over Skype on the afternoon of a concert day in Copenhagen, he seems almost out of breath as he recalls post-cycle fatigue. “Afterward I was totally drained,” he remembers. “I felt hypersensitive. We have a saying in Danish: You feel like your ‘skin is thin.’ With Beethoven, you can hold back physically, but emotionally you have to do everything one hundred percent.”

Finckel agrees: “Performing Beethoven’s quartet cycle is a marathon.” Finckel, who played in the cycle many times as a member of the Emerson String Quartet, describes a regimen that might be familiar to athletes. Any carefully structured preparation must combine personal practice and group rehearsal with the need to stay in good physical and mental condition. Then, once performances begin, he says, “you have to pace yourselves: rehearse, practice, sleep—in proportional amounts.”

The cycle “runs through Beethoven’s life,” Finckel explains. These sixteen works “cover the entire cycle of Beethoven’s creative thinking. They span the finest of his early period music, through this immense, heroic period and a couple of experimental quartets, to these five incredible late quartets.” Audiences and performers, Finckel continues, “are living through these extraordinary 57 years with this guy, who had such challenges, such highs and lows. It’s like getting on a train and riding with someone to their final destination.” He adds with a laugh: “And you can’t get off the train!”

For Øland, working through the cycle brought him closer to Beethoven the man. “We often talk about how this music is like something that dropped down from heaven,” the violinist observes. “But the music actually feels so human.” Shifts in Beethoven’s music, he says, capture the complexity and unpredictability of life. For example, he points to the transition from the slow Cavatina movement of the Op. 130 quartet into the movement known as the Grosse Fuge. “You go from something that destroys you with its beauty into something chaotic, in pain,” Øland says. Playing this music, he adds, is like looking in a mirror. “You get all the emotions reflected back at you and learn so much about yourself. It’s a human canvas.” Having performed the cycle, Øland thinks of Beethoven not as a musical god, “but as a very human being.”

“Beethoven struggled,” Finckel points out. “He struggled socially, he never had a permanent girlfriend or family, he struggled with his sister-in-law and his nephew. He struggled in polite company, and he struggled with his health.” The trials and obstacles that faced Beethoven throughout his life taught Finckel the key to being a musician. “Many young musicians—as I once was!—are looking for ways, technically, to make things easier,” he says. “To play more effortlessly, to have everything roll off the tip of their tongues.” With Beethoven, he learned that “the most satisfying solution to every problem is not necessarily the easy way out. The essence of the music lies in that striving and that struggle.”

Finckel compares the experience to climbing a mountain. “The summit is shrouded in mystery; you never reach it. But it’s not about reaching the top. It’s about what you do along the way. If you feel that you got to the top, you are no longer looking for everything, you become a non-artist.” My Skype connection becomes shaky. But Finckel is undeterred; nothing will dampen his

enthusiasm for Beethoven. As our conversation winds down, he asks if I have everything I need. “I could talk about Beethoven quartets all day,” he admits. Then, a bulb lights up. A final thought comes to Finckel. “This cycle is like meeting sixteen very different people,” he says. “Each is such a wonderful character.”

Øland thinks fast and talks fast. It is easy to imagine him onstage with his colleagues, his mind buzzing with intensity and engagement. Before I leave him to prepare for his concert, I ask him what he thinks it’s like to be in the audience for the cycle. “It’s not something you experience every day,” Øland muses. “You might spend more time in the hall than in your home,” he says with a laugh. When they performed the cycle in Denmark, the quartet members carefully planned the concertgoer experience. They bought the onstage lighting and built the bar themselves. “It creates a bond between everyone—audience and quartet,” Øland says. “You’ve shared a big experience with a lot of people, and that’s a wonderful feeling.”

Danish String Quartet

New York Vulture

February 13, 2020

Why I'd Rather Hear the Danish String Quartet Than Any Other Foursome

By Justin Davidson

Midway along the Danish String Quartet's journey through Beethoven's life, the players led the audience into a dark wood. The ninth quartet (Op. 59, No. 3) opens in dissonant despair, each crushing chord dropping inexorably onto the next. Then, in a classic feint, the apparently endless slough suddenly opens into a bright C major clearing. When the Danes pivoted from gorgeous misery to a blithe dance, you could practically hear the audience in Alice Tully Hall gasp in relief. The players, who look like lanky Vikings, all long limbs and blond hair, delivered each phrase as an utterance that had just sprung to mind. They seemed genuinely curious to know what came next, to keep up with the composer's mercurial thoughts.

Performing the complete Beethoven quartets in 11 days is a maven's mountain. This series, presented by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, is packed with listeners who can compare and contrast these performances with those of the Juilliard, Tokyo, Berg, and Emerson Quartets. The Danes seemed unfazed by all the reverence.

The group is performing the quartets in the order they were written, tracing a fitful arc from upstart to master. In the first concert, they brought out an aspect of Beethoven that often gets short shrift: his charm. He was a phenomenal pianist and an experienced composer in the late 1790s, when he wrote his first quartets, Op. 18, but he was also a young man in his twenties, eager to seduce patrons and the amateur string players he depended on to buy his published scores.

The genre had a mild history before Beethoven, rooted in background music. A string quartet should "not disturb a wine-drinking emperor too much," as the group put it in a program note. But even in these first pieces, Beethoven is already willing to disturb the digestion. The very first quartet he published (though not the first he wrote), The F Major quartet, Op. 18, No. 1, begins with

a Zorro-like gesture: all four instruments fuse on a long F lunge, followed by a staccato flourish, like a foil writing a Z in the air. The Danes made that gesture more mischievous than menacing, the calling card of a witty composer brandishing his virtuosity. Somehow, they made it possible to experience this young man's music afresh, to block out the Olympian figure Beethoven became and unhear the lightning storms that snap through his later music.

A few days later, the ensemble reached 1806, when Beethoven published his "Razumovsky" quartets, Op. 69. He had reached his self-mythologizing years, secure in the knowledge that whatever insanity he could dream up could be packed into a traditional genre and made to work. There are intimations of danger in these works, a kind of manic cackle that will eventually turn explosive and bleak. But even here, the Danes remembered that what they do for a living is "play."

I've been following this extraordinary group for years, but I really understood their mojo only after I met them all in their basement studio at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen. The group's three Danish players — violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard — first got together as teenagers at the Askov Folk High School in Jutland. (The fourth, cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, grew up in Norway.) Founded in the 19th century to educate farmers during the enforced idleness of winter, these institutions have evolved into a network of specialized but laid-back summer programs.

"You don't go there to achieve, but to develop for the sake of developing. It's more of a society of amateur musicians," says Øland. Nørgaard chimes in: "You'd be having breakfast, and someone would tap you on the shoulder and say, *Can you come and play eight or ten string quartets with us?"* We were always the last guys standing."

Those late-night summer sight-reading sessions spilled over into weekends during the school year, and companionship matured into professionalism. Chamber music came naturally to hotshot musicians accustomed to channeling ambitions into a collective endeavor. Sørensen mentions the Law of Jante, a pan-Scandinavian prohibition against sticking out.

"Maybe that's why Denmark doesn't have so many concerto soloists," he says. "In an orchestra it's always like: *You be the concertmaster. No,* you *be the concertmaster*," Nørgaard jokes.

The players are analytical about their Danishness, which, they feel, has freed them from the weight of, say, Russian, Hungarian, or Viennese performing legacies. ("Norway has an even weaker musical culture, made up mostly of people who went abroad and brought back different traditions," Sjölin says.) At one point, they tried on one of those heavy mantles, attaching themselves to the Russian violinist Nikolai Znajder. He inculcated in them an obsessional attitude towards detail, an interpretive rigor expressed by a penciled annotation on every note.

That Jedi-like training ran headlong into their irreverence. "Denmark is a flat country, literally and also in our attitude towards authority," Nørgaard says. "That also applies to how you treat the classics. You have the right to question the composers. After all, they were just guys who wrote some good music." Adds Sørensen,"We're basically a cover band."

It's an attitude that translates directly into their music-making. For a dozen years, the quartet has organized its own October festival in a tiny hall in Copenhagen. For a long time, they did everything themselves: distributed free tickets, designed posters, trolled antique shops for stage props, set up chairs, and even poured the beer. The pieces of a cardboard-and-plywood bar they built for the occasion sit jammed into a corner of their studio. In recent years, they roped in guest performers and launched a four-concert series in a bigger hall, with programs that are more eclectic than cogent. "We grew up post-vinyl, so we don't always think a

program has to be like an album. We do Spotify concerts," Nørgaard says.

Their actual albums, on the other hand, are distinctly albumlike. Last fall, they released the second volume of their projected five-disc Prism series, which matches music by Bach and Beethoven with a 20th-century composer (first Shostakovich, then Schnittke). After long immersion in Denmark's national composer Carl Nielsen, the quartet discovered the country's hymns and dance tunes, which eventually flowered into two ravishing albums of Nordic melodies: *Wood Works* and *Last Leaf*.

If I linger on their background, it's because that mixture of casualness and control comes out when they perform; it makes them the quartet I would most want to hear play just about anything. Chords all have a diamond edge, tunes pour like molten silver, staccato passages skip like stones across a lake. But too often, musicians who command that level of technical precision bundle it with a premeditated interpretation, in which every phrase is weighed, chiseled, and inserted in its proper slot. Maybe that's how the Danes work too, but the effect is convincingly spontaneous. They understand the explosive power of an impromptu nuance, the way a hairsbreadth rubato can make the clouds part.

The midpoint concert ended with the final fugue of the C Major quartet (Op. 59, No. 3), executed at fighter jet speeds with an astounding mixture of nonchalance and intensity. The separate strands unspooled, overlapped, and intertwined, the notes slipping through their fingers like tiny knots, so that it seemed like the whole thing would have to end in an exhilarating tangle on the floor. When they were done, the audience jumped with the thrill of having witnessed such a thing. And so the group sat down and played the movement again as an encore, as if to say: *We could do this all night. We're still the last guys standing*.

Danish String Quartet

musical america WORLDWIDE

October 14, 2019

Ensemble of the Year: Danish String Quartet

They bonded around a football stuck in a tree. "It was our first challenge as a string quartet," quips DSQ violist Asbjørn Nørgaard. Several years and first prizes later, the foursome faces a different challenge: a complete Beethoven cycle and recordings of the late quartets for ECM.

By Clive Paget

These days there is no shortage of bright, shiny young string quartets nipping at the heels of the masters, but there's plenty about the three Danes and one Norwegian who make up the Danish String Quartet to make them stand out from the pack.

Beards and beer

Critical plaudits tend to focus on the sheer excitement of a DSQ performance with "thrilling," "exhilarating," and "rockstar vibe" listed alongside references to pinpoint intonation and immaculate blend. Of course, it helps that despite being only in their mid-30s, three of them—violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard (Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin came onboard in 2008)—have been making music together for over 20 years (go on, do the math). There's also something about their

programming that brilliantly manages to combine the old with the new; the conventional with the unconventional. And then there's the folk music. But despite the hipster beards and the beer—both of which inevitably get a mention in any profile of the group—the DSQ vibe is best summed up by the phrase "expect the unexpected."

The three Danes first met at a summer camp for amateur musicians. Among the youngest in a mix of adults and children, they clicked at once. "We thought we sounded pretty good," admits Sørenson, describing how they would devour piles of sheet music culled from the camp library. "We were very confidant at that time," he adds with a laugh.

"Actually, we initially bonded more around a football," counters Nørgaard. "That year, Frederik brought a new, shiny football and it immediately got stuck in a tree. Being a better violinist than a footballer, it became a big project to get it down. It was our first challenge as a string quartet." Their teenage talents were nurtured back in Copenhagen by the Royal Danish Academy of Music's Tim Frederiksen who, according to Sørenson, invested "tons of hours and days and weeks" in coaching them. At the Academy, they found themselves concertizing as a quartet from the start, quickly winning the admiration of their peers.

The first pieces they studied were Haydn's "Emperor" and Shostakovich's Eighth. "Just play Haydn, that's the best practice you can do," Frederiksen told them, recommending Shostakovich as a counterweight to stimulate other parts of the brain.

A break came early—first prize in the 2004 Danish Radio Chamber Music Competition. Soon after, they triumphed at the 2009 London International String Quartet Competition, and in 2011 they were awarded the Carl Nielsen Prize, Denmark's most prestigious cultural honor. The following year they auditioned successfully for the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

Butterfly effects and success

"These established us nationally and internationally," says Nørgaard, "but the truth of the matter is that there is a huge iceberg below the surface. Tiny movements, decisions, 'wins,' helping hands, and lucky moments. Lots of butterfly effects that brought us to where we are today."

"We were very young and quite naïve, and at times that was actually a good thing for us," explains Øland. "We were always the underdogs in competitions and that suited us very well. But we have families now, so we have less time and we have to know our stuff before we get together. I guess it went from something that was very, very free spirited to something more professional."

To return to the group's certain something, their recorded catalogue is as good a place as any to discover their special qualities. Take their 2007 traversal of the six Nielsen string quartets—the first time I heard them—on the Danish Da Capo label. There's the commitment to Scandinavian repertoire, but also a freshness to the playing. You sense almost a determination not to bend under the weight of tradition. That originality led ECM to their door in 2017. Their debut—a coruscating mix of early works by Thomas Adès, Per Nørgard, and Hans Abrahamsen—is not exactly the standard fare with which a label launches a new act.

"We are obsessed with programming," says Nørgaard. "We believe a great program is carefully curated, just like in an art museum. No one would accept an exhibition at MoMA if the curator just threw up random paintings."

And then there's the folk music, a habit picked up as early as 2004 when they played a tiny Swedish folk chorale in a competition. "We started doing arrangements ourselves and incorporating them into concerts as encores," explains Sørenson. "It seemed these were the pieces people recalled—I mean, you pour out your heart in a Beethoven quartet and then you play

one little folk tune and that's what people remember!"

Labels embraced the idea with *Wood Works* (Da Capo, 2014) and *Last Leaf* (ECM, 2017), both winning acclaim.

A complete Beethoven cycle will be a special focus for 2020, the composer's 250th year, one that will see them crisscross the U.S. as part of three different tours. He is also the focus of their five-disc "Prism Project" for ECM, the first fruits of which garnered them a 2018 Grammy nomination. Each disc mixes a Beethoven late quartet with a 20th-century work and an arrangement of a Bach fugue. And if you assume that four Scandinavian lads will deliver testosterone-fueled Beethoven, think again—their interpretations are among the most lyrical I know.

"Prism is not just pieces on a CD. The works are related to each other," explains Øland. "It makes the music very human. It's not just masterpieces that have fallen down from the sky, it's people who have inspired each other—even stolen from each other—and made them their own."

Patient families and long relationships

These days, with two of the quartet members now married and three with children, touring requires more careful planning. "We have very patient wives and girlfriends," laughs Sørenson. But the ties that bind are manifold: "The friendship remains the same," says Øland. "It's been a long relationship—I mean, it's longer than any of us have been in any personal relationships. We know each other so well that we react without even looking at each other."

As for the beer: "It's magical after a concert," Sjölin declares with relish. And the beards? "I guess it started with just not shaving," he jokes. "I think we would look pretty much the same no matter what business we were in, but we do appreciate a good, full-grown Canadian scarf!"

Asked to define their own strengths, they cite humor and normality. "We have always laughed a lot and never taken anything particularly seriously," explains Nørgaard. "This can be helpful in a classical-music world that is sometimes too serious for its own good. We have always been 'normal' Danish boys with the quartet somewhere in the background. It had to fit into our lives and minds; we didn't try to squeeze ourselves into a conception of what a string quartet is and should be."

As recipes for success go, that one sounds simultaneously simple and deep. Just like the DSQ.

Danish String Quartet

GRAMMY AWARDS

2019 Grammy Awards Nominations

CLASSICAL

78. Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble Performance
For new recordings of works with chamber or small ensemble (twenty-four or fewer members, not including the conductor). One Award to the ensemble and one Award to the conductor, if applicable.

BEETHOVEN, SHOSTAKOVICH & BACH
The Danish String Quartet

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TheDanishStringQuartet

The Boston Globe

December 13, 2019

Zoe Madonna and Jeremy Eichler's Top 10 classical albums of 2019

By Jeremy Eichler

"PRISM II" Danish String Quartet
As the Beethoven year approaches, prepare for many takes on the otherworldly late string quartets. Yet few will be as rewardingly conceptualized as the Danish String Quartet's ongoing "Prisms" series pairing one late quartet (here Op. 130, with the "Grosse Fuge") with a forebear by Bach (the B-minor Fugue from the first book of "The Well-Tempered Clavier") and a spiritual descendant (Alfred Schnittke's time-warping Third Quartet). The playing is deeply committed from first note to last.

TheDanishStringQuartet

WQXR 105.9 fm wqxr.org

December 17, 2019

The Best Classical Recordings of 2019

A decade filled with fabulous new releases ends with a bang.

By Zev Kane

As a decade that has brought its fair share of ups and downs comes to a close, it's hard to be anything but amazed by one enormous plus: the sheer volume of exceptional new classical recordings that hit the shelves in the 2010s. The last year has been a fitting culmination, chock-full of brilliant reinterpretations of old favorites and bold ventures into new musical frontiers. Here are our favorites of 2019.

Danish String Quartet

The Danish String Quartet burnishes its reputation as one of the world's finest with the extraordinary second installment of their *Prism* series on ECM, which ingeniously couples Beethoven's late Quartets with some of the 20th-century string quartets (in this case, Schnittke's radical Third) they inspired.

TheDanishStringQuartet

THE NEW YORKER

December 14, 2019

Notable Performances of 2019 and of the Decade

By Alex Ross

Notable performances of 2019
The Danish String Quartet in Berkeley, November 10th

Notable recordings of 2019
"Prism II": Bach, Fugue in B Minor, Beethoven, Quartet Opus 130; Schnittke, Third Quartet; Danish String Quartet (ECM)

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THE NEW YORKER

November 25, 2019

The Pristine Empire of ECM Records

On its fiftieth anniversary, the revered jazz and classical label launches a major Beethoven cycle with the Danish String Quartet.

By Alex Ross

The Danes bring tonal heft and rhythmic vigor to late Beethoven.

The German record label Edition of Contemporary Music, or ECM, which recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, first made its name with elegant, atmospheric jazz albums that turned away from the melee of the post-bop avant-garde. Its most famous product, from 1974, was Keith Jarrett's "The Köln Concert," which, to its creator's chagrin, became a mellow soundtrack to innumerable make-out sessions and coffeehouse transactions. ECM also established itself as a purveyor of classical minimalism, with best-selling disks devoted to Steve Reich and Arvo Pärt. The label's austere design aesthetic—block letters, black-and-white photography, sparse notes—

was consistent to the point of self-parody. Circa 1999, no sophisticated stereo stand was complete without an ECM CD showing, say, a picture of a collapsed stone wall.

Stock images aside, ECM is one of the greatest labels in the history of recording. Manfred Eicher, who founded ECM and remains its sole proprietor, has forged a syncretic vision in which jazz and classical traditions intelligently intermingle. ECM's catalogue of some sixteen hundred albums contains abrasive sounds as well as soothing ones, clouds of dissonance alongside shimmering triads. All benefit from a crisply reverberant acoustic in which an instrument's timbre is nearly as important as the music played on it. Simply put, Eicher's releases tend to sound better than other people's. Some of ECM's best disks were made in league with the Norwegian recording engineer Jan Erik Kongshaug, who died earlier this month.

Just as important is Eicher's knack for sustaining long-term relationships with artists. In the jazz world, to record for ECM was to enter a community of the elect, bridging gaps between freewheeling European sophisticates and veteran American progressives. At the beginning of November, Jazz at Lincoln Center hosted a celebration of ECM, bringing in a remarkable parade of notables. Jack DeJohnette and Wadada Leo Smith, elder statesmen from the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, joined such eclectic younger stars as Vijay Iyer, Ethan Iverson, and Craig Taborn. Indeed, too much talent was crowded into one evening. When the unclassifiable Meredith Monk came onstage, to perform "Gotham Lullaby," from her epochal 1981 record, "Dolmen Music," I wanted her to keep going indefinitely.

Eicher's achievement in the classical sphere has equal weight. When, in 1984, he began championing the music of Pärt, he also launched a multi-decade partnership with the Latvian violinist Gidon Kremer, who went on to explore the haunted worlds of Mieczysław Weinberg, Sofia Gubaidulina, and Giya Kancheli. In time, ECM's house artists set down landmarks not only in new music but also in the core repertory. If I were naming my favorite albums of Bach's solo-string music, I might begin with Kremer's 2005 account of the sonatas and partitas. I then would have to choose between Thomas Demenga's traversal of the cello suites and Kim Kashkashian's rendition of them on viola. András Schiff has recorded revelatory Schubert on the fortepiano; Carolin Widmann and Dénes Várjon made a ferociously potent disk of the Schumann violin sonatas.

As the decades have gone by, the question of an "ECM aesthetic" has receded. What matters most is Eicher's relentless commitment to fostering artists he admires. His monumental documentation of Monk's career may prove to be his proudest legacy. Like the best book editors, theatre directors, and gallery curators, he offers talented people both a stable foundation and a space for independent expression. In a recent interview with *Downbeat*, Eicher reiterated his simple, deep philosophy: "It is all about curiosity. It began that way and I am still pursuing that. I am always searching for new sounds."

At first glance, the four young Scandinavians who form the Danish String Quartet—Frederik Øland, Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, and Asbjørn Nørgaard—seem to be unlikely additions to ECM's monastic lineup. They are an informal, shaggy-haired lot, resembling an indie-rock band more than a chamber group. During a recent West Coast tour, they took time off to attend a football game at the University of California, Berkeley. In an introductory note for their ECM project "Prism," which is centered on Beethoven's late quartets, they describe the works in question as "mind-blowing." They fall into fluent ECM-speak, though, when they offer the image of "a beam of music . . . split through Beethoven's prism."

The Danes are, in fact, musicians of impeccable refinement, and the first two "Prism" releases suggest a major cycle in

the making. Each disk sets Beethoven alongside a later composer: "Prism I" pairs the Opus 127 Quartet with Shostakovich's spectral Fifteenth Quartet; "Prism II" places Opus 130 next to Alfred Schnittke's fraught Third Quartet. There is nothing novel in pointing out the visionary quality of late Beethoven. Yet the Danes complicate the narrative by including, at the start of each installment, an arrangement of a fugue by Bach, thereby emphasizing not only Beethoven's premonitions of the future but also his consciousness of the past. Prior ECM releases might have inspired the format: Demenga has linked Bach to contemporary composers, and Kashkashian has blended Schumann with György Kurtág.

Not unexpectedly, the members of the Danish Quartet bring tonal heft and rhythmic vigor to the proceedings. Their Beethoven is no cosmic enigma: you register the physicality of his stomping ostinatos, the off-kilter drive of his dance movements, the playful abruptness of his stylistic transitions. Beethoven practiced polystylism long before Schnittke employed that term: the late quartets juxtapose Bachian counterpoint with Rossinian frivolity. Conventional wisdom holds that players must have decades of experience to do this music justice, but younger ensembles often thrive on its kaleidoscopic, dial-spinning nature.

At the same time, the Danes have no trouble stepping outside worldly realms and into zones of rapt contemplation. The Adagio of Opus 127 is taken at a riskily slow tempo, yet it unfolds in long-breathed lyric arcs. The Cavatina of Opus 130 is steeped in unaffected Old World style, with throaty portamento slides from note to note. The wrenching section marked "*beklemmt*"—oppressed, anguished—curls inward toward silence, with bows brushing on the strings in whispered gasps. The great hymnal chords that underpin these slow movements are tuned with extraordinary care, delivering a chiaroscuro of resonance.

Earlier this month, the Danes presented a spellbinding live version of "Prism II" at Cal Performances, in Berkeley. They began with Bach's Fugue in B Minor, from the first book of the "Well-Tempered Clavier." Beethoven may well have had Bach's fugue subject in mind when he wrote the Grosse Fuge, the original finale of Opus 130. Schnittke, in turn, weaves that theme into his quartet. The Danes, playing with nerve-fraying intensity, created the impression of a super-quartet spanning centuries. In February, they will perform Beethoven's entire quartet cycle at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Those concerts will be worth hearing, though the "Prism" project would have been more welcome.

How long can ECM go on making records of this calibre? Eicher is seventy-six, and he is still involved in every aspect of his business. His imprimatur retains its power: the only biographical text on the home page of the Danish Quartet's Web site is "ECM Recording Artists." Although producers of Eicher's discernment are rare, a successor might be found. The bigger question is whether record companies remain viable economic enterprises in the age of streaming, which has reduced royalties to a pittance. Consumers show more fealty to apps and media conglomerates than to labels and artists. I'd recommend one of the Danish Quartet's disks for holiday shopping, but the days of giving music as a gift seem to be drawing to a close.

September 24, 2019

TURNING THE PRISM: A REVIEW AND INTERVIEW WITH THE DANISH STRING QUARTET

By Tyan Grillo

Since making their ECM New Series debut with a program of works by Thomas Adès, Per Nørgård, and Hans Abrahamsen, the young musicians known collectively as the Danish String Quartet have secured a most suitable recording home in the label's ever-growing annals. Having explored unfamiliar territory as intimately as breathing, they now approach familiar repertoire as distantly as foreign travel. This is, perhaps, something of the meaning behind their *PRISM* series, which pairs Ludwig van Beethoven's late quartets with music of Johann Sebastian Bach and, between them, a modern work that ties the two together. When I caught up with the quartet via email, violist Asbjørn Nørgaard had the following to say about the title of this personal traversal:

"Just as a prism breaks light into different colors, we pass a linear beam of light from Bach to Beethoven. The original beam—in this case, Bach—already contains all the colors and directions of the future. In our interpretation, the late Beethoven quartets, typically considered a point of arrival, function as a prism, a pathway into something else. This puts all of the music into a very unusual perspective: Bach is the oldest, but already contains the future. Beethoven isn't the end of a road. And the modern pieces are created from the oldest mold imaginable."

I asked Nørgaard to expand on how Beethoven and Bach came to be the frame around these roving images:

"A while ago we found ourselves slightly bored with much of the classical programming (including our own). Too much randomness, too little connection. If art museums were curated like classical concerts used to be, no one would bother going. Then back in 2012 we had a collective 'aha' moment when Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic performed in Copenhagen. They started out with Ligeti's *Atmosphères* and continued with Wagner's Prelude to *Lohengrin*. By connecting these masterworks, he created a completely new framing but with elegance and highest respect. A small trick, but a brilliant way to serve this great old wine in a beautiful new glass. This idea made it into our five-album *PRISM* project. The specific connection to Bach came after reading *Beethoven: The Music and the Life*, in which Lewis Lockwood shows a connection between Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* late Beethoven."

Such tandem dynamics of parallelism and interweaving, of distance and proximity, are particularly evident in the first of the series.

PRISM I (ECM New Series 2561)
Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen violin
Frederik Øland violin
Asbjørn Nørgaard viola
Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin violoncello
Recorded November 2016, Reitstadel Neumarkt
Engineer: Markus Heiland
Produced by Manfred Eicher
Release date: September 21, 2018

Bach's Fugue in E-flat major from Book II of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, as arranged by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, is the opening bookend of this installment, and by suggestion of its resonance sets the parameters, pours the concrete, and delineates the land for purposes of construction. And what a mighty structure we find built on this foundation in the String Quartet No. 15 in E-flat minor of Dmitri Shostakovich. A haunting piece in six movements, its opening Elegy, at 13 minutes in length, takes clear inspiration from Beethoven, and with it starts on a journey through some of mortality's darkest channels, as Shostakovich crafts the quartet's existence as a body of organs.

The Serenade that follows has rarely sounded so tactile, and finds itself rendered as a dance of understated capture. The DSQ seems to feel so much about what Shostakovich meant to convey, and by that communication flips details inside out. The sonorities of the Nocturne are of especially brilliant subtlety. Muted strings unmute the soul. After a harrowing Funeral March, they conclude with a dynamic Epilogue, whispering a farewell in E-flat minor before its major counterpart is leaked by Beethoven's String Quartet No. 12 in E-flat major.

In his liner note for the album, Nørgaard describes their first encounter with the late string quartets of Ludwig van Beethoven as a humbling experience. What they first approached with academic flair they quickly found to be brimming with possibility and meaning. To them, Beethoven's Opus 127 in particular felt "as if it had fallen down from outer space onto our music stands, disconnected from music history and tradition." It begins with huge swaths of chord fabric, unfurled before instruments sharp as a blade yet not seeking to cut. It renders introverted textures in an extroverted language. The lengthy Adagio is its centerpiece, a 16-minute chain of hymnal variations for which the quartet plays, put so precisely by Paul Griffiths in his booklet essay, as "four hearts differently beating, but at the same rate." A pall of shadows and softest light given fresh nutrients by this performance. The following Scherzo flies off the bows of the quartet with especial providence, while the Finale speaks in a similar language of planes and caesuras, achieving transcendence in the final stretch.

"When you spend so much time with a certain repertoire, you naturally end up having a very intimate relationship with it. On top of that I think we all enjoy digging into the music we play and finding all the little details that are just below the surface. We are just the lucky vessels that get to convey fantastic music. If you pick the good things out there, you don't need to push all kinds of intent into it. It's fine on its own as long as you do it justice in the way you play it. That being said, we never intentionally try to play in a very 'intimate' way. Maybe what sounds 'intimate' is actually our respect for the music."

I wonder, then, how he might distinguish this album from their first two programs and, similarly, what binds it:

"Our two initial albums on ECM were 'standalones.' Everything is connected in the *PRISM* series, however. It's a wonderful feeling doing projects like this. It teaches you so much as a musician. We tend to think that masterpieces are 'otherworldly' when in fact they were the result of a bunch of human beings inspiring and learning from each other. Like us. They were just exceptionally good at it! What stays the same is the stable ECM sound that we have come to expect. We truly enjoy working with people who are so passionate about what they do. It clearly reflects in the top-notch albums that

come out of ECM and inspires us to do better."

Listeners can be assured of placing this and the second volume squarely within that top-notch category.

PRISM II (ECM New Series 2562)
Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen violin
Frederik Øland violin
Asbjørn Nørgaard viola
Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin violoncello
Recorded May 2017, Reitstadel Neumarkt
Engineer: Markus Heiland
Produced by Manfred Eicher
Release date: September 13, 2019

Bach's Fugue in B minor from Book I of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, in an arrangement by Emanuel Aloys Förster, thus ushers us into the project's continuation in the manner of an old friend, welcoming with an open door and an open heart. Moving with tenderness and spiritual comportment, it touches a window of reflection into unknown futures, tracing patterns of suspension and transcendence.

Following this is Alfred Schnittke's String Quartet No. 3, a 1983 composition in which ghosts of antiquity are astir. The opening Andante's sirens move with grace and finality, even as they activate seeds that will one day grow into life. The contrast between stretches of quietude and heaves of mourning are transfixing. The middle movement's self-refractive allusions are brilliantly examined, rendering Shostakovich-leaning textures and palpable flavors. The final movement, marked Pesante, returns to that keening quality of the first, treating every sonorous shift as a veil to be dyed and worn as a screen through which to view a monochromatic world. It ends off-center, waiting for something to speak. For me, the Kronos Quartet's version of this harrowing masterwork on *Winter Was Hard* has long been my reference recording of choice, and I can say with heartfelt assurance that its throne must now be rebuilt for two.

In light of this darkness, Beethoven's epical String Quartet No. 13 in B-flat major turns night into dawn. The opening stretch of landscape resolves into a jagged dance of joy. Its adjoining Presto even injects a bit of humor into the proceedings.

The three subsequent movements are like paintings in sound, each portraying the same scene from a different angle. The DSQ opts for the quartet's original version, including the monumental *Große Fuge* (op. 133) as the finale. After a declamatory overture, it morphs into some of Beethoven's most boisterous writing for the genre. A superb account in every way.

Holding both programs together as one, it's easy to ascribe a visual quality to their emerging narrative. First violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen agrees:

"Schnittke and Shostakovich do create very strong images—to me more so than Beethoven and Bach. I guess that the beauty of music is that every single listener and performer can have different images in mind when hearing/performing it: it's a very open art form in that regard. Of course as a quartet, we strive to project one common story when performing a piece. Often it's easier to think in images rather than being too concrete—loud, soft, fast, slow—when studying a piece of music."

And perhaps we can ascribe a cinematic aesthetic by the hand of producer Manfred Eicher, whose touch so often turns sound into physical action. Says second violinist Frederik Øland:

"It's always lovely to work with Manfred. His presence exudes great authority, and we always feel very committed when he's around. His overwhelming passion for recording, plus 50 years of experience in the business, gives you a totally unique and very personal touch on the records that I find rare in today's music industry. I would argue that he is old school, yet innovative. Timeless, in fact."

The album's engineering, every bit as beautiful as the playing, confirms an underlying dedication to recorded art. Øland again:

“Luckily, we have great people working ‘behind the scenes’ on our recordings. I’ve often thought that the producer and engineer’s names should be on the front of the cover, just as much as the musicians. We always start with adjusting the sound, so that everyone is happy and can relate to what they actually hear, but from there much of editing and engineering is left out of our hands. It’s really a matter of trust, but with that said, I think our sound is very well taken care of.”

And listeners can feel confident walking into these beams of light knowing they, too, will be very well taken care of.

Danish String Quartet

The San Diego Union-Tribune.

February 6, 2019

Low-key concert — with beer! — marks the beginning of Danish String Quartet's three-year residency with La Jolla Music Society

By Beth Wood

If your image of a string quartet is musicians formally dressed in black playing Beethoven, you're half right when it comes to the Danish String Quartet. The other half is that the recent first-time Grammy nominees have another stage persona as well, involving casual clothes, Nordic folk songs — and beer.

Beginning Thursday, the quartet will perform three distinctive concerts for the La Jolla Music Society to kick off its three-year residency. Its Friday and Saturday concerts will be held at La Jolla's Auditorium at TSRI, one as part of the Revelle Chamber Music series.

Thursday's performance — "Thursday Skål!" — will take place at Barrio Logan's basileIE Gallery. Sponsored by Mikkeller Brewing, it will be a standing-only event. Skål!, by the way, is Danish for "Cheers!"

"The program will be looser than a typical string quartet concert, with single movements and lots of Nordic folk tunes," explained violist Asbjørn Nørgaard via email. "We love the traditional string-quartet concert format, but we also believe that a string quartet can easily perform in other settings. If people are relaxed and less worried about appearances and the rules and regulations of standard classical concerts, they are more open to the direct emotional impact of the music.

"We are quite normal, youngish Scandinavian men. We enjoy drinking a beer and hanging with our friends. People say that beer is the social grease of Scandinavia. We even have in our rider that we want four beers backstage for after the concert."

A Washington Post reviewer last fall hailed each quartet member as "a master musician" and said their concert "eloquently demonstrated the power of folk music."

"What we do isn't actually folk music, it is more a hybrid form," Nørgaard said. "We want to use our skills as a classical string quartet to share some of the amazing folk tunes with an audience that maybe never heard them before."

Along with Nørgaard, the quartet comprises Frederik Oland and Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen, who share first and second violin duties, and cellist Fredrik Schoyen Sjölin (the group's only Norwegian). Nørgaard credits Sjölin and Tonsgaard for arranging the folk tunes, which are then fine-tuned by the whole group.

The 30-somethings' forays into folk have not diminished their love for, or expertise in, classical genres. A Union-Tribune review of the group's 2016 SummerFest performance of Janáček's "String Quartet No. 2" said: "The quartet soared, mused, cried out in pain. Every

crazy change in mood, speed and dynamics was remarkably rendered."

The quartet's most recent CD, "Prism I: Beethoven, Shostakovich & Bach," was nominated for a 2019 Grammy Award in the Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble Performance category. It's the first of five albums in the Prism series, all centered on Beethoven's late string quartets (Nos. 12-16).

Is getting a Grammy nomination a big deal in Denmark?

"It is a big deal in Scandinavia, but maybe slightly less than in the U.S.," said Nørgaard, who will attend the awards ceremony Sunday with his quartet-mates. "However, our nomination has been covered quite a bit in mainstream Danish media, where classical music rarely gets a mention."

The chamber-music program Friday will include Haydn's String Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 1, No. 1 "La Chasse"; Mozart's String Quartet No.17 in B-flat major, K.458 "The Hunt"; and "Jagdquartett (Hunt Quartet)" by living German composer Jörg Widmann.

"In Mozart's and Haydn's days, the hunt was the favorite pastime activity for the wealthy and rich," Nørgaard said. "It was something noble, healthy, fun and exciting. It's bizarre that we humans have institutionalized the killing of other living things simply to have fun and to show power.

"It is a theme that has inspired lots of music and art. Our program will show all the sides of this strange phenomenon: from the lighthearted, easygoing fun to the darkest sides of humanity."

On the lighthearted side, the quartet is looking forward to its three-year residency with the La Jolla Music Society. Now that some of the group's members have small children, they appreciate having even short stints in one place.

"Some of us are planning to bring our families on some of the La Jolla visits," he said, adding wryly: "But there is, of course, lots of planning involved as our partners — very inconveniently! — also have lives of their own.

"We performed in La Jolla for the first time in 2014 and immediately felt quite at home there. This might be surprising, as the nice weather in La Jolla has nothing to do with our gray Scandinavian homelands. But often a feeling of 'being home' has more to do with the local people than the actual location.

"In La Jolla, we felt as guests in a home, not just visitors to a place. We were even given blue Chargers T-shirts and were cheering in the stadium as they beat the Oakland Raiders. I guess we won't be rooting for the Chargers in the future, but we are thrilled that our connection to La Jolla can continue to grow in the years to come."

Danish String Quartet

San Francisco Chronicle

February 12, 2019

Danish String Quartet

By Joshua Kosman

It's no easy matter for a string quartet to acquire that rock-star vibe, especially for an ensemble that still keeps one foot firmly planted in the traditional chamber repertoire. But the Danish String Quartet has it, making the group's every local appearance a special event.

You only have to hear the ensemble play to understand what's going on — why audiences keep flocking to witness the combination of gritty energy and expressive urgency that these four musicians put on display. Their playing is smart, soulful and often profound.

For its upcoming visit to Berkeley, courtesy of Cal Performances, the program features familiar fare by Haydn, Webern and Beethoven. But that doesn't mean the results will be ordinary.

DEPARTURES
October 2018

The Danish String Quartet recently released its second album of Nordic melodies.

Playing a Different Tune

They may be niche pastimes elsewhere, but in Scandinavia classical and jazz are thriving—even youthful—art forms.

by Justin Davidson

WHEN THE NORWEGIAN violin virtuoso and composer Ole Bull died in 1880, it is said, peasants, who could hum his tunes, crowded around his open grave in Bergen and tossed in what meager tribute they could muster: "a green bough, a fern, or a flower." This bond between music and soil, between a cosmopolitan art and local pride, still endures in Scandinavia. The region's combination of soft-spoken nationalism, egalitarianism, and shared affluence has produced a vibrant and varied musical culture, in which every taxpayer has a stake.

The members of the internationally renowned Danish String Quartet are products of this landscape. I met them in a basement room at the Royal Danish Academy of Music, in Copenhagen, where we sat surrounded by the detritus of past projects, including a plywood bar they had hammered together for their own annual festival, so that audience members could have a beer while they listened. The group's three Danish players reminisced about their early days together at the Askov Folk High School in Jutland. (The fourth, cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, grew up in Norway.) Founded in the 19th century to educate farmers during the enforced idleness of winter, these institutions have evolved into a network of specialized but laid-back amateur summer programs. "You don't go there to achieve, but to develop for the sake of developing," violinist Frederik Øland told me. Violist Asbjørn Nørgaard chimed in: "You'd be having breakfast and someone would tap you on the shoulder and say, 'Can you come and play eight or ten string quartets with us?'"

Those endless summer sight-reading sessions evolved into musical weekends during the school year, and the ensemble grew organically out of those student activities, rather than be fallback for four hotshots with their eyes on superstar car Violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen invoked a Scandina concept, the Law of Jante, first enunciated in a 20th-cer Danish novel, which boils down to a commandment not to out from the group. "Maybe that's why Denmark doesn't so many concerto soloists," Sørensen speculated.

After a years-long diet of Beethoven and Denmark's nat composer Carl Nielsen, the quartet discovered an enthus for folk music. Sørensen, who grew up hearing, playing watching his parents dance to traditional tunes, suggested they try doing a few short hymns or dances as encores. A de later, after traveling to distant islands, diving into archives learning a whole new set of bowing techniques (plus a few c steps), the quartet has produced two evocative albums of N melodies: *Wood Works* and *Last Leaf*.

That deep dive into old songs is itself a historical legacy region's standard-bearer composers, like Edvard Grieg of way and Jan Sibelius of Finland, drew deeply on rural t tions (both real and imagined), repackaging them to repr their nations' distinctive souls. Nielsen, like Sørensen, gre around Danish peasant music, and some of his own com tions have been folded back into the nation's folk repertoi

For Scandinavia's top-flight classical musicians, who s much of their lives ricocheting around the world, it often an enormous effort to stay rooted in the land that has them so much. Leif Ove Andsnes, the classical pianist bas Bergen, Norway, is a global figure who has remained stau

"I don't know how many Steinway grands they've got up there, but every church seems to have one," said the concert pianist Leif Ove Andsnes.

local, playing copious amounts of music by composers like Grieg and Sibelius, and also by becoming a part-time impresario. I reached him at his summer cottage above the Arctic Circle, where endless daylight compensates for the lack of electricity. "Nature is quite overwhelming here," he said. "There's fishing, reindeer, eagles. I've gotten quite dependent on it."

After his vacation, he'll jump to the Lofoten Islands, which, though barely less remote, boast the essential ingredients for a major chamber music festival. "I don't know how many Steinway grands they've got up there, but every church seems to have one," Andsnes said. Chamber music festivals are scattered across Norway like caraway seeds on rye bread, from the fledgling Fjord Classics in the southern resort town of Sandefjord to the Arctic Chamber Music Festival at Svalbard, held in deepest winter. For 17 years, Andsnes was the co–artistic director of the Risør Festival, which intoxicated him with its mixture of international talent, intimate venues, and picturesque setting. "Hearing Bartók's four string quartets in a small Baroque church, you can feel the music in your stomach," he said. Recently, he consulted on the design of a new 400-seat concert hall on a 17th-century estate in Rosendal, where, in 2016, he had founded a chamber music festival. "I have this curator thing in me."

The Bergen-based globe-trotting concert pianist Leif Ove Andsnes keeps in touch with his Scandinavian roots by playing the music of Nordic composers and curating festivals around the region.

Andsnes and the Danish String Quartet occupy idiosyncratic niches in Scandinavia's complex musical ecosystem, where an egalitarian philosophy and a still powerful Law of Jante coexist with the pursuit of highbrow excellence. What keeps those apparent opposites glued together is an abundance of money. Norway's Arts Council, for instance, administers a $115 million cultural fund. (If the U.S. funded the National Endowment for the Arts at the same per-capita rate, its budget would be well over $1 billion; instead, it's $150 million.)

But that's only part of the picture. Like other Scandinavian countries, Norway channels money to art and music through a whole candy store's worth of subsidies: local and regional funds, publicly built concert halls, low-cost tickets, direct stipends, support for foreign tours, and, of course, education. All schoolchildren study music from age 6 to 16. Government investment has created a population of intensive music consumers. Much of that music is pop, of course, but large jazz clubs, symphony orchestra seasons, and festivals all show strong attendance, even in remote locations.

Commercial and avant-garde, popular and rarefied—these categories mingle and overlap in the Scandinavian system. "The jazz scene in Norway is flourishing," said Hans-Olav Solli, a former rock singer who now runs the venerable Moldejazz festival, which has helped launch the careers of such stars as Jan Garbarek and, more recently, the 33-year-old saxophone phenom Marius Neset. "It's quite amazing," Solli said. "During the festival, Molde's population doubles from 25,000 to more than 50,000! Some are tourists, but most of our audience is Norwegian." And that's just one of 23 jazz festivals in Norway, a country with a population smaller than New York City's.

Classical organizations, like jazz programs, are constantly trying to strike a balance between a political mandate to reach the widest possible public and an artistic imperative to challenge comfortable tastes. "The model in Scandinavia is that people should have access to classical music whether they have money for the tickets or not," said Sten Cranner, general manager and artistic director of the Göteborg Symphony Orchestra in Sweden. The organization keeps prices low and maintains an elaborate educational and youth orchestra system modeled on Venezuela's *El Sistema.* At the same time, a reliable stream of state and corporate funding allows the symphony to go on some pretty thrilling rides, such as hiring the multitalented soprano Barbara Hannigan as principal guest conductor. She is no ordinary maestro: YouTube has preserved a wryly outrageous 2013 performance in which Hannigan, dressed in dominatrix leather and a black bob, simultaneously sings and conducts the Göteborg Symphony in György Ligeti's *Mysteries of the Macabre.*

"We have a clear strategy," Cranner said. "We want to be brave, we want to be first, and we want to take risks." He could be speaking not just for his orchestra, but for the whole Scandinavian music scene.

Danish String Quartet

CLASSICAL POST

December 19, 2018

The Nordic lads of the Danish String Quartet possess warmth, wit, a beautiful tone, and technical prowess second to none. They are also consumed by many different projects: The Series of Fours in the beautiful old Radio Hall in Copenhagen; indie classical music festival, DSQ Festival; showcasing some of the treasures of their Nordic music traditions; and a series of five Beethoven albums called PRISM, of which the first one just received a Grammy nomination. Their intrigue in all aspects of the classical music world is ambitious and exciting with many awaiting what the group will do next.

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Danish String Quartet

The Boston Globe

November 7, 2018

From Beethoven to beer and beyond with the Danish String Quartet

By David Weininger

Here is the story of the Danish String Quartet, as told by the ensemble on its website. "We are three Danes and one Norwegian cellist, making this a truly Scandinavian endeavor. Being relatively bearded, we are often compared to the Vikings. However, we are only pillaging the English coastline occasionally."

There is, of course, a more straightforward biography on the site — how they met, decided to pursue chamber music, and became "a serious string quartet" — but why bother? The "alternative" story is far more entertaining to contemplate, and who knows, it may be true. (In which case, watch out, Lindisfarne.)

What is not open to question is that this deeply talented group, still young, has been moving from strength to strength since it entered the public eye. They now have their own festival, complete with its own line of craft beer. Last year they recorded "Last Leaf," a sumptuously colored assemblage of Nordic folk song arrangements. Their new release (both are on ECM) begins a cycle called "Prism," each entry of which will mix works of Bach, Beethoven, and later composers (in this case, Shostakovich).

Ahead of a Nov. 18 concert at Rockport Music, two of the quartet's members — violist Asbjorn Norgaard and cellist Fredrik Schoyen Sjölin — took time out of their busy traveling schedule to answer questions via e-mail about friendship, old and new music, and, yes, beer.

Q. You write on your website that "music is a way to hang out with friends." I know that three of you met at a music summer camp at around age 13. How does that long friendship inform the way you make music together?

Norgaard: I don't think that being close friends is a necessity for making music together, but for me it would be unbearable to spend that much time with people who weren't my very close friends. The music-making that can be experienced in a concert is, in a way, only 10 percent of the music we are "making." Ninety percent of the work and music-making happens in the rehearsal room, and I think we have found a way of working together that can be very efficient because we are very close friends.

In essence: If you don't trust each other 100 percent, you have to rehearse every musical moment obsessively to make sure that everything is lined up. You have to make all the decisions and set them in stone. But if you dare to trust each other 100 percent — and it is, after all, quite easy to trust old friends — you can leave more things open-ended and free, and still be sure that the general musical message of the group will be coherent in the concert.

Q. You said in an earlier interview that in approaching the quartet literature and crafting your interpretations, you begin by "trying to have as much freedom as possible." What does that mean?

Norgaard: Fundamentally, there are two ways of approaching a musical rehearsal and crafting an interpretation. One is very much conservatory textbook: You try different ideas, work your way closer and closer to some "truth," and in the end you end up with a "perfect" interpretation where every decision has been made [and] agreed upon. . . .

Another way is to use the rehearsal time to open up and explore as many possible paths, and then actually not deciding on one "perfect" path. The idea being that you want to have as many musical options available as possible in the concert situation, leaving a lot open-ended. The reality is a continuum . . . but I believe it is always better to open up musical possibilities rather than closing them down.

Q. What was the inspiration for "Last Leaf"?

Sjölin: Basically, we wanted to make another album with folk tunes and our own stuff after the first album ["Wood Works"]. But this time we also wanted to see if we could make the album more contiguous, rather than just 10–12 pieces on a disc. We had all kinds of ideas and story lines on the drawing board, and even though none of them manifested themselves in the album entirely, they all played a role in binding everything together in the end.

One song that captured our attention from early on is "Now Found Is the Fairest of Roses," which opens and ends the record, and at the same [time] stands as an example of how we colorize these very simple melodies to give them a sentiment and a context to fit a concert stage.

Q. Your new album begins a project called "Prism." Can you say what that word means in this context, and talk about the thinking behind this project?

Norgaard: The idea came when I was reading Lewis Lockwood's book about Beethoven. He writes about Beethoven's lifelong obsession with Bach and, in particular, "The Well-Tempered Clavier." In his last years, he basically spent all his time studying Bach and writing string quartets. Actually, most of the musical material that he used to craft his last five string quartets can be more or less directly found in specific fugues by Bach.

So the idea of "Prism" is to show this linear connection from Bach to Beethoven, and then to show how everything explodes with these monumental last string quartets. After Beethoven, every composer had to consider these quartets and somehow figure out how to carry on the torch. A fundamentally linear musical development was split into many different colors and potential paths. Just in the same way a prism splits a beam of light.

Q. How does your festival allow you to flex your creativity? And most important, what are the beers like?

Sjölin: The festival has always been a home for us. If it weren't for the practicalities of space, we might actually have it in one of our homes. It's meant to be a space where we can be 100 percent artistically free and invite anyone who wants to come into our own world. So every festival starts off with the question: "What would our 'dream concert' look like if we were the audience?" And beer has proven to be a part of that answer. And yes, they taste great!

Danish String Quartet

EPOCH TIMES

September 19, 2018

The Danish String Quartet's 'Prism 1: Bach, Shostakovich, Beethoven'

The quartet is launching the first of a five-album project

By Barry Bassis

The Danish String Quartet has been garnering awards and thrilling audiences since it made its debut in 2002 at the Copenhagen Festival. The quartet is known for its thoughtful albums and live appearances, where the members perform both contemporary works and earlier composers who influenced them. They have also highlighted compositions by Scandinavian composers.

The members of the Danish String Quartet are violinists Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen (born 1983), Frederik Oland (born 1984), violist Asbjorn Norgaard (born 1984), and cellist Fredrik Schoyen Sjolin (born 1982, cello). The first three met at a summer music camp when they were pre-teens. Sorensen, Oland, and Asbjorn went on to study at the Copenhagen Academy of Music. Sjolin, who is Norwegian, joined the group in 2008.

The quartet's new CD on ECM (their third for the label) is "Prism 1: Bach, Shostakovich, Beethoven." This is the first in a projected project of five albums, each exploring the historical and musical influence of Bach's fugal writing on Beethoven's final string quartets, and then, through Beethoven, on compositions by later composers, including quartets by Dmitri Shostakovich, Alfred Schnittke, Bela Bartok, Felix Mendelssohn, and Anton Webern.

On "Prism 1," the group plays the first of Beethoven's late quartets, Op. 127 in E-Flat Major; Bach's fugue in the same key (arranged by Mozart); and Shostakovich's final string quartet, the No. 15 in E-Flat Minor, Op. 144.

The CD opens with Johann Sebastian Bach's Fugue in E-Flat Major. The piece is nicknamed "St. Anne" because of the similarity between the theme of the fugue

and the hymn tune by English composer William Croft (1678–1727), which is usually sung with the words of Isaac Watts's hymn "O God, Our Help in Ages Past." Despite the similarity, music historians believe that Bach never heard the hymn, and therefore that the similarity was coincidental.

Composed as part of "The Well-Tempered Clavier" Book II, the piece was originally written for harpsichord, and Bach is thought to have played it on the organ. Nowadays, it is usually performed by pianists, including Glenn Gould. The arrangement for string quartet was written by Mozart, who was a great admirer of Bach's music.

Shostakovich's haunting String Quartet No.15 in E-Flat Minor, Op. 144, was written the year before his death. In fact, he completed it when he was in the hospital.

Beethoven's Quartet No.12 in E-Flat Major, Op. 127, is the first of his late quartets. There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, that violinist Felix Radicati complained that Beethoven's Opus 59 quartets were "not music." The composer responded, "Oh, they are not for you, but for a later age." That may be true since the quartets were not favorably received at their first performance. Now, the late quartets are appreciated as the composer's final great pieces.

The Danish String Quartet plays all these pieces with precision and feeling, measuring up to the best recordings of these works. "Prism 1" is a promising beginning for the series.

On Saturday, Nov. 17 at 8 p.m., the Danish String Quartet will debut at 92nd Street Y (92Y). This will be the group's only concert in New York City in the upcoming season. The program will include Haydn's Quartet in C Major, Op. 20, No. 2 (Hob. III:32); String Quartet No. 1 by Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen (born in 1952) and the only composer on the program who is still alive); and Beethoven's Quartet No. 7 in F Major, Op. 59, No. 1, "Razumovsky."

Danish String Quartet

classicalMPR

November 28, 2018

New Classical Tracks: The Danish String Quartet connects the dots between Beethoven and Bach

By Julie Amacher

LISTEN **New Classical Tracks: Danish String Quartet**
4min 59sec

LISTEN **New Classical Tracks: Danish String Quartet (extended)**
17min 36sec

Click to listen or visit http://bit.ly/2raKi9d

When you're connecting the dots by following the numbers, it's easy to visualize the end result. On their new recording, *Prism I*, the first in a series of five recordings, the Danish String Quartet establishes lines of connections from the past to the future, with Beethoven's late string quartets providing the foundation.

Can you talk a little bit about how this project evolved and what got you inspired to do it?

"My name is Asbjorn and I'm the viola player of the Danish String Quartet. The late quartets by Beethoven are huge masterpieces that any string quartet spends so much time working on and trying to figure out how to play. We started playing this music at a quite early age. I think we were 20 years old, 21 years old, and we were maybe too young to play this music. It was always weird to play it. It felt like it was kind of disconnected from all the other music that we were playing.

"As we got older and wiser, we started to read some things about these quartets and actually this is very connected to the past and actually also the future, which is what this project is really about. We tried to show the connection from Bach's *Well-Tempered Piano* and how these fugues found their way into [Beethoven's] late quartets. And then we want to show how Beethoven took this kind of heritage and opened up so many different possible paths to go.

"So that's the linear connection from Bach to Beethoven. And then Beethoven with these last five quartets really kind of explodes everything, much in the same way as when a beam of light hits a prism."

On this first of your 5-CD project, where are the travels starting and where do they take us?

"This is Fredrik speaking, the cellist of the quartet. I think you should consider this an emotional journey. The late quartets are called the mad quartets because they were so strange in his time and they are very strange even today. When you play this music, it opens a new room for you to explore."

Let's talk a little bit more about that emotional journey which starts off with the Bach fugue which was arranged by Mozart. What is that mood that we're starting with?

(Asbjorn) "It's a pretty short fugue — just a couple of minutes long — in E-Flat Major. It's a very open key, that is ringing very well when the string quartet plays it. And, then, it's like he's opening up the door and we see where these two later masters take the music."

That Bach fugue flows seamlessly into the Shostakovich quartet which is in the same key. The mood here changes dramatically. There is this sort of looming sense of death which really plays a key role in this work, including the fact that the composer wrote it just a year before he died. Can you talk more about that?

(Fredrik) "I certainly see the dark vibe in the Shostakovich. But I also see light and a sensation of hope in this music, also. Almost like saying, 'Okay, this was a tough one, but, you know, better times are to come.' In fact, the duality between the darkness and the light is so important to keep this work interesting. The light of it plays a very important role, actually."

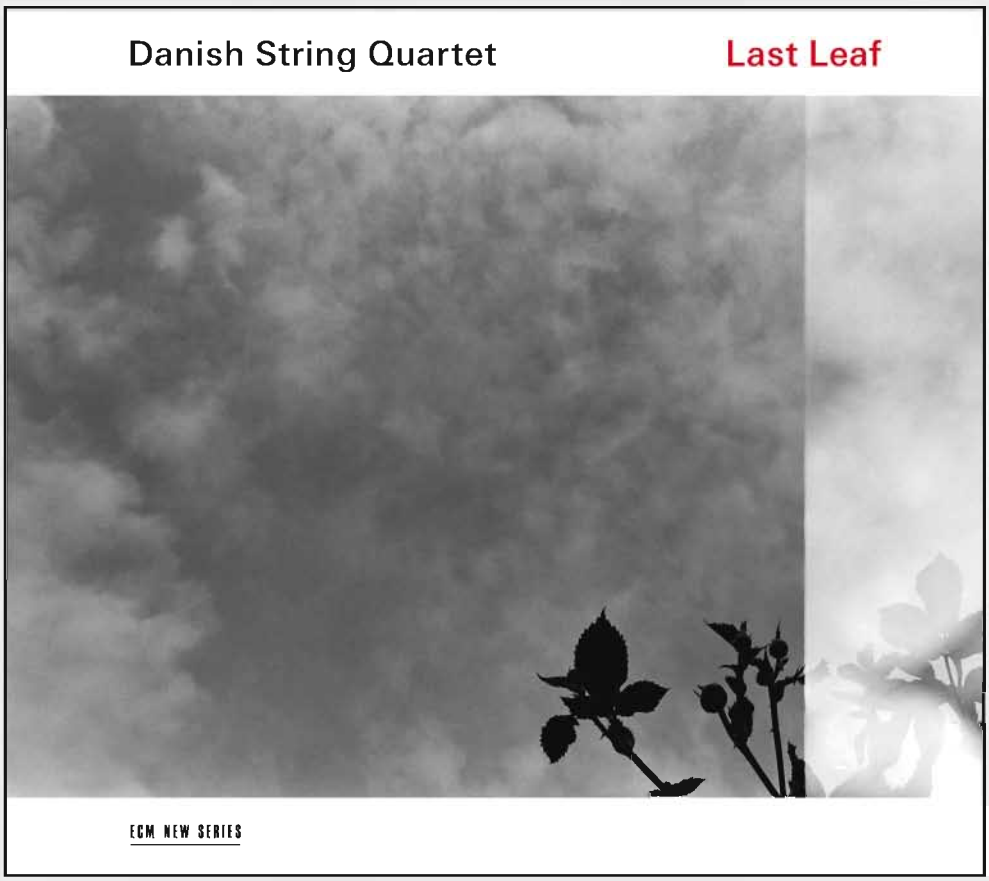
The recording closes out with the first of Beethoven's late string quartets, No. 12 in E-Flat Major. I have to say, as I just put this recording on to listen to it from start to finish, it was a welcome relief. It was like, "Oh, here we are. We're back together, we're having a good time, we're having this wonderful sense of community." That was my reaction to it. What do you sense when you play that Beethoven quartet?

(Asbjorn) "I mean, you're right, especially in this context where it comes off of this very, very silent, bleak Shostakovich. Then, it's this kind of ringing change from E-Flat Minor to E-Flat Major, which is for a string quartet the most resonant kind of chord you can make. You don't get a string quartet sounding any more resonant than this.

"But then, at the same time, we have that duality again because you have moments in the second movement where he removes a couple of voices, and in the end it's just the first violin and the viola playing very, very simple — few notes. Maybe that's the genuine message I get from this music: On one side, it's a big classical piece of music — big architecture, all this stuff — but it's also very human, very personal and very tender and very intimate."

Exploring the connections of the past and the future through Beethoven's late string quartets is a journey that has taken the Danish String Quartet to new places — as musicians and as individuals.

(Asbjorn) "We already recorded four of the albums. We will do the last one in January. It's quite extreme to have recorded those late Beethoven's. Because you think it's one thing, but each of them is its own little planet. So, it's just extremely challenging on every level. I think we're definitely at a different place than where we started."



"The Best Classical Music of 2017"

Spotify

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Chicago's classical experience

The Star
THE KANSAS CITY STAR

The New York Times

The Boston Globe

billboard
Traditional Classical Albums

Danish String Quartet

The New York Times

December 13, 2017

The 25 Best Classical Music Recordings of 2017

'LAST LEAF' Danish String Quartet (ECM New Series). It is wonderful to hear these superb players let their collective hair down in this collection of (mostly) Scandinavian folk tunes and original material composed in like fashion. This should warm the heart of every fan of fiddling, whether bluegrass, Celtic or Bachian.
– James R. Oestreich

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Danish String Quartet

npr music

December 12, 2017

The 50 Best Albums Of 2017

15. Danish String Quartet
Last Leaf

You don't have to be a Scandinavian musicologist to fall in love with *Last Leaf*, the Danish String Quartet's new album of Nordic folk songs and dances. The fact that the atmospheric "Drømte mig en drøm" (I Dreamed a Dream) is over 700 years old and the rollicking "Stædelil" is based on a Faroese medieval ballad later reworked by Beethoven is not as important as the fluency and grace that infuses these blithesome performances. In the quartet's eloquent, but not overworked, arrangements, you can hear the shuffling feet of dancers and wheezy bagpipes. "Æ Rømeser," from the Danish island of Fanø, mesmerizes, as the whirl of a polka meets a wistful melody. The band stays busy playing Brahms and Haydn — and even contemporary composers like Thomas Adès and Hans Abrahamsen, featured on a superb album released last year. But when it comes to the simple idea of a classical string quartet performing folk tunes, the Danish musicians have exceeded all expectations. —*Tom Huizenga*

Danish String Quartet

npr music

December 13, 2017

The 100 Best Songs Of 2017

22. Danish String Quartet
"Æ Rømeser"

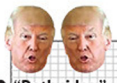
When they aren't playing Beethoven or Brahms, Danish String Quartet's musicians like to hole up in an vintage farmhouse and craft arrangements of old Nordic folk songs. The 18th-century tune 'Æ Rømeser,' from the band's pleasing album *Last Leaf*, offers both melancholy and a polka-like meter for dancing, unique to the village of Sønderho. Emerging through a murky introduction, a lone fiddle slowly unfolds the meandering theme, touched with heartache as it gathers speed and blossoms. In the quartet's elegant, idiomatic arrangement you can hear feet shuffling on a sawdusted dance floor and the drone of an old squeezebox. —*Tom Huizenga*

Danish String Quartet

NEW YORK

August 21 - September 3, 2017

HIGHBROW



"Both sides."

And a businessman-run Republican White House can't even hold on to the support of the **nation's CEOs**.

London spent $48 million on Thomas Heatherwick's Garden Bridge, only to see it **not built** in the end.

According to a Municipal Art Society study about the city's scheme to move the Garment District to Sunset Park, 65 percent of customers said they would be "**unlikely**" to follow.

White nationalists vow to continue to **rally** against the removal of Confederate monuments ...

... Which is happening nationwide.

Frederick Crews's takedown *Freud: The Making of an Illusion*. (So **Oedipal**.)

Obama tweets, quoting Nelson Mandela: "No one is born **hating** another person because of the color of his skin or his background or his religion ..." (It's now the most "liked" tweet ever.)

Kara Walker's artist statement for her upcoming show at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. gallery: "Frankly I am tired, **tired of standing up**, being counted, tired of 'having a voice' or worse 'being a role model.'"

"An Incomplete History of **Protest**," at the Whitney.

Autumn, Karl Ove Knausgaard's latest musings on beds, **tin cans**, vomit, and migrating birds.

The once dependably thoughtful *Nation*'s questionable **debunking** of the DNC hack.

Costco was selling "Tiffany" engagement rings, much to the annoyance of **Holly Golightly**, who wouldn't shop there, and Tiffany & Co., which just won a $19 million judgment against it.

Meanwhile, Steve Bannon for some reason calls up the liberal *American Prospect* to call the **alt-right mob** he cultivated "clowns."

The Danish String Quartet links Viking tunes to **bluegrass** in a Mostly Mozart concert of Nordic folk music.

Wu Tsang and boychild's **beach realness** at the Boffo Fire Island Performance Festival.

Torrey Townsend's ***The Workshop***, at the HB Playwrights Theatre.

Claire Messud's teen-tumult novel ***The Burning Girl***.

Groundhog Day to **close**. *Groundhog Day* to close. *Groundhog Day* to close. *Groundhog Day* ...

According to a study in the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, **smartphone-separation anxiety** is on the rise. Maybe Siri can talk you down ...

DESPICABLE

BRILLIANT

Trump attorney Michael Cohen tweets out a bunch of photos of him with his black friends to prove he's not **racist**.

Daniel Craig **reluctantly** returns as 007 when Idris shoulda been given a chance.

Plague—as in **the Black Death**—is found in Arizona. In case you need another sign we're heading back to medieval times.

All the Starks are just so **dreary** now.

According to a study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 24 percent of men and 27 percent of women have injured themselves grooming their **pubic** hair.

Bathers on a Spanish beach allegedly mobbed a baby dolphin, posing for selfies with it, and then it **died**.

The Spotted Cheetah, a Cheetos pop-up inside a Tribeca bar, had a wait list of over **1,000** orange-fingered people.

Another woman has claimed she was sexually **victimized** by Roman Polanski as a teenager.

Fox News host Eboni K. Williams gets **death threats** after criticizing the president.

... Or maybe Siri can leave you alone to pursue her **screenwriting career**, as Apple makes a billion-dollar bet on developing its own TV shows and films.

The monthlong **Jonathan Demme** tribute at BAM.

Customers at Buunni Coffee in Hudson Heights **volunteer** to work to give its employees the day off on the café's anniversary.

Céline Dion and Selena Gomez have handbag lines, and owning them might make you feel more like a **pop star**.

"Food Porn," the latest cut off Miss Eaves's **tasty** debut, *Feminasty*.

Brockhampton's post-hustle **slacker-rap** single "Swamp."

SoundCloud saved—**for now**—by last-minute funding.

Destroyer's "Sky's Grey," yet again making **bleak** lyrics seem like a wistful memory.

Taco Bell's fried-egg-as-its-shell **taco**.

New to NYC, end-of-summer **rootless-cosmopolitan** cool-off treat: dondurma, stretchy Turkish ice cream.

LOWBROW

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Danish String Quartet

The New York Times

October 23, 2016

This String Quartet Has a Line of Craft Beer

By David Allen

From left, Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen, Asbjorn Norgaard, Frederik Oland and Fredrik Schoyen Sjolin of the Danish String Quartet, whose goal is to carry listeners along with its sound.

Back in 2012 and 2013, the members of the Danish String Quartet, who appear at Carnegie Hall on Wednesday, Oct. 26, had an unusual traveler accompany them on a tour through Denmark and England: a phenomenologist named Simon Hoffding. Then a doctoral researcher at the University of Copenhagen, he was troubled by a philosophical question: "What kind of self is present when the musician is deeply into his music?"

Being asked to think about how they think was no easy task, the violist Asbjorn Norgaard, 31, said over lunch at Tanglewood this past summer: Playing, after all, takes place "on such a subconscious level." Even so, in his dissertation, Mr. Hoffding used interviews with the quartet's players to come up with a taxonomy of how top musicians experience their performances.

There's "standard playing," which any amateur might aspire to. Rarely, for professionals, there's "absent-minded playing." Occasionally musicians are under stress — say, from an audience interruption — and labor to return to normality.

And, most rare and interesting, there's "deep absorption," when players enter a kind of trance, a state of "euphoric joy" in which they have complete control and yet feel almost disembodied. Think of it as the equivalent of how an athlete gets "in the zone."

Perhaps, at a less exalted level, there is an analog for listeners, too, when the world beyond a performance dissolves and we are carried along by sound. That's a feeling that these three young Danes (Frederik Oland and Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen on violins and Mr. Norgaard on viola) and their Norwegian

The Danish String Quartet playing with the cellist Torleif Thedeen

cellist (Fredrik Schoyen Sjolin) are especially susceptible to creating.

In a golden age for young string quartets – think JACK, Ébène, Escher, Attacca, Doric, Chiara, Spektral, Calidore and many, many more — the Danish String Quartet has drawn almost unanimous critical praise, particularly for its performances of Nielsen, Beethoven and others with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. On record, it has set down roguish Haydn and poised Brahms, as well as Scandinavian folk music, a Dacapo release called "Wood Works," and an outstanding survey of first quartets by Thomas Adès, Per Norgard and Hans Abrahamsen, on ECM.

Theirs is playing of unusual, and unusually effective, liberty. When at their best, their tone throbs with joy.

"All Scandinavians feel like they have a bit of an anarchist inside them," Mr. Norgaard said. "If someone tells us what to do, or what to wear, we go, like, 'That's dictatorship.' We don't feel boxed in by playing this old music that everyone else is playing. It's just a canvas that we can work on. That being said, I don't think that we are crazy. We are respectful."

The starting point for any of their interpretations, Mr. Sorensen, 33, said, "is to try to have as much freedom as possible." But, added Mr. Oland, 32, who shares duties in the first violin chair, "you can't be free if you haven't prepared well on a technical level. The main structure of it doesn't change — maybe a little bit, but it's not completely free. Freedom comes from being in control, in a way."

It also comes from trust, in this case built over many years. The three Danes — and their cellist at the time, Carl-Oscar Osterlind — met at a summer camp, for all ages and most abilities, run by the Danish Amateur Orchestra Association.

"It's not like this American summer camp stuff," Mr. Oland said. "You play in two different orchestras during the day, and at night you play chamber music until you faint. We met there when we were something like 13, 14. We grew up there together, had our first beers there together, played a lot of soccer, played a lot of music, just formed a friendship that we have today."

In 2001, when Mr. Sorensen entered the Royal Danish Academy of Music, they began lessons with Tim Frederiksen,

whom the quartet refers to as "the godfather" of Danish chamber music: Once a violist in an incarnation of a different Danish String Quartet, he has also trained, among others, the superb all-female Nightingale Quartet.

Mr. Frederiksen focused the quartet's repertoire, starting with Haydn's "Emperor" and Shostakovich's Eighth Quartet, began lessons that could last four or five hours at a time and insisted on throwing them into the public eye as early as possible. Opportunities opened up to play in front of chamber music societies across Denmark, particularly after the group won the Danish Broadcasting Corporation's Chamber Music Competition in 2004, as the Young Danish String Quartet.

After recording committed accounts of the complete Nielsen quartetsfor Dacapo, the quartet took a year off. In the process, its original cellist chose a solo career, and Mr. Sjolin, 34, then a student in Stockholm, joined the remnants. He blended in quickly, as the new foursome, having dropped the "Young" adjective, prepared for and then won the London International String Quartet Competition in 2009.

"Often you read about quartets changing a member," Mr. Sorensen said, "and it takes like a year to try out different people. But from the first day, it just worked out."

Since then, the quartet has been helped by rising-star programs like the BBC's New Generation Artists initiative and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's CMS Two. They essay a balanced repertoire, with a healthy smattering of new music — including, this season, a new quartet, "Swans Kissing," by Rolf Wallin — among a diet of Haydn, Shostakovich and predominantly late Beethoven, scotching the notion that Beethoven is something that must be approached cautiously, especially by artists who might be considered less mature.

How do they choose their repertoire? "Sit down with a lot of beers, and a list," Mr. Oland said.

Mr. Norgaard said they approached some notorious challenges without particular concern. "We would do all the late Beethovens first," he said, "which was a no-go for any other quartet. It came very naturally."

If their late Beethoven is perhaps unexpected, they have surprising gaps, too. Ravel haunts them, though their Debussy is exquisite. Mozart was tried early on but has disappeared from their repertoire.

"I'm a little bit scared of Mozart, actually," Mr. Sjolin confided. "Scared is not the word. Every time, for some reason, it's very, very difficult. It's always two tempi, and either both of them work or none of them work."

"The opening of the 'Dissonance,'" Mr. Sorensen said. "We never really nailed that one."

What they have nailed is a particular style, in demeanor if not in playing. The reputation of their beards precedes them, though that facial hair is more kempt than it once was. Their fashion is hipsterish, without irony or a sense of being mere appliqué. In Copenhagen, one of their concert series has its own line of craft beer, brewed by the Frederiksberg Bryghus. At their own DSQ Festival, they invite friends to play with them, do the vacuuming and turn the lights out at the end of the night.

"We found a perfect little spot," Mr. Sorensen said, "which is an old girls' school from the late 19th century, a beautiful place with room for about 150. There's a soul in this place. This is a very lo-fi thing we have going on."

There is no admission fee, Mr. Norgaard said, but there is a tip jar. "We have very pretentious programming, with an actor doing monologues from Tolstoy with Janacek quartets," he said. "But it is a concert situation where people realize

who is sending out the concert. It's not some organization with a voice that tells you to shut off your cellphone. You go into our living room, and we want to play some music for you."

The classical music field is, they agreed, often too eager to change things up simply to attract new audiences. "It's healthy to try out new things," Mr. Sorensen said. But "you can smell if something is just packaging."

So their approach is refreshingly unapologetic. "When I enjoy musicians playing concerts," Mr. Norgaard said, to murmurs of approval from his fellow musicians, "it's when they're very honest. We experiment a lot, and you can say that we are breaking down barriers, blah, blah, blah. But at the same time, we don't do anything. We actually leave the music alone.

"What we're saying, is that you can be easygoing, that you can have fun, and be very serious and deep at the same time. There's no conflict there. You can have very funny rehearsals about sad pieces of music. It's easier to be deep and serious, if you just have fun."

Danish String Quartet

THE HUFFINGTON POST

January 2, 2017

Meet The Great Danes: Chamber Music With A Scandinavian Twist

By Michael Levin

"Our guiding principle for choosing repertoire has always been pretty simple," said Asbjørn Nørgaard, viola player for Danish String Quartet. "We only perform music we like."

"This sounds obvious," he continued, "but sometimes as a classical music student you find yourself playing music that might be part of the canon but that you are not actually enjoying. At the end of the day, the only thing that matters to us is that we like the music we are performing."

To listeners, that enjoyment is palpable. Whether they are interpreting late Beethoven or a contemporary Scandinavian composer, or playing traditional Nordic folk music, Danish String Quartet has mesmerized audiences worldwide with its flawless intonation, infectious energy, and masterly poise. They play at New England Conservatory's Jordan Hall in Boston on January 28th at 8pm as part of the Celebrity Series of Boston.

The group's performances and recordings display a distinctive joy in music making, which has resulted in part from long-standing friendships. Now in their 30s, three members of the quartet—violist Nørgaard and violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen —met when they were in their early teens at summer camp in the Danish countryside for enthusiastic amateur musicians.

"For us, friendship and music making has always been inseparable," Norgaard said. "As a quartet, you have to spend extreme amounts of time together. Many hours in the rehearsal room and traveling, plus all the high-pressure performances. Our friendship has allowed us to enjoy life as a string quartet quite a bit, and we believe that music thrives when musicians are happy, confident, and enjoying each other's company on and off the stage."

Since 2001, the group has performed under the tutelage of Tim Frederiksen, a third generation chamber musician at Copenhagen's Royal Danish Academy of Music.

"Tim gave us a way of working, a way of approaching chamber music that has been the perfect foundation for us to build on," Nørgaard said, going on to explain Frederiksen's remarkable attention to detail: "He will spend three hours on twenty bars of a Haydn quartet. When you go to a lesson with Tim, it feels like you enter a room with a jungle in your hands and leave with a nice Renaissance garden where everything is in balance and order."

In 2008, the three Danish musicians were joined by Norweigan cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin —"We found him hidden away in a castle outside Stockholm," says the group's website—and the current incarnation of Danish String Quartet was born.

When they are putting together new repertoire, Nørgaard says it happens "in bursts of long rehearsal days" in their rehearsal room, a basement enclave at the Royal Danish Academy of Music.

"There is more craftsmanship than artistry in this part of the process, so we are spending lots of time on basics like intonation and pulse. We leave most artistic decisions rather open and are not talking much—normally things start to settle by themselves without us having to verbalize every single thing we are doing. We are drinking lots of coffee, and as all of us are of a rather lazy nature, there is a lot of procrastination going on."

Besides classical, what other music genres do the members of Danish String Quartet enjoy?

"Some of us are obsessed with Wagner operas, all of us are into different kinds of folk music, someone likes straight up pop music, one is a jazz fan, another likes romantic symphonies and Pergolesi, all of us love Beethoven. We get inspiration from all music that we encounter."

Their January 28th performance in Boston will exhibit the group's eclectic inspirations. The evening's program includes a quartet by Russian composer Alfred Schnittke along with three Beethoven pieces. The Schnittke quartet borrows from Beethoven's Grosse fuge and 16th century composer Orlando de Lassus; Nørgaard says it combines Lassus's Catholic faith and Beethoven's anger—"almost shaking his fist to the sky"—with Schnittke "hovering in between, unsure. All the doubt of modern man is in [Schnittke's] music and he is looking back to find some answers."

Danish String Quartet

The New York Times

December 9, 2015

The Best Classical Music of 2015

Above, the Danish String Quartet performing the Carl Nielsen Quartet Cycle at the Rose Studio.

Danish String Quartet The adventurous young members of the Danish String Quartet play almost everything excitingly. Naturally, they bring exceptional insight and character to the four quartets of Denmark's own Carl Nielsen. In November, the ensemble played them in order for a lucky audience at the very intimate Rose Studio in Lincoln Center.

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Danish String Quartet

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

September 19, 2014

Radar

FALL CULTURE PREVIEW

The Danish String Quartet, from left: Frederik Øland, Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, Rune Tonsgaard Sørenson, and Absjørn Nørgaard.

MUSIC

DENMARK'S FAB FOUR

With their shaggy corn-silk hair and seafarer beards, the strapping members of the **Danish String Quartet** could be mistaken for 21st-century Vikings. But unlike their marauding forebears, this supremely gifted group of thirtysomething Scandinavians—three Danes who met as schoolboys and a Norwegian cellist—is out to conquer the world through sheer musical charisma. Already hailed as one of the finest ensembles of their generation, and now in the middle of a three-year residency at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, in New York City, the DSQ will continue to win over North American audiences this fall with a tour that includes Chicago; St. Paul, Minnesota; Washington, D.C.; Vancouver; New York City; and La Jolla and Santa Barbara, California. *Oct. 10–Nov. 18; danishquartet.com.*—PETER WEBSTER

Danish String Quartet

THE NEW YORKER

March 17, 2014

THE MUSICAL LIFE

LADS

Last month, during the Beatles-fiftieth-anniversary hoopla, a hot young European foursome with distinctive hairdos—Asbjørn Nørgaard, Frederik Øland, Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen—landed in New York for a high-profile gig. They are the Danish String Quartet, from Copenhagen, and they're at the beginning of a three-year residency with CMS Two, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's emerging-stars program. A few nights before a concert at Alice Tully Hall (which yielded raucous cheering, four curtain calls, and a woman exclaiming, "This has never happened before!"), they laced up their sneakers and hit the town.

The evening began at Bar Centrale, where they slid into a booth and ordered margaritas. Their instruments were in Chelsea, locked in a room with a man named Max, awaiting a late-night set in the bar at the McKittrick Hotel, on Twenty-seventh Street. "They're not our instruments—we borrow them from generous Scandinavian foundations," Nørgaard, the viola player, said. He has a full beard and hair that evokes Björn Borg's at its fluffiest. "They're a work tool, but also a piece of history. My viola is four hundred and fifty years old."

"My violin was built in 1708, in Venezia," Øland said. He has a swoop of yellow hair and wore a black T-shirt with a galaxy on it. As drinks arrived, he admired a Manhattan served with a "dividend"—a little extra drink, in a carafe, on ice. "It's like a My Little Chemist set," he said.

Sjölin, the cellist, is Norwegian. (He started the beard trend. "He came in with this Norwegian Viking look," Nørgaard said. "My wife said I looked like a little boy. She said, 'Fredrik has a beard, can't you?' ") Sjölin's cello is from 1688. "People who play the instrument also form the instrument," he said. "It's kind of a hippie thing to say, but true."

Sørensen's violin is from the eighteenth century, on loan from the Goof Foundation. "Yeah, Goof," he said. "He was a dentist, and he started buying instruments." (Actually, Goof was a dentally inclined businessman.) Sørensen has shaggy hair and wore a T-shirt with an image of a man who had a birdcage for a head. "It's a rather feminine instrument, very light and slim. Before it, I played a Stradivarius."

That night, they were seeing the Cotton Club revue "After Midnight," on Broadway. They like jazz, and other genres—indie, folk, bluegrass—with one caveat.

Sjölin: "I hate the word 'crossover.' "

"Like, 'Oh, my God, classical is boring—we have to fix it,' " Nørgaard said.

They do not find classical music boring. The three Danes met as boys, at an all-ages summer music camp, where long days spent playing violin and viola came with interludes of soccer and romance.

"It was the magic week of our year," Nørgaard said.

"The week after, so empty, the worst week of the year," Sørensen said.

Øland said, "Everywhere else, you have to play perfectly, but there you'd pick the hardest thing you could, and just *play*." He shook his head, smiling. "You'd get kidnapped by some old dudes and play fifteen Beethoven string quartets."

"After Midnight" had a similar blend of discipline and joy. The group sat with Wu Han, the artistic director of the Chamber Music Society, and watched in amazement as the show unfolded—Fantasia, tap dancing, feathers, red balloons, cartwheels, the Jazz at Lincoln Center All-Stars, "East St. Louis Toodle-oo." At the curtain call, they clapped and hollered. In the car, Wu Han said, "The way the girl used the vibrato was so *sexy*."

"It was a very sexy show in general," Sørensen said.

At the McKittrick, before the set, there was time to catch the end of "Sleep No More," the nightmare-funhouse "Macbeth" spectacle. The Scandinavians found themselves navigating dark hallways, wearing white masks, with beaks. "This is like 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre,' " Øland said. They observed fistfights, negligees, and taxidermy, and, Nørgaard later pointed out, heard what sounded like Herrmann's "Psycho: A Suite for Strings."

The Danish String Quartet

"Maybe for a New Yorker it's not that strange, but to go from the most happy show on earth to this, with people getting murdered, it's very strange," Nørgaard said.

The hotel's Manderley Bar was an anteroom to normalcy, but only just: red walls, stray masks, candlelit tables. The musicians sat onstage under orange and blue lights, and raised their bows. With precision and warmth, they played the last movement of the Beethoven "Serioso," Opus 95—sombre, then urgent, and ending with a flourish of happiness. The audience waited several seconds, in silence. Then it went crazy.

—*Sarah Larson*

Danish String Quartet

the Strad

ESSENTIAL READING FOR THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

February 18, 2016

2016 Borletti-Buitoni Trust awards go to Danish String Quartet and violinist Alexandra Conunova

The grants, worth £20,000 and £30,000, are also awarded to Calidore String Quartet, violinist Maria Milstein and violist Eivind Holtsmark Ringstad

The Borletti-Buitoni Trust has named the recipients of its 2016 Awards and Fellowships, including a number of string players.

The Danish String Quartet (pictured) – winner of the 11th London International String Quartet Competition and a former BBC New Generation Artist – receives a BBT Award, worth £30,000.

BBT Fellowships, each worth £20,000, go to the multi award-winning Calidore String Quartet from the USA; 27-year-old violinist Alexandra Conunova from Moldova, winner of the Joseph Joachim Competition in Hannover; violinist Maria Milstein from Russia, a founder member of the Van Baerle Trio; and violist Eivind Holtsmark Ringstad from Norway, first prize winner at the 2012 EBU Eurovision Young Musician Competition in Vienna.

A BBT Special Chamber Music Prize, worth €25,000 and given in honour of Claudio Abbado, goes to Quartetto Lyskamm from Italy, formerly mentored by the Artemis Quartet.

The Borletti-Buitoni Trust helps outstanding young musicians to develop and sustain international careers with financial awards, guidance and contacts, as well as public relations exposure. Since 2003, BBT has provided support to 96 individuals and ensembles from 30 countries.

Danish String Quartet

GRAMOPHONE
THE CLASSICAL MUSIC MAGAZINE

September 2, 2013

BBC Radio 3 2013 New Generation Artists announced

Supporting the next generation of promising young musicians with a series of live and recorded broadcasts

BBC Radio 3 has announced its 2013 New Generation Artists – six young musicians that the station believes have the potential to be the next classical stars. Now in its 15th year, the scheme supports the most promising musicians via a series of Radio 3 broadcasts over a two-year period - including live broadcasts with BBC orchestras, lunchtime concerts from around the UK and regular studio recordings. Over the years the scheme has nurtured such artists as Benjamin Grosvenor, Alison Balsom, the Belcea Quartet, Christine Rice and Gwilym Simcock.

This year's New Generation Artists are: the Danish String Quartet, winners of the 11th London International String Quartet Competition; British mezzo-soprano Kitty Whately, 2011 winner of the Kathleen Ferrier Award; Ukrainian mezzo-soprano Olena Tokar, finalist in the 2013 Cardiff Singer of the World competition; French viola player Lise Berthaud, winner of the Hindemith Prize at the Geneva International Competition in 2005; Swiss pianist Louis Schwitzgebel, second prize winner of the Leeds International Piano Competition; and Chinese pianist Zhang Zuo, first prize winner at the third Shanghai International Piano Competition and the 7th International Franz Liszt Piano Competition.

'It's fantastic to see this next wave of talented young musicians joining Radio 3's New Generation Artists scheme,' said BBC Radio 3 controller and Proms director Roger Wright. 'In its 15 years the scheme has showcased and nurtured some of the brightest musicians working in the classical music world today and we're looking forward to showcasing the 2013-2015 NGA artists to listeners across the UK.'

Danish String Quartet

The New York Times

April 21, 2023

The Danish String Quartet Spins Through Schubert

By Joshua Barone

Schubert's song "Gretchen am Spinnrade" famously imitates a spinning wheel in the piano: the left hand repeating the rhythm of a pedal, and the right whirling a phrase in perpetual motion. It's not exact, but it is evocative, like the Goethe poetry it's based on.

At Zankel Hall on Thursday, that spirit of repetition — oblique and constantly transforming — coursed through the third installment of the Danish String Quartet's "Doppelgänger" project, which pairs Schubert's late quartets with new commissions, and closes with an arrangement of a lied: in this case, "Gretchen."

Before that came Schubert's "Rosamunde" Quartet, a relatively light work among its "Doppelgänger" siblings, and the single-movement "Quartettsatz," as well as the world premiere of Anna Thorvaldsdottir's "Rituals," a slippery but entrancing series of permutations in which a set of musical gestures are rearranged like matter.

That piece rarely repeats itself, but the Schubert ones do; the violist Asbjorn Norgaard, speaking from the stage, described the "Rosamunde" as one of the most repetitive works in the quartet repertoire. (Philip Glass would like a word.) But it was less so on Thursday as the Danes — Norgaard, as well as the violinists Frederik Oland and Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen, and the cellist Fredrik Schoyen Sjolin — skipped the written reprises of the first two movements' opening sections.

Those cuts make for a slightly shorter performance, perhaps not even easily noticed by a casual listener, but not a materially different experience. More striking was the playing itself, in both the "Rosamunde" and the "Quartettsatz": unshowy, soft with an ember glow, charismatically dancing. Phrases were passed around with ease; rhythms and voices doubled seamlessly. At any given moment there was, as David Allen recently observed in The New York Times, the impression that each note had been considered. This was ensemble music at its purest — a consensus interpretation, rendered selflessly in service of the group as instrument.

Thorvaldsdottir's "Rituals" wasn't written as a direct response to Schubert, but in the context of Thursday's program it came off as something of a distant cousin; her work is less interested in repeating whole passages, but like her Viennese predecessor she obsesses here over gestures, reshaping them, foregrounding and obscuring them, layering them in explorations of counterpoint and compatibility.

Read into the title what you will: daily routines, ceremonies, religion. They all are implied in the piece's nine sections — effectively made 11 by two "Ascension" interludes with the rich harmony of a chorale and the serene lyricism of a hymn. The segments flow into one another without pause, except for some written rests, and unfold organically, each little motif introduced then recurring in a new guise.

At the start are sputtering bows and glissando slides over a droning foundation that is occasionally built out into briefly sustained, then shifting chords. Those textures — others come along, including percussive col legno and open fifths that flip steady ground into weightless suspension — glide among the instruments, a vocabulary ordered then reordered, always expressing a fresh thought. Thorvaldsdottir, in a mode characteristically abstract yet suggestive, could prolong an idea like this ad infinitum. But at 21 minutes, her score speaks with poetic concision, ending before it has overstated its point.

About poetry: The Danes concluded their recital with a Schubertian arrangement of "Gretchen am Spinnrade," in which the first violin acted as the soprano. But they also introduced a fifth instrument, a music box. As Oland turned its handle, the machine spun out a roll of paper punched with the swirling piano line — seeming to repeat itself but, in its small changes, irresistibly

Moving.

Danish String Quartet

The Boston Globe

January 30, 2023

Danish String Quartet brings the surprise

At Jordan Hall on Friday night, this casually fearless ensemble performed classical selections and Nordic folk music.

By Jeremy Eichler

The program on paper may have looked like a jumble of conventional works, one member of the Danish String Quartet pointed out, speaking from the stage of Jordan Hall at Friday evening's Celebrity Series recital. But, he added, the selected works by Haydn, Shostakovich, and Britten were in fact united by the element of musical surprise.

In another ensemble's hands, the statement might have added up to a well-intended but ultimately meaningless cliche — doesn't all good music surprise on some level? — but this was not another ensemble. The Danish String Quartet, a youthful foursome with a casually fearless air, has earned its renown by matching a kind of preternatural ensemble precision with a sense of spontaneity and — yes — surprise.

And sure enough, the quartet's playing embodied the evening's stated theme from the outset. This was some of the most technically adroit and at the same time cracklingly vital quartet playing I've heard in a very long time. The evening's first work, Haydn's Quartet in G minor, Op. 20, no. 3, has plenty of the unexpected baked into the score itself, with unpredictable phrase lengths, dynamic shifts, and moments of rhetorical high drama. The Danish Quartet played up these moments to the max without ever tipping into

caricature. Actual laughs could be heard in the audience as listeners responded to Haydn's humor.

Rather strikingly, in the Trio section of Haydn's Minuet movement, violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen gave a preview of the folk-style fiddling that the group would showcase in the program's second half, taking on Haydn's solo line with a rustic manner that made it sound like a ditty overheard in a country tavern. Even with these liberties taken, however, the performance as a whole somehow came across not as artificially mannered Haydn, but rather straight-up Haydn simply played with much more character and imagination than one typically hears.

The same could be said for the Danish's account of Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 7, its slow movement showcasing the group's vast palette of tone color and its closing finale ripped through with hair-raising intensity. Britten's Three Divertimenti were likewise boldly characterized, with the quartet delivering the full theatricality, wit, and playfully modernistic rhetoric of these youthful essays.

After intermission, the group offered a set of traditional Nordic folk music in its own arrangements, with each selection introduced from the stage and the set as a whole capped, rather improbably, with an encore of Elvis Presley's "I Can't Stop Loving You." Their joyfully freewheeling renditions of tunes such as "Kisti du Com" from Sweden, "Marie Louise" from Denmark, and "Regin Smidue" from the Faroe Islands, delighted the hall. Nor was there any of the attendant awkwardness, that sense of genre tourism, that can sometimes hang over those occasions when conservatory-trained musicians "let down their hair" in so-called crossover repertoire. In fact the beauty of the evening as a whole — and its ultimate surprise — came in how the classical works were played with the vitality of folk music, and the folk music was offered with the care and virtuosity of classical repertoire.

Let's hope the quartet as a whole returns next season. Meanwhile, Sorensen, the violinist, will be back in town next month — as one-third of the Nordic folk trio Dreamers' Circus, coming to the Celebrity Series on Feb. 24.

Danish String Quartet

The Boston Globe

August 4, 2022

Danish String Quartet stuns at Ozawa Hall

By A.Z. Madonna

Wednesday evening, the crowd that gathered at Tanglewood's Seiji Ozawa Hall for the Danish String Quartet's performance could be divided into two camps: those who had at least some idea of what they might be in for, and those who had none. My concert buddy, an arts-marketing professional and lifelong cellist, was in the latter camp, and by intermission his eyes were alight. "I could listen to them play anything," he said several times. Likewise, the woman behind me on my way out: "So how was that?" I heard her friend ask, and I turned around to see her struggle to find words through a wide smile.

Going into this performance, I was solidly in the first group. I'd seen several videos of the quartet online, as well as a virtual concert by Dreamer's Circus, violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen's Nordic folk band. But nothing could have truly prepared me for the tornado of energy that the quartet unleashed with its performance of Schubert's String Quartet No. 14, "Death and the Maiden." Cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin dropped a subtle hint of what was to come when he led the quartet onto the stage, not so much walking through the stage door as leaping.

But there wasn't much time to process

that before the foursome attacked the first descending scales, letting the stark sound echo and dwindle in Ozawa's rafters. The eminently hummable foundational melody of the second movement (borrowed from the composer's own song "Death and the Maiden") was rendered in a misty, translucent texture that lent a ghostly, foreboding quality to both it and the many variations that followed, individually distinct though they were. The players seemed to dance in their seats: In certain moments, it would have felt like no surprise if they got up and whirled around the stage.

With that, the galloping theme of the final movement — played with surprising sweetness in its first few incidences — turned into a seductive danse macabre, bridging twitchy interludes where the violins seemed to scream in terror. Everything around was improbably in tune with the music, from a stray alarm bell to a crow cawing outside: When Sørensen, playing first violin, smacked a stray piece of score with his bow to keep it from falling, it sounded uncannily like a whip crack, and on beat at that — perhaps the maiden fleeing Death on horseback? The standing ovation was nearly instantaneous.

So what is it about them that prompts such acclaim? It's not their technique — slobs they are not, but there are ensembles with more polish. Neither is it a commitment to any particular style of music, or style of playing. For my part, I've got to give it to two things: their commitment to connecting and contextualizing music from all areas of the concert music tradition and beyond, and the unbridled joy they take in playing with one another. Whether playing the well-traveled quartet, or Lotta Wennäkoski's thorny "Pige" (the main event of the second half) or the Danish folk tune "Five Sheep, Four Goats" that they offered as an encore, there was every indication that they were having the time of their lives.

"Pige," Danish for "girl," which was commissioned by the group as a companion piece to the "Death and the Maiden" quartet, offered an intentionally striking contrast to the melody-driven first half. Writing about the piece, the composer expressed her wish to convey the perspective of the "maiden," and the first movement seemed to translate the rhythms and cadences of a young woman's speech onto the stringed instruments. The second movement indulged in extended techniques and insect-like sounds, perhaps a little overly so: The music gelled more in the finale, a "scrapbook" of jumbled samples from various sources, including Schubert's songs and Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun," which ended with the cellist gleefully ripping a sheet of paper. The program ended as it began, with Schubert: the quartet's arrangement of the "Death and the Maiden" song.

Conventional wisdom would have dictated that the order of the program be reversed, with the source material first, then the contemporary piece as a prelude to the main event. (The first movement of "Pige" can be performed as a prologue to the "Death and the Maiden" quartet, according to the program notes.) But turning conventional wisdom (metaphorically) on its head seems to work for these four: So it was literally as well.

Danish String Quartet

The New York Times

April 22, 2022

One Night, Several String Quartet Premieres

By Joshua Barone

The men of the Danish String Quartet — the violinists Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and Frederik Øland, the violist Asbjørn Nørgaard and the cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin — are masters of juxtaposition.

Their enlightening "Prism" albums trace lines from Bach's fugues to late Beethoven and works of the 20th century. Another series, "Doppelgänger," pairs Schubert's final quartets (and his finest piece of chamber music, the String Quintet in C) with premieres that respond to them.

"Doppelgänger" has had a delayed start in New York. Because of the pandemic, Part I will arrive here last; on Thursday, the second installment came first, featuring the famous "Death and the Maiden" Quartet (D. 810) and Wennäkoski's "Pige."

Nørgaard introduced "Death and the Maiden" as "almost the definition of the Romantic string quartet," though you wouldn't have guessed that at first in the group's interpretation — a controlled accumulation that built toward a sprinting and desperate tarantella.

This work's nickname comes from Schubert's earlier song "Der Tod und das Mädchen," whose funereal opening serves as the theme for the second movement. Sørensen, as the first violin, was a stand-in for the Maiden, his articulation at the start delicate, even reticent. As the music becomes more animated, it lashes out and retreats, torn between fury and woe; the Danish players opted for restraint, their command of the score absolute but their passion understated.

In the second movement, they revealed the power in Schubert's pauses, particularly with a patient ending, like an attempt to prolong its moment of peace. That couldn't last forever, though: At the coda of that tarantella finale, here impressively cohesive amid increasingly frantic chorales and unstable runs, Death arrives in a sudden minor-key turn, delivered in grandly Romantic fashion.

"Pige" (Danish for "Girl") shifts the focus from Death to the Maiden. As response pieces go, this one reflects less on the quartet — though nods to it abound, as in a version of Schubert's long-short-short rhythm — and more on the original song. Schubert's quartet never quotes the Maiden's verse, which gets its due in the first movement of "Pige," a series of phrases that start and disintegrate in wispy fragments and fading arpeggios.

Throughout, Wennäkoski balances extended technique and expressive lyricism, sometimes layering the two, but bringing the instruments together for affecting silences. Then comes the bright, episodic finale, "The Girl and the Scrapbook," which takes flight with up-bow flourishes and a casual reference to Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." In the final measure, the cellist (Schubert's voice for Death in the quartet) tears a sheet of paper — "slowly and continuously," the score says, at a forte.

The group followed "Pige" with a transcription of "Der Tod und das Mädchen," a straightforward treatment with a touch of frostiness in trilled harmonics. That could have been a baked-in encore, but the Danish players returned with another arrangement: of "Der Doppelgänger," the series's namesake.

They referred to it as "one of Schubert's best songs." I'd agree, and add that it's also one of his most terrifying, which they teased out by building on its harmonic ambiguity for a tension almost as discomfiting as the thought of death itself.

Danish String Quartet

Santa Barbara Independent

May 1, 2022

Danish String Quartet at UCSB's Campbell Hall

By Charles Donelan

It's been a whirlwind season of artistic triumphs for classical music in Santa Barbara, with all of our city's prominent organizations dedicated to that art back in person and in fine form. Adding immeasurably to these cultural riches, UCSB Arts & Lectures has embarked on an ambitious program of presenting the world's finest musicians and commissioning innovative new works for them. We saw and heard Jennifer Koh and Davóne Tines making musical history with *Everything Rises* at Campbell Hall just a month ago. Last week, on April 27, the Danish String Quartet (DSQ) returned to resume the presentation of their A&L commissioned project, the Doppelgänger.

This undertaking aims at nothing less than a comprehensive reimagining of the core of the Romantic string quartet repertoire. Approaching one of the most significant quartets ever written as a source and inspiration, Finnish composer Lotta Wennäkoski took Franz Schubert's String Quartet No. 14 in D Minor, D. 810, "Death and the Maiden," and built her response to it, *Pige*, to better express the maiden's point of view.

The program began with the Danish String Quartet stretching out on Schubert's original, an astonishingly fine

piece of music of seemingly infinite depth. After the interval, they returned to bring some musical news. While Death was once the dance leader, "the future belongs to the girl." Wennäkoski's composition began in turbulent conversation; moved into ringing, bell-like tones; and achieved a final lyricism before the cellist signaled its conclusion by tearing the score in half.

Another brief version of "Death and the Maiden" arranged by the DSQ closed out the main program, which the musicians followed with an encore expressing their homesickness based on a Danish folk song known as "Who Can Sail Without the Wind?" These musicians have elevated string quartet music beyond the expectations of even the most discerning connoisseur, and it is a privilege to welcome them as frequently as we do.

Danish String Quartet

Palm Beach Daily News

March 31, 2022

Danish String Quartet wows crowd at Four Arts

By Sarah Hutchings

The Society of the Four Arts hosted the charming Danish String Quartet on a windy Wednesday evening in the Walter S. Gubelmann Auditorium.

This unassuming group has performed together since they were friends at school. The group began with three Danes, violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard. Later in 2008, they added Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, whom they described as someone that "...looked like a character from 'Game of Thrones.'" They like their beards and poking fun at each other. They also want us to understand their raison d'être: to have fun and share their endearing camaraderie with audiences.

The Danish String Quartet offered unique programming choices, beginning with Benjamin Britten's "Three Divertimenti for String Quartet." Written in 1936, this deconstructed set of courtly dances includes a March, Waltz, and Burlesque as movements. The divertimenti are not meant to be taken too seriously and are offered as light entertainment, justly keeping with the ensemble's ethos.

However, the music provided intellectual stimulation as the audience experienced the familiar dance meters through Britten's compositional lens. Like Joseph Haydn, Britten's music contains many humorous moments as he easily embeds musical "jokes" into his works.

Each piece in the Britten set was a wonder of bowing precision and control that required difficult stops and chops of the bow. The players knew how to ring their instruments in the hall on releases to add extra effect. The final movement, the Burlesque, was technically perfect and equitably balanced in the instruments. The audience particularly liked the pizzicato passages, responding with enthusiastic applause.

In an unusual programming choice, the quartet combined dances from works by contemporary American composer John Adams, the French Baroque composer Marc-Antoine Charpentier and the Romantic Russian pianist and composer Felix Blumenfeld into a piece called "An Alleged Suite."

The effect was almost like a dance and variation, beginning with the regal Charpentier "Prelude" and injected with movements from Adams' "John's Book of Alleged Dances." The musicians seem to crave technical complexity; indeed, they excel at it. But confronted with the Charpentier, the French Baroque idiom seemed a shock to their program while again asking us to have fun and not take this too seriously. Only when they passionately played through the musical sequences did the power of the combined suite become clear.

The quartet returned to the stage after intermission to perform a cornerstone of string quartet literature, Franz Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" quartet (String Quartet No. 14 in D minor, D. 810). Each movement was performed with fire and technical

agility, with an astounding clarity of balance in the ensemble.

The best responses of the evening came from a group of string students in attendance who were “wowed” by the ensemble’s presentation and inspired to go home and practice more on their instruments. For many, it was their first exposure to curated John Adams and the Britten “Divertimenti.” In the end, this may be The Society of the Four Arts' greatest triumph: inspiring the next generation.

Danish String Quartet

San Francisco Chronicle

October 11, 2021

Danish String Quartet mines the world of doubles for expressive gold

By Joshua Kosman

The concept of a doppelgänger, a mysterious twin or double, is like clowns and thunderstorms — mostly scary, but not always. Even something this unsettling can sometimes bring its own level of reassuring comfort.

"Doppelgänger," the rich and elegant string quartet by Danish composer Bent Sørensen that had its U.S. premiere in Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall on Sunday, Oct. 10, is of that latter type. It's a warm, soothing bathrobe of a piece, playing tricks with our musical memories in a way that serves to reassure, not spook, the listener.

Sørensen's 25-minute work was the centerpiece of a compelling program by the Danish String Quartet, presented by Cal Performances, and it marked the beginning of a fascinating commissioning project by the ensemble. For this undertaking — also titled "Doppelgänger" — the quartet invited a group of composers to pick a Schubert string quartet and write a new piece as a companion.

On this occasion, Sørensen took as his inspiration Schubert's G-Major Quartet, D. 887, the composer's final work in the form and itself a morass of ambiguities and subtle shifts in emphasis. At the heart of Schubert's piece, which occupied the first half of Sunday's program in a resplendently still-voiced rendition, is a simple but far-reaching question: Is the music in G major or G minor?

For a piece of tonal music, this is an existential quandary — or at least, it can be treated as such by a composer. That's what Schubert does, creating a mood of slippery uncertainty by constantly switching back and forth between major and minor within the space of a single melodic phrase. Especially in the two outer movements, this has the effect of destabilizing everything we thought we knew about the musical landscape; the ground seems to crumble constantly beneath our feet. Yet the slow movement counteracts that image through an almost series of weightless harmonies.

The Danish Quartet — violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, violist Asbjørn Nørgaard, and cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin — emphasized this duality in a beautiful rendition that encompassed both the music's serenity and anxieties.

Sørensen's piece, which followed intermission, seemed intent on picking up only the sunnier half of the Schubertian split, which is by no means a criticism. Sometimes a haunted house feels all the more arresting for having a light shone upon its interior.

More important, Sørensen's two-movement work boasts its own ambiguities, including an elusive sense of form and a way of repeatedly tickling the listener's memory. The conflict between G major and G minor is revisited in the opening measures, which quote the harmonies of Schubert's first movement and the instrumental texture of his third; after that, Sørensen uses Schubertian gestures for his own expressive ends.

This is most apparent in the gorgeous second movement, a slow chorale that somehow morphs into in an instrumental aria for the second violin and then a delicate ballroom dance for marionettes. Schubert's doubts rear their heads in the quartet's final moments, in which a definitive G-major conclusion suddenly gives way to an open-ended question mark.

Schubert's late song "Der Doppelgänger," arranged by the quartet, made a terrifically apt conclusion, its dark, lugubrious harmonies undermining — or at least casting a shadow backward on — the previous delights. In the world of twins and doubles, nothing stays the same for long.

Danish String Quartet

Santa Barbara Independent

October 18, 2021

Danish String Quartet at the Rockwood

By Charles Donelan

It's a common programming procedure in the chamber music world to pair works from the standard repertoire with new compositions. Do people come for the familiar and stay for the new, or is it the other way around? At this genuinely brilliant recital by the Danish String Quartet, the answer was both. In the first part of the concert, that quartet stretched out in a dreamy exploration of Franz Schubert's massive and intoxicating *String Quartet in G Major, D. 887, op. 161*. Violist Asbjørn Nørgaard introduced the piece by calling attention to Schubert's immense authority as a composer of songs, saying that the composer's gift for melody serves to slow the listener down, even to the point where one's conscious mind "goes away for a little bit," as he put it. The DSQ's performance of this lengthy piece was sensational — focused, symmetrical, and perfectly blended, offering listeners an ideal opportunity to appreciate the composer's expansive lyricism and adventurous dynamics.

The second half featured the premiere of Bent Sørensen's *Doppelgänger* along with the DSQ's arrangement of Schubert's *Doppelgänger* lieder from the *Schwanengesang* cycle. Sørensen's piece gave immediate notice that whatever explicit relation it might bear to the work of Schubert, this was 21st-century music, make no mistake. The DSQ excelled in revealing the inherent musicality within the composer's rich vocabulary of extended techniques and sonic effects. The musicians growled as one in the slow opening section of the second movement, and they sent up airy clouds of organ-like chords when called upon to do so. The finale, a superb transformation of Schubert's *Doppelgänger* song into the musical idiom of the string quartet, expressed the eerie dilemma of the besotted and bewildered protagonist with uncanny vitality.

Danish String Quartet

bachtrack

September 13, 2021

DANISH STRING QUARTET PRESENTS SUBLIME SCHUBERT AND SØRENSEN PAIRING

By Rose Dodd

In Amsterdam's Muziekgebouw, the Danish String Quartet began its four-year *Doppelgänger* project, exploring Schubert's string quintet and the last three quartets, each to be paired with a signal commission. The grouping of composers within this extended conversation underlines the seriousness of intent. Bent Sørensen, Lotta Wennäkoski, Anna Thorvaldsdottir and Thomas Adès' new works will be framed by Schubert's great string works, offering to each new work, a reflection of one to the other... and so, Doppelgänger.

This journey began with *Doppelgänger – 1*, pairing Schubert's great final *String Quartet no. 15 in G major*, D887, with Sørensen's *Döppelganger*, the programme aptly closing with an arrangement of Schubert's song *Der Doppelgänger* from *Schwanengesang*.

Four chairs centre stage evoked similar expectancy to an orchestra tuning up, marking anticipation of an incoming artistic hustle. Warm applause greeted the quartet, after which viola player Asbjørn Nørgaard addressed the audience, chatting engagingly about their hopes for the project. Acknowledging the length of Schubert's great G major quartet, famously epic until Morton Feldman's six-hour long *String Quartet no. 2* superseded it in 1983, the feeling of journeying into a long Nordic saga was evoked. Pleasantries over, the playing began.

Breezy Scandinavian air blew effortlessly through the Main Hall, the verve of this new project unfolding with conviction across the evening. The *Allegro* of Schubert's substantive quartet oscillated between courtly melodies placed thoughtfully in opposition to more passionate phrasing in counterbalance. A sweetly graceful *Andante* followed, with the precision trio of violins and viola supporting the cello's melodic line. Surety of phrasing by violinist Frederik Øland in the Scherzo marked the pace; in the *Allegro*, Øland's grip on tempo, and timbral voicings were special, blending perfectly into a sumptuous whole.

Amsterdam audiences are sophisticated in their listening credentials and the concentration in the hall was rapt, held unswervingly – gently but firmly – in perfect string quartet form by four performers who are mature exponents in their jointly articulated language.

Bent Sørensen's *Döppelganger* responded acutely to the commission, mirroring what he found in Schubert's quartet. In his preamble, Nørgaard helpfully invoked the idea of Sørensen's piece as sketching a "timeless room", guiding the audience's imagination in the specialised musical geography of Sørensen's sonic vocabulary. Fictional detective Sherlock Holmes' fancy, the mind palace, resplendent with many rooms, seems an appropriate way to

encapsulate Sørensen's myriad imaginings. Notions of what could be termed idiomatic string quartet language, in a variety of contrived, condensed string textures, played across fast motivic language in alternation. Lyrical, structured language playfully bounced across normative gestures of quartet repertoire, rising, falling and rushing around many newly created rooms.

Thrilling listening moved us through time as we turned familiar corners, feeling similar yet burnished with new coloration and impetus. Suddenly there was a dramatic *grand pause* – presenting a highly romanticised focal point, suspended in a chorale outside time. A pure room of beauty and ascendance, reminiscent of a surging 1940s soundtrack, was sustained for some time. The work was greeted with fervent applause and a shouted "Wow!"

After these two rich works were embedded in our memory, Schubert's *Der Doppelgänger* provided a judiciously short conclusion, reuniting with sumptuous classical language, the concert's structure felt completed.

Combining the old with the new, the Danish String Quartet have set sail on a joyous voyage. With a relaxed and easy demeanour, their communication is direct. Through this *Doppelgänger* project reconciliation between both languages may be eased. And certainly – wow! Sørensen's work will surely assimilate into the classic repertoire. What a start to such an innovative and wide-ranging endeavour. Is it really that we must wait a whole entire year until the next episode?

Danish String Quartet

The New York Times

February 20, 2020

A Quartet Sets a New Standard for Beethoven Marathons

The Danish String Quartet presented the composer's complete quartets over six extraordinary concerts at Alice Tully Hall.

By Anthony Tommasini

Almost 15 years ago, the men of the Danish String Quartet — they were in their 20s, at the time, and still called themselves the "Young" Danish — said in an interview that they would need to become more mature before daring to play Beethoven's late string quartets in public.

It didn't take that long for these prodigiously gifted musicians to get over their youthful reticence. In 2014, for their first Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center performance at Alice Tully Hall, they ended a program with an urgent, yet cogent, spacious and mystical account of the Quartet in A minor (Op. 132). And they were back there this month for a series of six concerts, again presented by the society, devoted to all 16 of Beethoven's quartets performed in chronological order.

Over the years, the Danish quartet has played these pieces individually. But this is only the second time they attempted a daunting complete cycle — about nine hours of music. Tully was packed for all six programs, which opened on Feb. 7

and concluded on Tuesday. This year, the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth, is going to offer lots of complete cycles. It's always difficult to bring fresh takes to pervasively familiar repertory, but the standard set by this quartet will be especially hard to top.

As a rule, I'm not keen on complete Beethoven cycles, precisely because these scores remain such fixtures of our musical lives. I prefer programs that take on Beethoven by juxtaposing his pieces with works by other composers. That's the approach the Danish quartet took in two recent recordings on the ECM label, "Prism I" and "Prism II," which place two late Beethoven quartets in context with Bach fugues and 20th-century quartets by Shostakovich and Schnittke.

But perhaps Beethoven's string quartets could benefit from being heard complete if they're in order, spanning the composer's career. And how many opportunities do we get to hear, say, the "Serioso" Quartet?

Or, for that matter, the six early quartets published together as Op. 18. For all the command these probing musicians demonstrated in their riveting accounts of the late quartets, their excellence came through most in bracing performances of the early works.

Beethoven modeled those Op. 18 quartets on Haydn — his teacher, who essentially invented the genre of string quartet. Here Beethoven was honoring him by writing works within the protocols of form and style that Haydn had developed. But there is an element of one-upmanship at play. Beethoven is taking on the master, showing what, in a sense, a "Haydn" quartet could really be.

There was some of that impish quality in the Danish quartet's playing, despite its elegance and brilliance. From the first phrase of the opening work, the Quartet in D (Op. 18, No. 3), the blissfully lyrical violin melody, soaring over seemingly supportive harmonies in the other strings, sounded cozy and alluring, but just a touch sly. Sure enough, before long an episode of spiraling passages in triples seemed like a warning for us to listen below the sunny surface.

It's difficult to explain what makes the Danish String Quartet's playing so special. Other ensembles arguably match these players in technical excellence and interpretive insight. To say that their performances represent a marvelous balancing of qualities suggests that they occupy some place in the middle of the road. The results are anything but: There is a winning mix of studied concentration and willful freedom in their playing. "All Scandinavians feel like they have a bit of an anarchist inside them," Asbjorn Norgaard, the group's violist, said in a 2016 interview. That came through during this entire series.

Their technical command resulted in precise execution. Yet they played with enough leeway to allow instinctive responses to take over in the moment. You might assume that musicians in their 30s would bring youthful energy to bear, but I was struck by how often they opted for a raptly restrained tempo. Rhythms were dispatched with clarity and exactitude, without a trace of rigidity.

They have a shared sensibility and richly blended sound. But that doesn't stop their individual musical characters from continuously shining through. (The members, besides Mr. Norgaard, are Frederik Oland and Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen, who trade playing first and second violin parts, and Fredrik Schoyen Sjolin, a Norwegian cellist who has been with the ensemble since 2008.)

The big endurance test of the cycle was the third program, in which they played the three "Razumovsky" Quartets (Op. 59), from 1806. Here is the towering Beethoven, the composer as revolutionary, striding across the pages of these scores — brash, adventurous and ingenious. I found the performance here of the middle one, in E minor, especially distinguished. The Danish quartet brought out both the brooding weightiness and near-crazed intensity of the music. The ebullient third, in C, ends with a quasi-fugue finale, a breathlessly fast tour de force with streams of rapid-fire notes. For an encore, they repeated the final large section of that movement.

And, with nothing to prove, they played with an extra dose of daring.

It's hard to single out movements, or even moments, from the ensemble's accounts of the late quartets. I loved how they began the Quartet No. 12 in E-flat (Op. 127), which opens with what seems a fanfare, in thick chords, that soon spins off into a genial exploration of a winding theme. The Danish quartet underlined this passage with grit and urgency that sent a signal: A gate to a new path had been opened.

They ended the Quartet No. 13 in B-flat (Op. 130) with the original finale, the Grosse Fuge, not the benign substitute Beethoven replaced it with at the urging of his publisher. That section still comes across like the fugue to end all fugues, with outbursts of sputtering rhythms, obsessively hammered attacks and tangles of wayward counterpoint. As played here it sounded audacious, extreme and, finally, exhilarating.

The players showed imagination in closing programs with short encores, including a harmonically juiced-up arrangement of Beethoven's popular piano piece "Für Elise" and, on Valentine's Day, "My Funny Valentine." But after the series ended on Tuesday with the Quartet in F (Op. 135), they returned to the stage without their instruments, joined arms shoulder-to-shoulder and smiled to the cheering audience. They gave Beethoven the last word. Which was right.

Danish String Quartet

LIMELIGHT

AUSTRALIA'S CLASSICAL MUSIC AND ARTS MAGAZINE

February 9, 2020

BEETHOVEN: THE EARLY QUARTETS

Three Danes and a Norwegian exhibit crystal clarity and an imaginative eye to the future in early Beethoven.

By Clive Paget

It may be only February, but critical eyes and ears are already swimming with all the Beethoven on offer in this, the composer's 250th birthday year. Given the plethora of opportunities to hear his music in concert, many of them occasions for marathon cycles, making the right choices are crucial for those who fear an early onset of "Beethoven fatigue". Performing as part of Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's 2020 program, the magnificent Danish String Quartet, I'm happy to report, is about as far from fatiguing as you can get.

The DSQ's New York traversal of the complete Beethoven string quartets is coming off the back of volumes 1 and 2 of their outstanding "Prism" series, a five-album survey of the late quartets for ECM that pairs each one with a resonating contemporary work. Two packed-to-the-rafters concerts in and you can feel not just a tangible sense of artistic vision, but already there is a keen anticipation of the shape of things to come in the four remaining gigs.

Like the Op. 2 Piano Sonatas, or his Op. 21 First Symphony, Beethoven's Op. 18

set of six string quartets seems to mark the current state of play as far as the genre is concerned. The composer's fingerprints are certainly there – the dramatic flair, the rhythmic quirks, the enviable array of memorable themes – but there's also a sense of a man who's still covering ground well-trodden by Mozart and Haydn. Boundaries are sometimes tested, but the commercially canny composer is not going to lose a lucrative domestic sale by bewildering the consumer just yet.

Given those twin aims, a quartet is faced with a choice to go at them hell-for-leather and emphasise the new, or alternatively to explore the tensions within, hinting at what might be around the corner while respecting the 18th-century gallantries at the heart of the set. The DSQ (three Danes: violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard, plus Norwegian Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin on cello), it seems, is opting for the latter path, and it's a sound decision, especially given their natural propensity for light, lean textures and gleaming tone.

Three virtues are immediately apparent: 1) these are players of considerable imagination; 2) the ensemble is tight as a drum; and 3) here are four men who love and respect Beethoven. Their obvious emotional bond translates into a jaunty camaraderie allied to an infectious joy in making music together. Their natural lightness of touch clarifies Beethoven's part-writing, while gently sprung rhythms and occasional bursts of mercurial fantasy keep the music on its toes. Contrasts are relished, and while they are careful never to overdo matters, at times you feel them peddling the composer's more novel ideas with a rhythmic dig in the ribs here or a cheeky sense of swagger there.

The poignant *Andante con moto* of the D Major Quartet (Op. 18's No 3, but actually the first of the six to be written) found them in seriously sublime mode. Here was warmly lyrical playing with a gentle lift emphasising the uniquely Beethovian side steps from key to key (though never at the cost of the music's organic ebb and flow). The exuberance of the F Major Quartet (called No 1, but actually the second composed) showcased their innate companionability – three of them have known each other since boyhood – tossing the themes back and forth with a friendly glance, teasing out the moments when one idea magically morphs into another, and diving down Beethoven's musical rabbit holes with a cheerful alacrity. The DSQ proved ideal advocates for these quartets as "social" affairs, in other words music the composer meant to be shared among friends.

In fact, Beethoven had studied with Haydn a few years earlier, and while behind his back the old man referred to the cocky youngster as "The Great Moghul" (i.e. a puffed-up bigshot), Beethoven was keen to pay homage to his teacher while serving up moments that players could latch onto as recognisably "Haydn". The DSQ was adept at bringing out such moments, capturing the Haydnesque geniality of the opening of the D Major Quartet (No 3) and the hijinks of its *Presto* finale. Equally praiseworthy was the Classical grace conjured throughout the A Major Quartet (No 5), and especially in the gallant *Adagio*, which introduces the theme and variations of its highly individual third movement. The tiny hiccups as the music gets into its stride and the stomping rush of the lively fifth variation were full of individuality and character.

But it was in the concluding B Flat Quartet (No 6) – Beethoven's emphatic full stop to his opening sallies in the form – that you sensed the Danes really starting to look to the future. The brisk, bubbly *Allegro con brio* was pure, idiomatic Beethoven, the contrasting second theme lovingly finessed. The curiously double-tongued *Adagio* with its weirdly shifting second theme benefited from the DSQ's minimal vibrato approach, while in the virtuoso romp through the *Scherzo* you could feel the composer's eye on prizes to come. The famous "La Malinconia" finale is where Beethoven finally puts his

iconoclastic cards on the table, and here the quartet's precise approach saw them bit by bit inching the insidiously gloomy theme forward. The music's toppling over into forced jollity was perfectly judged and they were similarly adept when it came to the jarring lapse as the "black dog" reasserted itself. This was dramatic playing of the highest quality, whetting our whistles for the eccentricities of the *Razumovsky* Quartets ahead.

In their engaging program notes the Danes acknowledge the modern habit of dressing up and the formal institution that is chamber music. But what is more important, they argue, is the sense of a journey, and an opportunity to experience a complete life in music. "It isn't about shining, big moments. It isn't about impressive endings with bows held high above our heads," they write. "And when we finally enter the realm of the late quartets, we will have ended up in a place where shiny surroundings and ironed shirts are of no importance. It is a place where there is only music left." Hear, hear! And with six quartets down and 10 to go, so far, so good (or should that say excellent?).

Danish String Quartet

LIMELIGHT

AUSTRALIA'S CLASSICAL MUSIC AND ARTS MAGAZINE

February 20, 2020

BEETHOVEN: THE LATE QUARTETS

One of today's great string quartets delivers unique accounts of Beethoven's music of the future.

★★★★★

By Clive Paget

A funny thing happened halfway through the Danish String Quartet's traversal of the Beethoven late string quartets – my foot started tapping. In itself, that isn't unusual, but if I add that we were deep in the thorny thickets of the *Grosse Fuge*, eyebrows might reasonably be raised. Perhaps the most demanding single movement Beethoven ever wrote, it's better known for its cerebral challenge and a certain stark – even brutal – austerity, but in the hands of the DSQ it sang, it danced and, more than any performance of the Op. 130 Quartet I can recall, it offered the most convincing argument for the composer ending the work with a 15-minute exercise in advanced counterpoint.

This wasn't an isolated incident, though. The DSQ – three Danes, Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen (alternating first and second violin) and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard, alongside Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin – had already impressed mightily in the Op. 18 quartets, exploring the tensions within these early works by hinting at what might be around the corner while

respecting the 18th-century gallantries at the heart of the set. Their take on the *Razumovskys* was full of wildness and fantasy, the three middle-period works erupting with the full force of the composer's mold-breaking creativity as channelled through the distinctively original musical personalities of the four players themselves.

The late quartets took us on a different journey altogether, to a place where "shiny surroundings and ironed shirts are of no importance – a place where there is only music left," as the DSQ wrote in one of their engaging programme notes. The first thing that strikes you is their tone, rich, full-bodied, yet flexible with an easy lightness at both the top and the bottom of the sound. A freshness of phrasing in faster movements was coupled with a subtle spotlighting here and there, while slower movements were given ample room to breathe. The silences, when they came, were always earned. Then there is the impeccable ensemble, tight, blended, but always allowing room for solo contributions to fly. And finally there's the considered approach, one that puts an individual stamp on the numerous fantastical episodes within these most capricious of quartets, but also lends a coherent shape to every movement and reveals a unique way of thinking about each of these five cornerstone works.

The E Flat, Op. 127 opened with bold, hefty chords presaging a clear-sighted reading with an energetic sense of forward momentum. The DSQ can be daredevil speed merchants when they put their minds to it, shooting the white water rapids of the *Scherzando vivace's* trio, but they also captured the skittish neuroses that pepper the surrounding passages. High-octane playing elsewhere made breathers like the *Adagio, ma non troppo e molto cantabile* especially rewarding, the long lines acquiring a contrasting sense of timelessness allied with a weightless lyricism. The stomping finale combined a warm geniality with episodes of slashing daring and an ethereal take on the magical coda.

The pensive openings to each of the late quartets gave plenty of opportunities for the DSQ to demonstrate their mastery of the *misterioso*. The start of the A Minor Op. 132 with its gently clashing harmonies felt original and exploratory – there's always a sense of probing intelligence about the DSQ – before the *Allegro* burst in full of breathless surprise and the kind of wide-eyed excitement in the face of new discoveries that is another trademark of the group. A sense of yearning in the first movement was matched by a second movement that felt more lugubrious (even world-weary) than jaunty, a fine prelude to what was an original take on the famous "Heiliger Dankegesang" *Andante*. Anxious dreamscapes hovered over this convalescent, and even the delicate trilling interludes offered no easy answers.

With their penchant for swords and sorcery (in their written notes, *The Lord of the Rings* is something of a touchstone), the eccentricities of the B Flat Op. 130 played right into the Danes' hands. The enigmatic opening movement was packed with debate, a sense of common purpose, and a feeling of insufficiently fruitful ideas tried and rejected. Elsewhere there was wit at work in the elfin round dance of the *Presto,* ditto in the "who's got the map" byways of the third movement and the waltzing elegance of the *Alla danza tedesca*. The effortless rise and fall of the great *Cavatina* was concentrated, hushed, and profoundly intense, before the dynamism of the aforementioned revelatory *Grosse Fuge,* its interludes

sprinkled with unexpected sweetness and light.

The group's sixth and final concert proved the culmination of all that had gone before. The challenges of the great single-movement C Sharp Minor, Op. 131 were met with a concentrated energy and stylish poise that steered them through the seven contrasting sections, while striking a haunted, even mournful note for much of the work's 40-minute unbroken span. A veiled wistfulness permeated even the *Allegro molto vivace*, and there was an aching nostalgia about the ensuing *Allegro moderato*. When they took joyous flight, as in the feather-light slitherings of the *Presto*, the sense of release was palpable with pizzicatos popping like corn. What they dredged up from the depths of this music was extraordinary, and all without overplaying a single bar of it.

Ending on a jocular note, a perky insouciance raised plenty of smiles and made the perfect palate cleanser out of the amiable Op. 135 F Major. This music feels like it's hard baked into the DSQ's DNA and, with the exception of the beautifully paced, deeply affecting *Lento assai*, it received a beautifully sprung performance full of chuckles and the occasional cocked-snook. Good-natured and conversational, the famous "Muss es sein?" "Es muss sein!" finale rattled along culminating in a mercurial ending and a well-deserved standing ovation.

In a brief speech before the final quartet, violist Asbjørn Nørgaard thanked what must have been their sixth full house – in the foyer there was even a substantial queue for returns – and suggested we should all be awarded commemorative Beethoven Cycle t-shirts. And do you know what? For once I'd have happily worn it.

VIOLIN VIOLA CELLO BASS FIDDLE
STRINGS

November 14, 2019

A Prismatic Program from the Danish String Quartet

By Thomas May

The Danish String Quartet's contribution to the Beethoven 250 celebrations this season includes a tripartite North American tour. As part of the fall segment of this tour, which is currently underway, the Scandinavian foursome made a recent stop in Seattle. On offer was the first of the Beethoven-themed programs they are presenting under the project name PRISM. The performance launched this season's International Chamber Music series at the Meany Center for the Performing Arts of the University of Washington.

The PRISM project, which the Danish is recording for ECM (the first two have already been released), is about contextualizing this most myth-encrusted of composers. It consists of five distinct programs, each culminating in one of Beethoven's late string quartets. These serve as the "prism" for music from the past—represented by a fugue by J.S. Bach arranged for string quartet—and post-Beethoven, in the form of a major quartet by one of his leading successors in the genre.

PRISM I's program thus juxtaposes the first of the late quartets (Op. 127) with the Fugue in E-flat major from Book II of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* (BWV 876, as arranged for quartet by Mozart) and the last of Shostakovich's fifteen string quartets (Op. 144). On the most basic level, the musical thread linking these three pieces, personalities, and eras is the tonic E-flat—major in the Bach and Beethoven, minor in the Shostakovich. The Danish's recording of PRISM I (2018) garnered a nomination for Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble Performance at this year's Grammy Awards.

In the evening's first half, the musicians segued directly from the relatively brief Bach fugue into the Shostakovich—as if this were a single work, the fugue itself a prelude to the profound reflection on mortality that the ailing Russian completed in 1974, just a little over a year before he died. It defies belief that these four musicians are only in their 30s—not merely because of the individual and ensemble confidence of their impeccable technique and intonation, but even more in view of the interpretive depth they sustain and convey so persuasively.

Mozart's arrangement—one of the byproducts of his Bach obsession that anticipates Beethoven's own immersion in early music—amplifies the contribution of each thread in the fugue. The Danish's admirable balance of voices made the sudden shift into the dark, barren landscape of the Shostakovich all the more arresting, beginning with the threadbare tones of violinists Frederik Øland and Tonsgaard Sørensen in the most minimal of dialogues. Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin (the band's only non-

Dane) laid out lean pedal tones that added to the effect of a vast, empty space, with impenetrable darkness looming beyond.

All six movements of Op. 144 are adagios. Four of them carry explicit associations with nighttime or grieving (Elegy, Serenade, Nocturne, and Funeral March), and an Intermezzo and Epilogue fill out this large-scale composition. The effect was at times hypnotizing, yet this never dulled into a generically lugubrious uniformity. The violent, knife-sharp crescendos passed among the players in the ironically titled Serenade had a visceral thrill, while a gentle susurration of surreal hope emerged in the textures of the Epilogue.

Most striking of all in this remarkably concentrated performance was the paradoxical sense of a dusky beauty that the players conveyed, despite—or, really, by virtue of the music's unswerving bleakness. Thinking of the prism and light metaphor, I found myself recalling the subtle, subdued interiors of the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi, Edvard Munch's contemporary.

Shaggy haired violist Asbjørn Nørgaard explained that the concept for PRISM grew out of their wish to get away from the lore of the late Beethoven quartets as the otherworldly products of a "crazed genius alone in his chamber," cut off because of his deafness and "unconnected to the world." Pointing to the composer's obsession with old masters, he noted that the beam refracted from Bach through Op. 127 is "not so much the contrapuntal as the linear aspect."

Nørgaard and his colleagues illustrated the point in a splendid performance of the Beethoven that was rewarding on several levels. The opening ensemble of chords seemed to explode with colors that were subsequently unfurled in the Allegro's long-spun melodic line. The distinctive polish and sheen of their sound emerged from nuances, not from a smoothing over of textures into a homogeneous "beauty."

Without obvious tricks and exaggerations, the Danish brought a buoyant spontaneity to their account. The Adagio acquired new colors in the context of the previously heard Shostakovich as the ensemble pulled and tugged at the melodic line until it crested to new heights. The Scherzo's "mania" wasn't overdone but instead took shape as currents of energy allowed to build and bubble just below the surface—subtle freedoms along with the comic release. In the vista that opens in the finale's slowed-down coda, the Danish seemed to recall the fragile hope from the Shostakovich epilogue, refracted here through the spirit of Beethoven.

Such a richly satisfying and fulfilling performance required no encore, but the Danish treated the audience to a tender *lagniappe*, playing their arrangement of a Carl Nielsen song.

SAN FRANCISCO CLASSICAL VOICE
CONCERTS. ARTISTS. CRITICAL REVIEWS.

February 19, 2019

A Haydn Quartet Is a Revelation in the Hands of the Danish

By Rebecca Wishnia

When a late Beethoven quartet is on the program, it's usually saved for last. There's always more to hear in a work like Op. 135, which the Danish Quartet played at UC Berkeley's Hertz Hall on Sunday, and going in with warm ears helped.

Indeed, the Danish players (Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, violins; Asbjørn Nørgaard, viola; and Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, cello) played with both an eye for new emphases and a lot of heart. They brought out the beautiful intricacies of the slow movement, and heightened the drama of the interlude — "The Difficult Decision" — to the cheerful finale.

Gratifying as Beethoven's music is on its own, it's also fun to look for the signs of Haydn's influence. You needn't search hard. If the Beethoven work was the unofficial headliner of Sunday's program, the revelation for me was the opener: Haydn's Quartet in C Major, Op. 20 No. 2.

Last winter, when I first heard the Danish Quartet perform, I was struck by the virtuoso blending that characterized the group sound. It remains a truly special quality, one that particularly serves music like the opening Moderato here.

It's often said that Haydn's later quartets are increasingly egalitarian, and though the first violin still has the most to do here, the other instruments, when they join in, aren't echoes, or low counterparts — with the Danish players, they really sound the *same*.

The viola and second violin occasionally take a turn at the continuo line, for example. On Sunday, they played with convincing weight, as if to imitate the cello — who, himself, rose from the harmonic foundation to play the melody in a way that melded with the first violin. In the finale, a fugue, each line was given equal importance — and yet all was so light, everything sounded with perfect clarity, like a tiny music box.

Fluid phrasing made the monumental slow movement — aptly named Capriccio — practically operatic. The sweetness of the arias made even more brusque the sudden take-offs of the dotted rhythms, played in striking unisons that linger on diminished harmonies.

From there, Danish eased into the Menuet — gingerly, at first, as if unsure whether the storm had passed. Once the music got going, it was merry — yet hints of the Capriccio tinged the trio with darkness. All this, from the man who was only just getting started with the string quartet.

On the other hand, Webern, finishing his single-movement String Quartet (M. 79) in 1905, hadn't quite come into his own. In a brief and engaging speech,

violist Nørgaard described the inner turmoil of a young composer obsessed with — and yet not quite comfortable with — the emerging 19th-century canon.

Webern, in fact, quotes the same Beethoven quartet: both explicitly, drawing from its melodies, and in smaller textural details, like the sudden prominences of the second violin.

Webern drew inspiration from a triptych of Alpine landscapes — a typically romantic subject, Nørgaard pointed out. Stylistically, though, the music lies somewhere between Schoenberg's über-romantic, tension-maximizing *Verklärte Nacht* and the more tonally ambiguous *Lyric Suite* by Berg.

More than anything, the three-part work is full of distinct characters. It's indecisive music, in a wonderful way. There's thorny counterpoint, an expressionist's fugue, and, once in a while, nervously passionate strains in fully-functioning harmony. The composer who hasn't yet decided, it turns out, can do anything.

Danish String Quartet

Santa Barbara Independent

February 20, 2019

Danish String Quartet at UCSB

By Charles Donelan

Clearly in a jocund mood after Tuesday's program of Nordic folk songs, the Danish String Quartet arrived at Campbell Hall on Wednesday, February 14, poised to enter fully into the music of two of their greatest national composers, Hans Abrahamsen and Carl Nielsen. The group, which consists of Frederik Øland, violin, Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, violin, Asbjørn Nørgaard, viola, and Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, cello, has risen to the top of the classical charts with a pair of exciting, innovative recordings of original arrangements of folk music while still managing to wow audiences and critics alike with their programs and recordings within the traditional classical repertoire.

The opening piece, the String Quartet No. 25 in C Major, Op. 20, No. 2 of Joseph Haydn, allowed the players to revel in the kind of carnivalesque moments that Haydn so often smuggles in to the classical forms of which he is considered to be the great visionary father. It also effectively anticipated the wandering moods and modes of the following work, Hans Abrahamsen's String Quartet No. 1, "Ten Preludes." Anchored by segments clearly designed to establish the composer's neo-classical bona fides, the piece was at its best when it strayed furthest from tradition. A long, driving raga-like movement oscillated in the mind like the tolling of some strange bell.

The third quartet of Denmark's most revered musician, Carl Nielsen, felt like coming home when the musicians returned to the stage after intermission. Subtle displays of virtuosity, like the brilliant solo for viola that ended the Andante second movement, floated free from the moving surface of the work's complex harmonies only to be submerged again by organ-like chords. After this stunning example of unparalleled connection between a group and a composer, all that was left for the DSQ to do was to send us home with a Nielsen holiday song: a little bit of Christmas in February.

Danish String Quartet

The San Diego Union-Tribune.

February 9, 2019

Danish String Quartet thrills with superb performance in inaugural weekend of La Jolla Music Society residency

By Christian Hertzog

The game was afoot Friday evening at The Auditorium at TSRI as the Danish String Quartet superbly played a thoughtful concert whose first half examined the classical music tradition of hunting music and whose second explored a quartet by their fellow countryman, Carl Nielsen.

Nielsen's "String Quartet No. 1 in G minor, Opus 13" was written before he became the Carl Nielsen we think of today. It's a late Romantic work whose rustic scherzo gives us a taste of the later Nielsen. The Danish String Quartet performed it with passion, humor and force.

Thank the La Jolla Music Society for bringing them to San Diego for a three-year residency. Their uncanny unity of ensemble and tone, matched to an intellectually stimulating and musically compelling programmatic sensibility, has made them one of the premier string quartets of their generation.

Grace and technical expertise reigned in Haydn's "String Quartet in B-flat Major, Opus 1, No. 2" and Mozart's "String Quartet in B-flat Major, K. 458." Neither Mozart nor Haydn gave these quartets the nickname "The Hunt," but their first movements do suggest horn music that contemporaries could have heard at stag hunts.

The high point of the concert, however, was Jörg Widmann's "String Quartet No. 3," subtitled "Hunt-Quartet." On the surface it was a modern consideration of tropes heard earlier on the program. The horn-like melody, the simple tonic-dominant harmonies, and the vigorous 6/8 rhythms evoked the hunting music genre that Haydn and Mozart utilized — consciously or not — in their string quartets. The open-stringed double stops in all four instruments suggested the rugged, unruly sounds of outdoor horns.

Dig a little deeper, though, and you'll find that the four-bar phrase obsessively repeated or hinted at is a quote from Robert Schumann's "Papillons." This quote certainly sounds like hunting music, but there are two more levels here. Schumann was quoting a well-known folk tune called "The Grandfather's Dance," implying old traditions. Schumann again quoted the tune in "Carnaval," where it represented cultural Philistines. Widmann quoted a quote of a quote.

Widmann's use of historical material does not imitate or nostalgically evoke the past. He takes a quotation and slams it against modern harmonies and extended string techniques such as scraping bow noises, snapped pizzicatos and unstable glissandos. He strips away

centuries of cultural grime, rips apart the original and brutally examines it. It's clear by the end of "Hunt-Quartet" that the jolly old fox hunt is cruelly sadistic.

Stag or fox hunting with horns was associated with aristocracy, a connection that still exists. Elsewhere Widmann has written about a "triple crisis" facing humanity, namely eco-disaster, uncontrollable finance systems and an increasingly unstable geopolitical structure. We now doubt basic assumptions of our society. "History," he writes, "is moving rapidly beyond its all too hastily proclaimed end."

There is a very strong theatrical component to "Hunt-Quartet." The players whip the air with their bows like riding crops, yell out hunters' cries, and in the end, three players form a musical alliance and turn against the cellist, resulting in his implied death. This scapegoating is, in Widmann's words, "an analogy to social patterns of behavior."

Artists are often viewed as prognosticators, culturally peering into what may lie ahead. Take a look at our global crises today and consider that Widmann wrote "Hunt-Quartet" 16 years ago.

Danish String Quartet

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

November 21, 2018

Danish Foursome Shows Mastery

By Benjamin Pesetsky

The Danish String Quartet brought Haydn and Beethoven classics to Rockport Music's Shalin Liu Performance Center on Sunday, along with an early work by their fellow Dane Hans Abrahamsen, who has more recently become internationally known for works like *Schnee* and *let me tell you* (which Andris Nelsons brought to the Boston Symphony in 2016).

The tuneful refinement of Haydn's String Quartet No. 25 in C Major immediately showed the Danish's strengths. This quartet—comprising violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørenson, violist Asbjørn Nørgaard, and cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin—sounds as a quartet should: in fact, uncannily close to some ideal of string quartet blend and unity. They deployed vibrato strategically, projecting a fairly pure tone most of the time. The unison beginning of Haydn's Adagio movement arrived scrupulously together, as if the quartet existed as one large instrument. But everything stayed on the pretty side: no grit made it through on this concert. The impression was a quartet with all its edges polished smooth.

Abrahamsen's Quartet No. 1, from 1973, shows just how far this composer has come. A subtitle like "Ten Preludes," especially when added to a work in a major genre, is often a composer's hint to the listener not to keep expectations too high. And so it was: this piece read like a student sketchbook, none of the

preludes was developed enough to stand alone, and somehow they felt even flimsier in each other's company. The kernels of ideas were often inventive, though in a baffling range of styles from high modernism, to minimalism, to Vivaldi. I missed any sense of a composer's unique presence or point of view: something Abrahamsen has found in his more recent music.

Following intermission and the first violinist's brief backstage search for his part, the Danish played Beethoven's first "Razumovsky" Quartet, Op. 59, No. 1, in F Major. Like the opening Haydn, this came close to an ideal performance, if not quite an interpretation. The Adagio suggested profundity, but most remarkable was the attacca transition to the Russian-folksong finale, which the group navigated with unusual sleight, slipping the listener delightfully into a new sound world. The Danish encored with a fiddle-tune they wrote themselves (they all have an interest in Scandinavian folk music). Certainly the suavest fiddling you've ever heard.

It's clear why the Danish Quartet is a rapidly up-and-coming group, popular with presenters: they sound *really* good, and seem like an affable bunch, too. There is something familiar and very of-the-moment about their playing I couldn't quite place until it occurred to me later: even live, they sound like a digital recording, edited, mixed, and mastered.

The Washington Post

November 13, 2018

Danish String Quartet shows off the power of folk music

By Patrick Rucker

What is it about folk music? Some neuroscientists believe humans sang before we spoke. For an 18th-century philosopher such as Johann Herder, folk song contained the very essence of a people. Folk song and dance constitute a vital ingredient of that high point of culture of the Viennese Classical School. Haydn, Beethoven and Schubert are permeated with the polyglot folk traditions that surrounded them in the Habsburg lands. In the 20th century, for Béla Bartók, himself an avid folk song collector, similarities between types of folk music signaled the brotherhood of all people

The Danish String Quartet played a concert Monday night that eloquently demonstrated the power of folk music. Its members, violinists Frederik Oland and Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen, violist Asbjorn Norgaard and cellist Fredrik Schoyen Sjölin, could have emerged from Central Casting for a remake of "The Vikings." But make no mistake, each is a master musician. Together, they play with a cohesion, finesse and precision second to none. Having built a solid reputation in the standard quartet repertory, recently they've turned their attention to Nordic folk music. The enthusiastic and vocal audience that packed the Sixth & I Historic Synagogue seemed glad they have.

The program, announced from the stage, included a number of the songs from the quartet's past two albums, "Wood Works" and "Last Leaf." There were arrangements of music collected in the 18th century by an itinerant Swedish fiddler; a piece that may have been sung a thousand years ago by Norwegians on the Shetland Islands; and traditional Danish tunes from particular corners of that tiny nation. Every last note, whether evoking open fields, dense forests, mighty fjords, the deep sea or the flight of birds, was played with a freshness, immediacy and love that gripped the heart and wouldn't let go.

Washington Performing Arts has scored another bull's eye.

Danish String Quartet

theStrad
VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

May 2018

DANISH QUARTET

ALICE TULLY HALL 25 FEBRUARY 2018

From the first notes of Haydn's String Quartet op.1 no.1 'La chasse', the clarity, precision and depth of the Danish Quartet's playing captured the ear. This afternoon programme of four quartets, each with a 'hunting' theme, provided surprising variety, and the group (right) positively shone in each. In the Haydn – the final Presto in particular – the semiquaver runs sparkled while the Adagio was elegant without being too slow. Mozart's 'Hunt' Quartet op.17 followed: almost never before have I wanted to clap after each movement in thanksgiving and joy. The accompaniment in the opening Allegro vivace assai perfectly supported the top line, and the cello solo in the Adagio was especially lovely, but perhaps most impressive of all was the quartet's flawless articulation. The final movement was almost too fast, but the overall performance was an utter delight.

Next was Jörg Widmann's *Jagdquartett* , with the group capturing the character and spirit of the hunt in this difficult work with great energy and passion. Their control of the extended techniques was tremendously impressive, but even more captivating was their highly musical interpretation – allowing music to breathe, layering the parts thoughtfully and shaping phrases carefully in what could otherwise have sounded like chaos.

Brahms's op.67 Quartet followed the interval with flawless ensemble and seemingly minimal effort required by those playing the opening Vivace's difficult inner parts. The Agitato in particular was immensely satisfying. It is a movement that can sound repetitive, but no note played by the Danish is ever stagnant, unchanging or misplaced.

LEAH HOLLINGSWORTH

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South Florida CLASSICAL REVIEW

April 15, 2018

Danish Quartet illuminates Beethoven's music across three eras

By David Fleshler

Many of the world's greatest string quartets touch down in South Florida, thanks to the region's several excellent concert series. But even in today's golden age of chamber ensembles, few will match the tonal luster, ensemble precision and interpretive brio of the Danish String Quartet.

This ensemble, which today consists of three Danes and a Norwegian, played an all-Beethoven concert Saturday at the Broward Center in Fort Lauderdale, in a performance intended to span the breadth of the composer's career.

They played a quartet from Beethoven's Opus 18, where the young composer displayed mastery of the form inherited from Haydn and Mozart. Then came a work from the Opus 59 set, classic, middle-period works published around the time of the Violin Concerto and Fifth Symphony. Finally they finished with the Quartet No. 14, Opus 131, a searing, challenging, deadly serious work completed the year before his death.

The Danish Quartet opened with Beethoven's String Quartet No. 3 in D major, a gracious, Classical-style work. From the first notes, the quartet's ensemble tone was striking–well balanced and transparent, light but richly resonant.

They brought an airy buoyancy to the opening Allegro, beginning unusually quietly and then building to passages of exultant joy. Their compact tone, topped by the graceful playing of first violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, gave a polished account of the Andante. The concluding movements were full of Haydnesque humor, right down to the witty, quiet ending, yet still played with a richness and grandeur that expressed the young composer's emerging ambitions.

Beethoven's String Quartet No. 7 in F major, Op. 59, no.1 opened in a subdued manner, with cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin playing the first theme in a way that communicated quiet assurance rather than the heroic extroversion favored by other players. But the movement soon acquired all the muscle it needed with their rugged but virtually unblemished playing.

In the Allegretto, the music and the quartet's style evoked the Beethoven of the Fifth and Third symphonies. There were terse motifs delivered in a crisp, clipped manner. The intense outbursts were nearly orchestral in sonority–yet always crystal-clear–in climactic passages of dense, dramatic chords. Pensive running passages has a quiet yet ominous power.

The Adagio unfolded in an unhurried manner, with effective restraint for one of those noble Beethoven slow movements in which the emotional power builds slowly but forcefully.

Violinist Sørensen brought quiet eloquence to the poignant opening melody. Cellist Sjölin brought a mellow humanity to it when it came his way. As the theme moved from instrument to instrument, accompanied by running figures in the ensemble, they made the music swell and subside with extraordinarily tight interpretive precision. Toward the end, when Sørensen and second violinist Frederik Øland played the theme together, it arrived with piercing intensity. The concluding Allegro was big, rumbling and symphonic.

The second half of the concert was devoted to Beethoven's Quartet No. 14 in C-sharp Minor, Op. 131.

Although this quartet is unlikely to approach the popularity of the composer's best-known symphonies, concertos or piano sonatas, it's widely considered one of his masterpieces. The Danish ensemble gave a performance of taut concentration that spanned the quartet's landscape of inward contemplation, rollicking energy and raw-edged emotion.

The musicians opened softly, allowing the Adagio's counterpoint to build in impact, playing the bleak passages for two violins or viola and cello with immense focus. Their ability to play pianissimo passages with clear, hall-filling resonance achieved an unusually wide dynamic range that allowed for greater expressivity.

Playing in a staccato manner, with sudden stops and decelerations, they played the Presto as a mirthless burst of manic energy. Particularly effective was a passage toward the end, where they bowed in a manner that produced eerie, woody sounds, a ghostly echo of the opening high spirits.

The concluding Allegro unfolded with a grim drive that kept up to the end. The strongly marked rhythm that shapes the movement was attacked with blistering force. The ensemble's way with pianissimos paid off here, with sinewy, soft passages full of ominous energy, as the undergirding rhythm powered forward. The high passage in violins with which the movement climaxes was just the searing, emotional high point it should have been. This was a great performance of one of Beethoven's last musical statements.

Danish String Quartet

San Francisco Chronicle

February 20, 2018

Danish String Quartet rewards its patrons with rugged beauty

By Joshua Kosman

Herbst Theatre was strikingly full on Monday, Feb. 19, for the first San Francisco recital by the Danish String Quartet — so much so that more than one audience member remarked on the turnout and speculated about the cause. Was it the end of the holiday weekend? The cold weather? Some random confluence of disparate factors?

Call me an optimist, but I prefer to think that local audiences just knew what a thoroughgoing thrill was in store.

This formidable ensemble, made up of violinists Frederik Oland and Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen, violist Asbjorn Norgaard, and cellist Fredrik Schoyen Sjölin, has made its reputation with a canny mix of standard repertoire and contemporary classics (a recent CD featuring music of Thomas Adès, Per Norgard and Hans Abrahamsen finds the group at its adventurous finest). And it brings to everything a distinctively rugged, dark-hued tonality that gives even the most luminescent music a sort of subdued, moody charge.

Monday's program, presented by San Francisco Performances, was the group's first appearance in the city, although it has appeared regularly with Cal Performances, Music@Menlo and other Bay Area presenters. So there was plenty of opportunity for music lovers to understand what they were in for.

Yet even then, the vigor and showmanship on display — a combination of expansive eloquence and gritty, nuts-and-bolts precision — can only have landed with a jolt. In music by Bartók and Beethoven, these players mustered a degree of expressive unanimity and rhythmic sleekness that were astonishing to witness.

Those technical achievements, in turn, were put to the service of impeccably conceived readings of these familiar works. Bartók's String Quartet No. 1, with its gradual heightening (of both tempo and emotional intensity) across three movements, charted its course with unerring specificity, from the sepulchral, sinuous lines of the opening fugue to the burst of high spirits with which the piece concludes.

And in Beethoven's F-Major Quartet, Op. 59, No. 1, which occupied the second half of the program, the ensemble layered a woody veneer on its sonority that made every section of the piece — from the vigorously dramatic opening through the broad-beamed slow movement and into the final treatment of a Russian folk melody — sound at once lively and profound.

Since folk melodies figured in both works, it seemed only fitting that the central part of the program was devoted to folk music from Nordic countries. This collection of waltzes, wedding songs, folk melodies and other popular material — drawn from throughout Scandinavia and arranged by members of the quartet — features on the group's excellent new CD for ECM New Series, "Last Leaf."

But hearing the music played live was something else, an affecting procession of moods and colors that conveyed a sense of the traditional lifestyles that gave rise to this material. (One Danish folk tune bore the piquant title, “Five Sheep, Four Goats.”)

To be there in person felt like being a guest at a country feast that had secured the services of the world’s greatest wedding band. A beautiful song by Carl Nielsen, a short, chorale-like number whose title went by too swiftly to catch, served as a single, gorgeous encore.

Danish String Quartet

TheaterJones
NORTH TEXAS PERFORMING ARTS NEWS

October 21, 2017

Fantastic Four

The Danish String Quartet opens the Dallas Chamber Music Society season with exemplary ensemble work and intonation.

By Gregory Sullivan Isaacs

The Danish String Quartet presented a near flawless performance for the Dallas Chamber Music Society at Southern Methodist University's Caruth Auditorium on Monday evening. They tackled two major pieces of the repertoire and something lighter as an *amuse-bouche* between them.

In general, the Danish Quartet delivered an impeccable performance of everything on the program. Intonation, bowing and ensemble were as perfect as humans can achieve.

What is remarkable is that they rarely refered to each other for starts or other musical cues as they performed. They must have some kind on ESP going on, or maybe a Vulcan Mind Meld. Maybe it is the result of playing together all over the world for 17 years, but it must be something more than that. No matter how it was achieved, it produced a remarkable performance that sounded like there was only one player. This also helped them to achieve the noteworthy clarity of lines, so important in the contrapuntal writing of both composers (more about that later).

Anther striking thing about their performance is the extraordinary legato that they achieve. It sounds like they have a circular bow.

As to intonation, it was immediately obvious that the same ESP applies to carefully matching pitches. It is rare to hear such dead-on intonation and, at intermission, nearly everyone was commenting on it.

They opened with Bartók's First String Quartet, an early work written when he was still refining his unique style and musical voice. It was finished in 1909 when composers were beginning to battle the bastions of tonality. Schoenberg's revolutionary second string quartet, written a year before, in 1908, featured two movements that were vaguely tonal but two others that struggled to escape the bounds of the tonal centers, even though they both ended with a traditional major chord. Once that seminal work hit the streets, everything changed and its influence on Bartók was no exception.

Each of Bartok's six string quartets marks a milestone in his compositional career and creates a musical biography. The first one is all about unrequited love for Stefi Geyer, the violinist for which he wrote his violin concerto. He even quotes a motif from that larger work in the very contrapuntal first movement.

This brings us to the connection between the Bartók and the Beethoven's String Quartet No. 14, Op. 131 that closed the concert. It mainly rests in the first movement of each. Both feature complex, slow counterpoint and the connections between the two works are obvious. How nice to hear them both on a single concert!

The lighter fare mentioned above was some Nordic folksongs that they

arranged themselves. They had as much fun playing them as we did hearing them. It was hard to keep your feet from moving. What was revealing was the similarity of these tunes to Irish and Scottish folk music and their adoption in the American south and Appalachia. To channel Gertrude Stein: a jig is a gigue, it appears

Danish String Quartet

theStrad
VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

February 2017

DANISH QUARTET, TORLEIF THEDÉEN (CELLO)

ZANKEL HALL 24 OCTOBER 2016

'I would like a shot of that in the morning!' declared my friend, following the Danish Quartet's exuberant finale of Schubert's Quintet in C major. Among many virtues, the ensemble found exquisite balance with its superb collaborator, the cellist Torleif Thedéen. During the memorable first movement, Thedéen matched the group's cellist with every measured bow stroke, followed later by a duet with the violist.

In the fragile beauty of the slow movement, phrases were notable for the controlled pauses between them, until a magnificent moment when the opening melody sneaked in near the end. The scherzo had cinematic urgency, with a short sostenuto break – supernaturally quiet – before the vigorous, propulsive finale brought the sold-out crowd to its feet. A song by Nielsen arranged by the group's second violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen made a plaintive encore.

But the first half of the programme was equally impressive: a gripping traversal of Shostakovich's last and bleakest quartet, no.15. From the desiccated waltz near the beginning to the prolonged gasps for air that make the ending so painful, it would be difficult to imagine a more intense half-hour.

BRUCE HODGES

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The Boston Musical Intelligencer

January 31, 2017

Unanimous Outing for Danish Four

By David Moran

Today's golden age of string quartets glisters more and more. It can hardly be the case that the Danish Quartet practices more, or harder, or somehow more effectively than other quartets today. But Saturday night at Jordan Hall in the Celebrity Series the group gave a performance of Beethoven and Alfred Schnittke with ensemble playing at an unobtrusively superhuman level.

From 1800, the 29-year-old Beethoven's Opus 18 No. 4 is the only one of that set which has some of his C-minor dark to it, not a lot, both at the start and then sporadically throughout, along with nifty syncopations. The Danes rendered the work utterly musically, relaxed and unanimous, in hair-trigger rhythm. Rare imperfect intonation did not need to be noticed. The young men, presenting as Brooklyn beard farmers in Norse hipster black—violinists Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, violist Asbjørn Nørgaard, and cellist Frederik Øland—give little energy to overshaping moments, to overdemarcation. My lapsed-cellist date declared their performance "absolutely effing perfect" but perhaps "a little too varnished, and unengaged". I myself thought it altogether marvelous, albeit somewhat rounded, true, lacking, rightly or wrongly, in that articulated and usually oversized Haydnesque crispness familiar from other quartets' (particularly American) early Beethoven.

Russian composer Alfred Schnittke's (1934-1998) music is an eclectic, referential postmodernism (Ted Libbey's wording) in which everything could be used and parodied, even banal ideas, but with an urgency both serious and ironic. He wrote many dozens of film scores, and that facility shows everywhere in a post-Shostakovich, sometimes quasi-serial manner. His Quartet No. 3 opens with Orlando quoted in droning supplicative mode, followed by those (upcoming) Beethoven *Grosse Fuge* climbing intervals and eventual declaiming, and next much more poly-quote material, dramatically formed, not to say finely stewed: agitated perpetual motion, Soviet hoedown, Crumby insect swatting and swarming, tundral Ives, Dvorak hysterias and later *Verklarte Nächt* shrieks, humming Glassian chords, Vaughn Williams *Tallis* and then Górecki dronality, *Grosse Fugue* plucks, Russian Orthodox hymnody marching in half-steps, and back to Orlando supplication and changes wrought on D-S-C-H. The middle movement glimpses Classical formality in a sort of giddy crisis.

I found the Schnittke a stirring experience overall, and wish to hear it again. The Danish Quartet performed it so well, with such unstrained aplomb, that … well, was it a little on the pat side? In any event it was more elegant than the Kronos's read. In fact, during halftime I began to wonder if the Danes' almost unbelievable unanimity, actually achieving the hoary ideal of a single wideband instrument, ever worked against them. Like other European quartets they deploy with rounded attacks and rounded releases, anti-crisp, anti-big, generally muted as to dynamic range, no overpresentation, no overbiting, no over- anything. It's breathtaking to hear, to mix physiology—but are they not sometimes a bit ungripped, and ungripping?

I wrote to a chamber-music colleague who knew their work well. I went on about their oneness and streamlined sound, their geniality, their polish, none of it in the bad senses. How they were so much both lighter in touch and x-raying than most. I felt similarly to my first time hearing the Yale or the Tokyo (or the Casals) Quartets. "That sounds like them," came the response. "I admire them, vivid personalities, musically smart and vibrant. … Interesting to ponder this result of energy and quest for unanimity, and their sweet dispositions tinged with 'don't mess with me!'".

Beethoven's Opus 130 was one of those transcendent concertgoing moments. I have recently heard exalted, yet quite different, renditions by the Jupiter and Leipzig Quartets. This Danish one sang nobly, exactly, with deep interiority, as if we were overhearing, and except for a stray cough Jordan Hall was as quiet, dead quiet, as I have ever heard it. The playing was effortless, perhaps a shade unurgent, Beethoven's deaf whispers and throbs momentarily muted. You could briefly register how luscious the sound was before realizing that that was beside the point. But the performance had unbroken drive, and the choked *beklemmt* music was fully anxious and straitened, costing the composer tears, it was reported at the time, and again in his recollections. And then that Big Fugue, recentering the heard weight, to end a composition (Michael Steinberg) "unrelieved in ferocious vigor, limitlessly bold in harmony", [its pried-open moments still] "so startling that you could almost think you were dealing with a badly spliced recording." Eventually "the four instruments then unite in strong octaves like those at the beginning of the *Overtura*, and from there Beethoven moves swiftly to the end. The resolution of these extraordinary, unprecedented conflicts posed is surprising and

touching—a mixture of the exalted and the humorous that only Beethoven could have invented."

The Danish String Quartet acquitted this strange, jarring work with a hair less vehemence and more musicality than the norm. The lost, falling-apart moments in the middle and before the end sounded more lost and fallen-apart than usual. They were secure-seeming even when not perfectly secure, so ensemble that even when they went off the road and hit the shoulder, losing sweetness (the first violin)—or in the Grosse Fuge sometimes it seems it's Beethoven himself who's responsible for the flailing—they did it together, every man, bobsled-style.

(TMI department: Halfway through the fugue my enthrallment was such that I drooled on my notes. Another first.)

Crewing teams speak of swing, and psychology books about groups describe what it means to be in the flow. Good musical quartets learn about such states. But in almost all ways, these guys are Viking masters. If you're a chamber type, do not miss them

Danish String Quartet

The New York Times

December 16, 2016

The Best Classical Music Recordings of 2016

By Anthony Tommasini

THOMAS ADÈS, PER NORGARD, HANS ABRAHAMSEN: QUARTETS Danish String Quartet (ECM New Series). For its debut recording on the ECM label, this formidable quartet offers a typically adventurous 20th-century program, including significant works by two Danes: the Modernist master Per Norgard's Quartetto Breve, and Hans Abrahamsen's arresting 10 Preludes (String Quartet No. 1). This exciting album opens with an early work, "Arcadiana," by the inventive British composer Thomas Adès.

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Danish String Quartet

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

October 31, 2016

Two Takes on a Schubert Quintet

Performances by the Emerson String Quartet and the Danish String Quartet offer perspective on age and artistic insight

By Barbara Jepson

Two recent performances of Franz Schubert's sublime String Quintet in C Major provided an opportunity to test a common presumption in the classical-music business: that older performers invariably bring deeper insights to late works by the great composers.

Schubert's 50-minute piece, which adds a cello to the usual string-quartet instrumentation, is a late work by a prolific young man in the final stages of syphilis, written months before his demise at age 31 in 1828. Abundant in melodic invention, its pervasive mood swings suggest youthful exuberance as well as the looming shadow of death. So it was illuminating to hear the piece, aka the Cello Quintet, played by superb quartets at different stages of their lives.

The first performance, presented by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center on Oct. 23 at Alice Tully Hall, was by the eminent Emerson String Quartet, now in its 40th anniversary season and winner of nine Grammy Awards. The second, on Oct. 26 at Carnegie's Zankel Hall, was by the impressive Danish String Quartet. Its blond 30-something members, black-shirted on this occasion, began concertizing in 2002. These events also included music by Shostakovich and, on the Emerson program, the New York premiere of Mark-Anthony Turnage's "Shroud."

Both concerts were reminders of the changing of the guard taking place in the string-quartet world. Three acclaimed ensembles have disbanded during the last decade: the Melos Quartet in 2005, the Guarneri Quartet in 2009 and the Tokyo String Quartet in 2013. At the same time, a number of "millennial" quartets like the Danish are making their mark on the international scene: the Dover Quartet, the Elias, the Escher, the Pavel Haas and so on down the alphabet.

At Tully Hall, the way Emerson String Quartet violinist Philip Setzervaried the repetitions of the simple but eloquent opening theme in the Quintet's Adagio movement could have served as a master class to them all: by turns straightforward, tender, assertive, sweet, sorrowful or ethereal.

Fittingly for this anniversary concert, the guest cellist was David Finckel, co-artistic director of the Society, co-founder of the Music@Menlo Festival and the Emerson's cellist for 34 years. The five musicians rendered the Scherzo's lively opening theme in an appropriately jubilant manner. They were particularly effective in conveying the emotional subtext of some related passages, where it seems as if Schubert is saying, "I know I'm dying, but let's dance!" And then, interrupted by strident cellos, the music briefly becomes overwrought, because he knows it may be his last chance to celebrate. Similarly, in the Scherzo's contrasting Trio section, the Emerson gave the somber chordal passages a valedictory quality, wistful without

being lugubrious. Throughout the Quintet, they displayed a beautiful blend of sound and golden tone.

In their concert at Zankel, the Danish String Quartet (three of the performers are from Denmark, the other, from Norway) offered a fresh take on Schubert's Cello Quintet. They brought a stronger sense of longing to the middle section of the Adagio, when the composer abruptly shifts to an impassioned aria. Here, as elsewhere, they employed a wider range of dynamic levels to "sculpt" the music, from soaring fortissimos to five shades of quietness. Overall, their tonal palette was silvery. At the end of the Quintet's concluding Allegretto—with its gypsy rhythms and evocations of Viennese café music—where the Emerson communicated a kind of brooding intensity, the Danish intimated anger. It was a powerful moment. Guest cellist Torleif Thedéen's velvety, finger-plucked pizzicatos in the Adagio and elsewhere added measurably to the performance.

Both quartets played Schubert's Cello Quintet (and everything else on their programs) at such a high level that accuracy of intonation, ensemble precision and technical fluidity were a given. The Emerson's rendering was insightful, warmly expressive and thrilling in its virtuosity. The Danish String Quartet's performance had the finely honed brilliance of a fiery diamond, enabling the listener to experience the work anew. In this marvelous masterpiece, what both ensembles communicated probably had more to do with their ideas about the score than with their age.

VULTURE
DEVOURING CULTURE

October 28, 2016

Music for a Bleak Election Season: A Glorious Shostakovich Moment at Carnegie Hall

By Justin Davidson

On any given night, New York is full of extraordinary rites performed in basements and second-floor rooms. On Monday night, the Danish String Quartet carried out its regular professional duties, performing works by Shostakovich and Schubert at Carnegie's underground Zankel Hall, and at the same time administered a raw kind of splendor. The concert opened with an almost intolerably dark and stripped-down performance of Shostakovich's 15th and final quartet, from 1974. It's a work of ravishing bleakness: The violin sings a cracked and lonely tune, struggling to get past its opening notes. The Danish quartet made it feel as though the voice could be snuffed out at any moment, and then the quartet would have ended, a whisper in the wind. Instead it stubbornly played on, as other instruments gathered, building the piece up from gasp to gasp until it formed the outline of a damaged soul. The funeral march in the final movement didn't mark a passing, but rather described a burdensome existence. In these players' hands, music accomplished what life often fails to do: fashion beauty out of pain. Shostakovich lived in a Soviet Union that honored and oppressed him, filling his days with dependency and fear. As I listened, I began to feel that if things go badly on

November 8, this should be my Election Night song. I might even have to start each day with it for the next four years.

Replete, rich, and full of tragic euphoria, Schubert's "C Major Cello Quintet" offers an antidote to Shostakovich's bleakness. In the Adagio second movement, a quarter-hour of music I can't imagine doing without, a quiet surf of melody rolls above lilting pizzicatos. The quartet, supplemented by cellist Torleif Thedéen, indulged Schubert's rhythmic obsessiveness (dum-dum-DUM, dum-dum-DUM) and at the same time softened it into a heartbeat. The hardest thing about performing complex chamber music is to know the score so well that you create the illusion you've never heard it before. The Danes shot Schubert's straits with bravado, letting the syncopations lurch a little on an upturned wave, jacking the intensity of a crescendo until it rattled, or planing into a pool of quiet. Every revelation felt inevitable; each repeated passage told a new tale. How can four thin blond men fuse so completely into a nimble, multi-bowed, poly-stringed organism that tracks the flitting shadows of a dead composer's mind?

Danish String Quartet

The San Diego Union-Tribune.

August 6, 2016

Danish String Quartet a highlight of SummerFest

Group's members managed to perform as a unified entity

By Christian Hertzog

A thousand years ago, Norsemen colonized the New World.

On Friday evening, the Danish String Quartet landed as the opening act for SummerFest and won over the audience at Sherwood Auditorium.

If you're going to open, you might as well open big. Janáček's "String Quartet no. 2" is a wild, intense ride; it was the composer's attempt to depict his decade-long love (probably unrequited) for a married woman 38 years his junior.

Its form is intuitive, manic repetitions contrasting with mysterious skitterings, intercut with puzzling interruptions. It takes a special ensemble to make all this convincing.

That ensemble is the Danish String Quartet. Its unity was astonishing, an oneness of purpose created by an intense precision of rhythm, matched timbres and ensemble balance. That might sound mechanical, but the group's ability to merge into a single organism transcended technical issues, permitting us to focus entirely on Janáček's puzzling but powerful score.

The quartet soared, mused, cried out in pain. Every crazy change in mood, speed and dynamics was remarkably rendered.

When Janáček called for solos, they were played with conviction.

First violinist Frederik Øland climbed ledger line ladders in the last two movements, each stratospheric note intensely throbbing and always on pitch. Asbjørn Nørgaard poured out warm, focused baritone-like melodies on his viola.

Danish String Quartet

New York CLASSICAL REVIEW

February 22, 2016

Danish String Quartet closes CMS Beethoven cycle with revelatory simplicity

By George Grella

There is more classical music in existence than any listener could hear in a lifetime. The big names, the great composers, dominate attention, and as much as their work deserves that, the constant presence of the same figures on concert programs—Bach, Mozart, Brahms, et al—can be come predictable.

Then one gets to the late Beethoven string quartets, and nothing is predictable or humdrum. The music is so mysterious and compelling, so wonderful to hear and so consistently interesting that they sound fresher and more adventurous than most works that have followed.

Sunday in Alice Tully Hall, for the final concert of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's Beethoven cycle, the Danish String Quartet explored some of these late works: the Op. 131 and Op. 135 quartets and the alternate Allegro finale to Op. 130.

As in previous concerts in this cycle, the event was the meeting between great music and a superb ensemble. The Danish String Quartet has been a popular and critical favorite at Chamber

Music Society concerts the past few seasons, and their performance Sunday made clear why. They play at the highest artistic and technical level, and they play with a thought-through approach to what they find in the music and how they feel it should sound.

The program was in chronological order of the compositions with the Quartet in C-sharp minor, Op. 131, the only piece on the first half. At approximately 40 minutes, that half passed in a sense of quick suspension, a tumult of ideas and reveries caught in the stillness between breaths.

From the opening few bars, the specialness of the performance was clear; the Danish quartet's sound was gorgeous, and their attention to the expressive riches of dynamics and phrasing was ravishing. They played the music with as beautiful a sound and shape as they could give it, yet with a self-effacing simplicity—it seemed like Beethoven was playing them.

Some quartets play Beethoven with just an emphasis on making a beautiful sound, others play the music with a focus on psychological intensity and physical aggression. The Danish group played the music with a feeling of lightness. There was nothing insubstantial about their approach—they gave each other air and space, which let through both the substance of the music and their soft, woolen instrumental color.

They also played with an agility akin to a great athlete who makes the difficult look graceful and efficient. The unique energy that Beethoven coiled inside his rhythms—especially in the Vivace movement of the Quartet in F major, Op.135 —released like a stone skipping across water, picking up speed and energy as it went. Few quartets manage to keep such a lithe and perfectly ordered pulse going underneath the violin syncopation as the Danes did. Their playing for the entire Op. 135 Quartet had extraordinary balance and clarity.

The concert closed with the finale to the Op. 130 Quartet in B flat major (written as an alternate to the *Grosse Fugue*, the original final movement). Coming at the end of the concert, this Allegro felt like a substantial encore. Graceful as in the rest of the concert, the tempo had an easy quickness to it, with wit and vivacious energy.

The performances throughout the evening offered a rare instance of musicians delivering the quality of the sublime that is in Beethoven's late music. Deaf and increasingly ill, the music is both wildly mercurial and organically logical. Thoughts seem to come and go at random, until there is a moment that brings everything together. The Danish String Quartet captured this in an ideal and revelatory way—the profound intellectual and emotional intensity of Beethoven conveyed in a vessel of beautiful simplicity.

Danish String Quartet

The New York Times

November 14, 2015

Danish String Quartet Plays at the Rose Studio

By Anthony Tommasini

The young players of the superb Danish String Quartet have been performing the four quartets by Denmark's own Carl Nielsen ever since their student days. Yet these players had never performed all four on a single program until Thursday evening at the intimate Rose Studio, in a concert presented by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

It makes intuitive sense that artists from Denmark would play Nielsen's scores so distinctively. Still, what exactly is "Danish" about Nielsen's music? Even these players have trouble answering that question, a difficulty that came through in charming introductory comments from Asbjorn Norgaard, the ensemble's violist, about the String Quartet No. 3 in E flat, completed in 1898.

Nielsen wrote this piece while temporarily separated from his wife. You can hear his turmoil, Mr. Norgaard said, in the expansive opening Allegro and the hymnal Andante, suffused with bittersweet lyricism. But in the last two movements, Mr. Norgaard observed, the mood changes, and the music turns almost goofy. Some people, he added,

think that this is "a Danish thing," to be "very deep and very superficial at the same time." But, he added dryly, "we don't know about that."

What they do know is how to be an exceptional quartet, whatever repertory they play. (The other members are the violinists Frederik Oland and Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen and the cellist Fredrik Schoyen Sjolin.) In this commanding account of the Third Quartet, the first movement sounded like music trying to be an exuberant late-Romantic Allegro, but roughed up by modernist jolts and sudden shifts. The slow movement unfolded with glowing sound and smoothness. The final two movements were slyly playful, especially the finale, a wild-eyed rustic dance.

What makes Nielsen's quartets seem the work of someone Danish came through, for me, with the Quartet No. 2 in F minor (1890). Nielsen, 24 at the time, wrote the piece in Germany, where he had gone to study. Though the work hews to a traditional four-movement structure, the teeming music "jumps from one idea to the next, forgetting about the old one," as Mr. Norgaard put it. Nielsen showed the piece to the great violinist and conductor Joseph Joachim, who praised it but suggested ways to make it less radical. The young Nielsen ignored him. Maybe that was something essentially Danish: to come from a place close enough to the centers of new music in Germany to learn something, but culturally removed enough to stick to your own instincts.

The String Quartet No. 1 in G minor (1887-88) already shows Nielsen searching for his own voice. The Quartet No. 4 in F (1906, later revised) is almost Neo-Classical in character. Yet just below its pleasing surface, the music abounds in quirky strangeness.

This rewarding program was the second installment in the society's series of complete cycles of string quartets by five composers. Coming before the end of the season are Bartok, Ginastera and Leon Kirchner.

Danish String Quartet

The Boston Globe

August 12, 2015

Danish String Quartet's ambitious program proves rewarding

By David Weininger

Even among the large crop of superb youngish string quartets — those with between five and 15 years under their belts — the Danish String Quartet stands out. The foursome — violinists Frederik Oland and Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen, violist Asbjorn Norgaard, cellist Fredrik Schoyen Sjölin — boasts a confidence and command beyond the 15 years it's been together. Having made its Boston debut in 2013 in the Celebrity Series of Boston Debut Series, it chose a riskier and more ambitious program for its visit to the Cape Cod Chamber Music Festival on Monday, a concert that was as comprehensively rewarding as any chamber-music performance in recent memory.

The quartet's dark, velvety sound was apparent in two of Mendelssohn's Four Pieces for String Quartet (Op. 81), making them sound unusually tender. It also made the gentle opening of Shostakovich's Ninth Quartet into a

comfortingly nostalgic dream. But when the music turned bitter and impassioned, the quartet's sound quickly became more acerbic thanks to Oland's slashing interjections from the second chair, a perfect foil to Sorensen's mellower tone. (The two switch off in first chair.) The finale, a juggernaut that reaches hard-won victory only after ardent struggle, was electric.

Alfred Schnittke's Third Quartet was the evening's most impressive achievement, if only because of the music's sheer strangeness. The piece is openly haunted by the past, as quotations from Lassus's "Stabat Mater" and Beethoven's "Grosse Fuge" collide with an unsettlingly dissonant vocabulary. The music seems too sinister for pastiche, challenging your conception of what the composer's "real" style actually is.

The DSQ's performance was impassioned, precise, and brilliant in ways both technical and conceptual. The "Grosse Fuge" itself followed, sounding even more avant-garde than it usually does with the memory of what Schnittke had made of it still fresh in the ears. The performance was notable not only for its exhilaration but also for the careful pacing and planning that went into it. Each segment of this highly sectionalized work seemed to bring something new and unexpected.

The demanding program was given a rapturous reception at Dennis Union Church, so the Quartet played a brief encore from its homeland: a Christmas-themed chorale by Danish composer Carl Nielsen. It offered what nothing else on the program did: serene, untroubled beauty.

Do not lose track of this group: Even by today's high standards, it offers something very special.

Danish String Quartet

The New York Times

August 9, 2015

Stately Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra, a Brave Danish String Quartet

By Anthony Tommasini

In recent summer seasons, Jane Moss, the artistic director of Lincoln Center, has successfully transformed the Mostly Mozart Festival. What was once a stodgy diet of Classical-era hits and occasional novelties has become a varied festival that includes a valuable platform for contemporary music. This week, for example, the festival presents the American stage premiere of George Benjamin's acclaimed opera "Written on Skin," with Alan Gilbert conducting the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, a major event.

Still, this summer, as in recent seasons, the main programs by the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra at Avery Fisher Hall are hewing closely to Classical period staples, as with Friday's program, conducted by Edward Gardner, the impressive 40-year-old music director of the English National Opera in London. For what it was, the concert was excellent, especially the crackling, clearheaded account of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony that Mr. Gardner drew from the orchestra after intermission. The festival did offer a real musical adventure on Friday, but only after the orchestra concert, up in the intimate, inviting Kaplan Penthouse. There, the exciting young players of the Danish String Quartet made their Mostly Mozart debut as part of A Little Night Music, the popular series of hourlong programs at 10 p.m. This ensemble has won many fans in New York of late, thanks to its association with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. At the Kaplan the quartet played an intriguing program: two Fugues from Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, arranged for string quartet by Mozart; Thomas Adès's "Arcadiana," a rapturously strange and engrossing work composed in 1994; and, to end, Beethoven's visionary and slightly crazed Grosse Fuge, played here with such conviction and command that this thorny late piece sounded utterly exhilarating, even playful at times.

The concert by the festival orchestra certainly offered high-quality performances. Mr. Gardner opened with a colorful account of Weber's Overture to "Der Freischütz," bringing telling dramatic shape and a feel for surprise to the episodic score. Then the excellent Scottish pianist Steven Osborne was the soloist in Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 24 in C minor (K. 491). In the first movement, passages of grim turmoil in this elusive piece are balanced by elements of regal elegance and somber restraint. It's hard to achieve that balance, and Mr. Osborne and Mr. Gardner seemed to be searching for it. The tempos varied: Sometimes Mr. Osborne played with hushed mystery; other times with restless intensity. All was fine in the Larghetto second movement, however, in this graceful performance, touched with a little suspense. The finale was the highlight, full of urgency, sweep and slyly shifting moods.

Still, it sends a mixed message when the festival farms out contemporary music and unusual works into concerts beyond the safe confines of Avery Fisher Hall.

Danish String Quartet

American Record Guide
INDEPENDENT CRITICS REVIEWING CLASSICAL RECORDINGS AND MUSIC IN CONCERT

March/April 2015

Danish Quartet
New York

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's Artistic Director Wu Han came into the intimate Rose Studio to introduce the Danish String Quartet. She was very proud that the organization had found this remarkable group. They are in the first of a three-year residency with CMS Two, a program for young musicians and ensembles on the precipice of international careers in chamber music. The four blonde, tousled, striking musicians are in their early 30s and have been together (with one exception) for 12 years. They made their NY debut 10 years ago as the Young Danish Quartet, having met and formed as students in Copenhagen. In 2008 cellist Fredrik Sjolin joined violist Asbjorn Norgaard and violinists Frederik Oland and Rune Sorensen.

From the first chord of Debussy's quartet, I knew that perfection of ensemble and unanimity of interpretation would characterize the evening's performance. Only in my own chamber performances have I been seated close enough to the other musicians to make eye contact, but here I was close enough to observe every interaction between these string players. It was a memorable, strong account of one of the masterpieces of the literature. The hushed, barely audible ending of the third movement (marked "blissful and as soft as possible") was revelatory, with all four men making judicious use of their mutes. The finale was a rainbow of colors and textures; as Debussy wrote, "Any sounds in any combination and in any succession are henceforth free to be used in a musical continuity."

Pianist Gilles Vonsattel, also a member of CMS Two, joined in for the other work on the program, Louis Vierne's Piano Quintet (1917-18). Vierne, organist at Notre Dame for nearly 40 years, wrote this big work after the death of his son in World War I. It is very chromatic, thickly written, and has a true virtuoso piano part. It is to the entire ensemble's credit that all of the contrapuntal lines were clearly delineated. As in the Debussy, recurring themes and motives tie the movements together. Unlike the Debussy, Vierne's work is rare and has almost no performance history. I felt privileged to first encounter this work in all of its romantic glory at this concert. The musical depth the Danes and Vonsattel brought were astonishing. They missed none of the excitement either. Their convincing performance often created a huge sound in a relatively small performance space. It was akin to a big romantic piano concerto.

The Rose Rehearsal Studio is on the 10th floor of the Rose building, a part of Lincoln Center just across 65th Street from Avery Fischer Hall and the Metropolitan Opera. Much of Julliard is also in the same building, as are the main offices of the CMS. The concerts are typically about an hour long and performed twice at 6:30 and 9:00. Several of the late night performances are also streamed over the internet. There are only 100 seats, and almost all concerts are sold out at $50 a seat. The early concert has traditional seating, but the later has chairs arranged around small tables. This was the only time in my life that I attended a concert and then got to see a second performance of the same program on my computer after I got home. There were many superb camera angles, excellent audio, and state-of-the-art engineering. The performances were even more exciting the second time around. This kind of inventive programming and presentation bodes well for the future of classical music.

JAMES HARRINGTON

Danish String Quartet

Los Angeles Times

November 19, 2014

Danish String Quartet makes a truly fab four in Santa Barbara

By Mark Swed

The Danish Spring Quartet makes a rare Southern California performance at UC Santa Barbara.

Danes are the most content of the world's great discontents. Credited as home to the happiest people on Earth, Denmark — and Copenhagen in particular — is home to what has been called the world's best restaurant, the most environmentally friendly urban bike lanes, some of the world's best design and most beautiful people.

It has also given us the marvelous Danish String Quartet, which appeared in Hahn Hall at the Music Academy of the West on Tuesday night.

The secret to all that satisfaction is often credited to an inherent Danish fatalism, an acceptance of life as it is.

The Danish String Quartet embodies a great deal that is admirable about Scandinavia. It has a stunningly elegant rounded sound, four guys in their early 30s who play like one. They are also four hip guys who appear to be going through a little bit of an identity crisis. Like another Fab Four of old, every new recording or publicity shot reveals different degrees of facial hair and different hairstyles, along with increasingly informal dress.

Violist Asbjorn Norgaard, left, and cellist Fredrik Sjolin of the Danish String Quartet perform at UC Santa Barbara.

The quartet's repertory also is going through a bit of upheaval, adding modern angst and folk music repose to otherwise solid classical foundation. The group's latest release, "Wood Works," is bathed in an aura of backwoods Scandinavian fiddlers. In the recommended high-quality vinyl version, the LP jacket looks as if the record could be a Danish classical update of the Band.

In a rare Southern California appearance as part of UC Santa Barbara's Arts & Lectures series, the ensemble felt Danish to the core. (The quartet will finally make its local debut in February in the Coleman series at Caltech.) It began with Haydn's late String Quartet, Opus 77, No. 1, a work upbeat on the surface, but leave it to these Danes to show Haydn's surprise harmonies and turns of phrase to be hidden dark corners in an otherwise aging composer-optimist. It ended with Beethoven's most visionary late quartet, No. 14 in C-Sharp Minor, Opus 131. In this case, Opus 131 served as a corrective to the evening's middle score.

In 2011, the Danish String Quartet and composer Thomas Agerfeldt Olesen were awarded the Carl Nielsen Prize, Denmark's largest cultural prize, which is named after the country's national composer. It seemed only natural for the players to ask Olesen to write a string quartet for them.

"Nielsen was a positive guy," violist Asbjorn Norgaard explained to the audience. "Olesen is not a positive guy." Nielsen's most famous symphony is called "The Inextinguishable," a work in which music is meant to show that, depressing as life is, there is a high moral need for struggle, and that music can lift the spirit to higher purpose.

Olesen has titled his Seventh Quartet "The Extinguishable." It is a piece full of interruptions, just as the essence of life is a series of interruptions that lead to the final one. The quartet starts out with the cello stuck in a rut, bowing the same note over and over. The other instruments play fluty figures, as though a kind of string quartet birdsong might be a freeing agent.

A hauntingly tonal middle section is, as Norgaard described it, a memory of when you might once have had hope. It is inevitably full of stops and starts. The cello figure returns at the end of the piece, but the struggle is over, and it now sounds almost ethereal.

"Life isn't going to go on forever," Norgaard explained. "Since we don't have any hope, maybe it's a good thing that we don't live forever."

In this context, the group made Beethoven's great C-Sharp Minor string quartet into "the unflappable." Over a 40-minute span, Beethoven fights gravity, in both senses of the word. He is gravely serious and struggling with freeing himself from earthly struggle. The players were here both as Scandinavians riveted to the land and as artists questing for liberation.

Their command of the quartet's challenging arch-shape formal structure was complete. They could be grounded in their tone or mystical. They allowed time to stand still, and they could assume the pose of excitingly aggressive rockers. They did it all.

Beethoven, however, was no fatalist but, rather, a spiritually transcendent discontent. As an evolving young string quartet, the Danish provides inevitably young Beethoven and inevitability. It is better thus far at providing answers than letting spiritual provocations remain mysterious. But there could be no arguing with great playing.

Danish String Quartet

The Washington Post

October 16, 2014

Fastidious playing by the Danish String Quartet at Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater

By Robert Battey

The Danish String Quartet is now a dozen years old, and though its members are still boyish and gangly, the group is in full artistic flower. After its performance last year at the Library of Congress, I wrote: "It is a true four-way collaboration. The violinists trade off the first chair, and no personality dominates (at least in performance). The young artists are all very fine instrumentalists, and in matters of blend, intonation and technical dispatch, the group is certainly world-class." On Wednesday at the Terrace Theater, it was, if anything, better; this is one of the best quartets before the public today.

The program, presented by Washington Performing Arts, was a bit conservative — Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Shostakovich (No. 9) — but with playing on this level, it didn't matter. While the Danish does not wring the last ounce of gutsiness out of the music and can

sound a little sleepy at slow tempos, the clarity and musical detail of its performances are rare indeed. Also, the group would sound still richer if its violist had a larger instrument; the silvery timbre blends nicely with the violins, but the lower end of the quartet could use more heft.

Mendelssohn's "Capriccio" encapsulated the group's profile; in the introduction, the artists were a little too willing, perhaps, to make musical points by slowing down, but in the fiery fugue, the virtuosity of passagework and balancing of voices were simply stunning. If achieved at the expense of a true fortissimo, it was still a good trade.

The Shostakovich quartets require, first and foremost, perfect intonation. The composer's long, droning passages can set the teeth on edge if anything is out of place, and here the Danish was particularly fine, everything lining up. Bow strokes were matched to the centimeter, and the entire thing was a tour de force of quartet discipline. The Danish Quartet did not bring the savagery that some Russian groups do to this music, but it was artistically valid.

Beethoven's Op. 131 is the Everest of the literature, and no performance can capture everything. But here again, the scrupulous detail (one of the few renditions I've heard that made a real effort to execute Beethoven's seemingly crazy dynamics), the unanimity of interpretation and the cleanliness of the ensemble were outstanding. While the opening fugue and the penultimate movement could have been a little less dirgelike, the imagination and impish interplay in the scherzo were delightful. It was a memorable performance, and while the season is young, this concert is likely to be one of its true highlights.

SAN FRANCISCO CLASSICAL VOICE
The Go-To Place for Classical Music in the Bay Area

July 21, 2013

Magical Danes Debut at Music@Menlo

By Janos Gereben

Danish String Quartet with pianist Gilbert Kalish

There is music in another dimension. Just as at times music takes over when words fail, there is this otherworldly experience that relieves the limitations of music itself.

This is what you hear in the maze of the forest and of anguished feelings in Schoenberg's *Transfigured Night*; when Mahler's Symphony No. 9 trails off into silence; when the chorus falters with grief in the Mass in B Minor's "Crucifixus" (before the redeeming explosion of "Et resurrexit").

The other dimension, the ambiguous-transcendent feeling persists through the entire third movement of Beethoven's String Quartet No. 15, Op.132, a contemporary of his Ninth Symphony, but kin only to the meandering, sublimely lyrical slow movement. The string quartet movement is marked *Molto adagio* and inscribed by the composer as "Holy song of thanksgiving to the Divinity by a Convalescent, in the Lydian Mode." He might have just as well called it "Music that suspends time."

There is probably no chamber music that poses more contrasting demands on the performers. It is a landscape without landmarks, a progression of phrases both inevitable and mysterious; it requires from the musicians both superb control and total letting go — shaping music that exists without recognizable boundaries.

Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and Asbjørn Nørgaard

On Sunday, in Music@Menlo's splendid Center for Performing Arts at Menlo-

The grand finale: Frederik Øland, Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, Asbjørn Nørgaard, Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin

Atherton, the youthful Danish String Quartet made its West Coast debut with a concert of one ravishing performance after another, culminating in the Beethoven, weaving magic over the full house, which gave a genuine standing ovation to the quartet, not one of those half-hearted crouching applauses. No, this was very real, really loud, and more than well-deserved.

To be pedantic about it, the quartet is three-fourths Danish because cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin is Norwegian. But violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard are true, if non-melancholic Danes:

We are simply your friendly neighborhood string quartet with above average amounts of beard. The three of us met very early in our lives in the Danish countryside at an amazing summer camp for enthusiastic amateur musicians. Not yet teenagers, we were the youngest players, so we hung out all the time playing football and chamber music together.

During the regular school year we would get together often to play music and just have fun. We became best friends. In 2001, professor Tim Frederiksen of the Royal Academy of Music in Copenhagen got in touch with us and started coaching us on a regular basis. All of the sudden, at the ages of 15 and 16, we were a serious string quartet. It all happened so fast that none of us seemed to notice the transition.

In just three years of being a professional ensemble, the quartet already received raves in major newspapers, and were given the Carl Nielsen Prize, Denmark's most important cultural award.

At the Sunday concert, the brief opening piece, Mozart's arrangements of two Bach fugues, was the perfect introduction to the musicians, instruments entering one by one, right to left, from cello to first violin. We heard microscopic solos, clear, warm, beautiful sound from each instrument.

The quartet then launched into Haydn's 1796 String Quartet in D Minor, Op. 76, No. 2, nicknamed "Die Quinten," because of the first movement's motif of descending fifths. While the Danes were phenomenally musical and consistent throughout the work, they gave a special treatment to the "mildly demonic" minuetto, known as "Hexen-Menuett" or Witches' Minuet. With the two violins in unison, viola and cello mimicked them an octave lower. The musicians virtually exploded (while adhering to the boundaries of Haydnesque classicism) in the joyful finale.

Shostakovich's 1940 Piano Quintet in G minor, op. 57, followed, a contemporary of the first string quartet and Symphony No. 7 ("Leningrad"), in the brief period between the end of the Winter War with Finland and the beginning of Nazi invasion the following year.

With Gilbert Kalish at the piano, the work opened with a big, bold, symphonic forte, and as the strings joined in, it sounded for all the world like a piano concerto. The Danish SQ played brilliantly in the runaway scherzo and with deep emotion in the next movement's "night music." First violinist Øland shone in his solo of a Russian folksong, all four performed as virtuosi as the music sped up again with a grotesque circus tune, a Shostakovich trademark. All through the piece, Kalish and the quartet remained joined at the hip, five instruments playing as one. >{>

And then the Beethoven. This next-to-last of the late quartets is still so

complex and rich, it's difficult to imagine what the first audiences heard in it in 1825. The first two movements, performed with power and certainty, served as a prelude to the wizardly third movement Beethoven wrote after a severe illness (hence the reference to "thanksgiving... by a convalescent"), and anybody in the audience who by now didn't fully realize the brilliance of the Danes came to a moment of inevitability.

Here, transcendent music received its due from four musicians making an unforgettable debut. May they soon return.

Danish String Quartet

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

November 14, 2013

Three Danes (and A Norwegian) Make Fine Debut

By Cashman Kerr Prince

Last night Vikings sailed into Longy's Pickman Hall: in its Celebrity Series of Boston debut, The Danish String Quartet conquered New World audiences with music by Abrahamsen, Mendelssohn, and Debussy.

All four members of the quartet (actually three Danes and a Norwegian cellist) are Vikingsian young, blond men, and three sport beards worthy of Boston Red Sox players during the World Series. The skinny ties and more casual dress mark them as new and hip, but there is nothing casual about their artistry. They describe themselves as "simply your friendly neighborhood string quartet with above-average amounts of beard."

If only we could all live in such a musical neighborhood! Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen alternate between first and second violins (Øland playing first on the Mendelssohn in this concert); Asbjørn Nørgaard plays viola, and the Norwegian Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin plays cello. The violinists and violist met as children at a summer music camp for amateur musicians, and continued their studies together at Copenhagen's Royal Academy of Music. The Danish String Quartet debuted in 2002 at the Copenhagen Festival, and Sjölin joined them in 2008, forming the current line-up. Throughout this program they played with a tight ensemble and constant interaction among the players. Their readings of the Mendelssohn and Debussy quartets were subtle and smart, with judicious and well-considered musical decisions building into interpretations that were unique, fascinating, convincing. This is a mature quartet with a fabulous future before them.

The program began with Hans Abrahamsen, String Quartet No. 1, "Ten Preludes" (1973). A member of the Danish *ny enkelhed*, or "new simplicity" movement, which is a reaction to the Darmstadt School of serialism, Abrahamsen's quartet is a series of ten self-contained movements exploring a

variety of musical styles even as recurring musical cells unite this series of character-piece preludes into a unified string quartet. Although I am not well-versed in this composer's idiom, I heard similarities to the music of Terry Riley and Philip Glass in the focus on subtle change, repetition, and sparse or open harmonies. At the same time the piece opens with a piercing ferocity that signals Abrahamsen's broader, more polyglot musical language, one which included chorales and traditional dance elements. This work is a compendium of musical forms and expressions and ends in a playful scherzo that is more traditional than the beginning. Individual preludes played with the idea of deferred resolution, even as the whole clutch of preludes comprising this string quartet find a unity in shared and repeated musical gestures. This work was played with drama and flair and the sheer artistry of the performance was inescapable.

Mendelssohn's String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor, op. 13 (1827), written in the wake of Beethoven's opus 132 quartet, is an homage to and an extenuation of the explorations of form and harmony Beethoven undertook in his quartet. The similarities are more noticeable for the differences between these works. The *Adagio* opened with a tenderness, a gut-wrenching hesitancy making of this a poignant start and imbuing the ensuing *Allegro vivace* with a patina of sadness that was enhanced by a judicious use of *portamenti*. Even the exuberance of Mendelssohn's music in this opening movement was tinged with melancholy. The second movement, *Adagio non lento*, began as a lullaby then turned to a delicate *fugato*, before growing jagged and edgy as it developed in intensity: a fury raging to escape the bounds of civility, then surprisingly calming into a rounded and sweet hymn. The third movement, *Intermezzo: Allegretto con moto – Allegro di molto*, was lighter in spirit: a small child skipping through sun-dappled fields of hay on the last day of summer. Again, an ineluctable sense of poignancy. The playful scherzo here opened with a subdued *pianissimo*. A highly effective *ritardando* brought back the lilting a-theme before the concluding amalgamation of these two ideas. The concluding *Presto*, like the Beethoven model, opens with a violin cadenza which Øland played with passion and verve in a lushly overwrought moment of anguish; this was a palpable stylistic conversation between late Beethoven and Classical restraint. The movement continued with vigor and intensity but did not shout in the full-blown expansiveness of later nineteenth century forceful expression. The performance ended in a resolute silence which the enthralled audience held.

Following intermission, the quartet gave a fully inhabited reading of Claude Debussy, *String Quartet in G Minor, op. 10* (1893), with marvelously sinuous interplay among voices producing a sea of vibrating colors and resonant modalities. If, as one early critic opined, this music is "orgies of modulation," then please, by all means, give me more—so long as it is played with such astute artistry and keen passion as this.

The Danish String Quartet returned to the stage to offer their thanks for being included in the Celebrity Series of Boston season, and offered as an encore Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen's arrangement of a traditional Danish folk tune from the western Danish island of Sønderho often performed at weddings. This second tune from the Sønderho bridal trilogy can be heard on a CD of Scandinavian folk music the Danish String Quartet will be releasing on their own label in Spring 2014.

Danish String Quartet

TheaterJones

November 13, 2013

Great Danes

Playing for Dallas Chamber Music, the Danish String Quartet proves why they're one of the best in the world.

By Gregory Sullivan Isaacs

To talk about the Danish String Quartet performance at Southern Methodist University's Caruth Auditorium on Monday evening, under the auspices of Dallas Chamber Music, requires a trip to the thesaurus for superlatives. There is little wonder why they are always mentioned when speaking ranking such ensembles into a top 10 or so. They delivered a near perfect performance of a wildly varied program to an astonished audience.

The Danish part of their name was immediately evident as the four young very blond players took the stage. "Young," in fact, used to be part of their name. They dropped it a few years ago with an eye to the inevitable future (even though they all still hover around 30). Cellist Frederik Schøyen Sjölin is the oldest, born in 1984, and the only one

not from Denmark. He is Norwegian, but explains that away by the fact that Norway was a part of Denmark until 1814. Violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, born in 1983, has the lightest hair of the group and looks like he is still in his teens. Violist Asbjørn Nørgaard, also born in 1984, founded the group. Violinist Frederick Øland, also born in 1984, is an expert in computer gaming.

In fact, computer gaming is mentioned frequently in most of their biographies. Nørgaard makes quite a point of it in his, declaring that the viola player is the "Overmind" of the quartet, a reference to the online game Starcraft. There is no mention of what the other three think of this. But, you didn't need to look at their birth dates to tell that they are part of Generation Y, the Millennials.

All this matters because their playing has a youthful presence to it; nothing you can put your finger on specifically, but something that is definitely there. The impeccable playing and superb musicianship that they so amply demonstrate can be found (rarely) elsewhere, but it is this freshness, this *je ne sais quoi,* that sets them apart in such a remarkable manner.

Their program ran the gamut from the very new to the standard masterpieces of the repertoire. Hans Abrahamsen's 10 Preludes, written in 1973, covers just about every musical language there is in its short 20 minutes—wild atonalism to something that could have been written hundreds of years ago. Felix Mendelssohn's String Quartet No. 2 in a minor, Op. 13 is a great technical challenge, as is most of his music, and they met it with ease. Debussy's First Quartet in G minor, Op. 10 makes both monumental technical and musical demands. The Danish group gave definitive performances of all three.

The two violinists switched off playing the first part and it made quite a difference. Sørensen has a deep and resonant sound while Øland's sound is brighter. They used this to great advantage. Sørensen played first on the Mendelssohn, whose sparkling scampering music greatly benefited from his glittering sound. Øland's darker sound was perfect for Debussy's impressionistic harmonies.

Rather than going into the details of their spectacular performance of each piece, here are the hallmarks of their playing that allowed this concert to rise above many others and one which will remain in the memory of all who attended.

First and foremost, their intonation was amazing. Each and every sonority rang true and clear. Their individual musicianship is self evident by their biographies: Rune is the concertmaster of the Copenhagen Philharmonic, a chair that Øland once held and where Nørgaard once sat in the principal viola chair. But it is their collective musicianship that is so remarkable.

It is apparent that this group has carefully considered every note and phrase and then how to resample them into a realization of the composer's intentions. They approached each of the very different pieces on the program in a very different manner, that is true to the composer stylistic demands. Their sound changed to match the music. You could easily imagine rehearsals where there was as much musicological discussion as playing. Quite remarkable.

Virtuosity, impressive as it was, never became an end unto itself. Their ensemble was so together that even the fastest passages were so precise that it was as if there was only one player involved. Balance was magnificent and constantly in flux. Each voice came forward at just the right moment and then stepped back, sometimes even after a single note was so favored. This gave the performance an integrated sound, where the four individual players vanished into a new sonic entity. This

was especially noticeable in the Debussy's undulating harmonies.

If you missed it, keep an eye out for their next appearance and get there. Their recordings cover all these same attributes but cannot convey the experience of watching them create such an impressive performance. One very well known violinist in the audience turned to me at the end of the Mendelssohn with a look of shear joy and commented that this was the way to play it. I agree.

Danish String Quartet

The New York Times

April 19, 2023

The Danish String Quartet's 'Prism' Is Essential Listening

This group has wrapped its series of five albums that traced a lineage from Bach to late Beethoven to his successors into the 20th century.

By David Allen

The three Danes and a Norwegian who play together as the Danish String Quartet have always had a charming modesty to them. But it was nevertheless a bit of a surprise, when their first studio recording of late Beethoven came out in the initial installment of "Prism," a series exploring that composer and artistic lineages, to find them writing of themselves as "still a group of boys."

The Danish, who return to Zankel Hall on Thursday to offer the third part of "Doppelgänger," their project pairing Schubert with new commissions, have never really approached Beethoven's formidable last works in their genre like children, after all. They were already renowned as one of the major string quartets by the time they recorded Op. 127 in 2016, when the youngest among them was still 32, and they had built their reputation in large part on their preternatural maturity — a sense of proportion, a slight reserve, a certain inexplicable wisdom — in those scores, which can mystify far more senior musicians.

As they tell it now, though, they had barely gotten going. Op. 127 was the

focal point of "Prism I," the first of five recordings on the ECM label treating the late Beethoven quartets not as the alien, anomalous masterpieces they often appear, but as part of musical history, on the one hand influenced by Bach, who is represented on each release by a transcribed fugue, and on the other influencing later successors, here Mendelssohn, Webern, Bartok, Shostakovich and Schnittke.

"Prism V" came out earlier this month, and it completes a series that has come to mean more to the quartet than they might initially have expected. The eldest of the "boys" has now passed 40: The broad chords they played with such rich allure at the beginning of Op. 127, they write in the note for their most recent release, turned out not only to be "the entry gate to the promised lands of the late Be

What a prospect a "fully-fledged" Danish String Quartet, as they describe themselves now, will be, for these releases must qualify as some of the most essential listening of the past decade. No recording could quite capture what makes the Danish so special in concert, could make indelible the fleeting aura of rapt, intense concentration that settles in a hall when they are at their best. But the five "Prism" releases come close, documenting the unique potency of a quartet that may not be the most technically imposing around, nor be the most radical in repertoire, but which excels at being itself.

All the elements of the Danish style are here to behold, first among them their particular sound. Part of the intrigue when listening to string quartets comes in hearing how four audibly separate voices convene in music: how they blend together or scrape against one another, or how one rather than the others drives an argument forward. But the Danish play as if they have abandoned their individual personalities entirely to serve the collective — as if they were joined on a single instrument, armed with four bows.

For the three Danes who met as not-yet-teenagers — the violinists Frederik Oland and Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen and the violist Asbjorn Norgaard — and the Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schoyen Sjolin, who joined them in their 20s, music has long been an act of friendship. They share it naturally, as equals. Listen to any of the Bach fugues on the "Prism" releases, and you find that few, if any, of the thematic entries are underlined or even pointed out. Even when they adopt the bare tone they favor in Bach, they adjust their balances to welcome a new line, a new thought, with exquisite, barely perceptible ease.

You get the sense in these recordings that every bar of music has been as carefully considered as it should be, that the minutest aspect of each note has been discussed; the control of sonority and articulation on show is absolute, even as the range of both is vast.

There are downsides to the Danish approach, sensible as a whole yet bold in details. Their patience pays dividends in the long slow movements of Op. 127 and Op. 132, but becomes a tad staid in the drawn-out variations of Op. 131. Theirs is not a Beethoven of struggle, of strife; if they allow rough edges to creep into the blistering dissonance of the Grosse Fuge, they hardly threaten the general air of composure. The most violent playing across the series, oddly, comes in the first movement of Mendelssohn's A minor quartet on "Prism II," as a young disciple rages at a master's death.

For the most part, the Danish impose themselves as indirectly as possible on the music, and they seem happy to let the connections running through the albums strike the listener as they come, too. "Doppelgänger" places Schubert works alongside new pieces explicitly inspired by them — Thursday's concert pairs Anna Thorvaldsdottir's "Rituals" with Schubert's "Rosamunde" — and the links in "Prism" are similar, if less deliberately contrived. They can be a matter of direct quotation, as when Schnittke uses the Grosse Fuge in his Third Quartet, or of something as clear as Bartók beginning his First with a slow canon echoing the methods of

Beethoven's Op. 131. But they can also be elusive; you still have to listen, and listen well.

Listening well also reveals the subtle liberties that the Danish bring to their playing, the touches that prevent their performances from ever sounding bland. They find astonishing rhythmic freedom within the confines of their admirable discipline, a lilt to their phrasing that surely stems from the folk songs they so eagerly arrange and perform together. Take, as examples, the sense they make of the awkward opening of the finale of Op. 132, so often ungainly in the hands of others, and the elegant spring they lend to the dancing fourth movement of Op. 130, whose cavatina they unfurl with breathtaking serenity. It's playing whose virtues speak for themselves, yet its simplicity is anything but.

"The first album was recorded by four relatively fresh young men," the Danish write in their latest release. "Now we are fathers of babies, toddlers and school kids." Here is a rare middle age we can welcome.

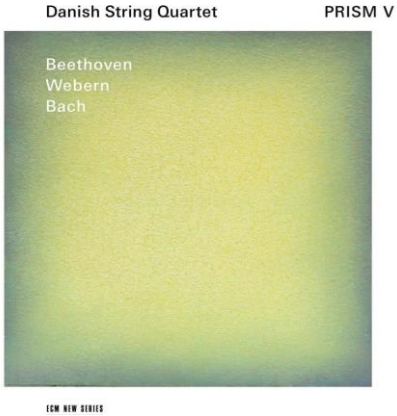
Danish String Quartet

GRAMOPHONE
THE WORLD'S BEST CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEWS

June 2023

Prism V: Beethoven, Webern, Bach

By Peter Quantrill



You need your wits about you and the volume up to catch the head-motif opening Webern's String Quartet of 1905, played by the DSQ and recorded by ECM at the prescribed *ppp*. A descending semitone and rising major third may not look much on paper but the theme has in common with the late music of Bach and Beethoven a strength and simplicity sometimes mistaken for severity. The pause markings over each phrase of the introduction are taken seriously; at 18 minutes, this is almost the longest performance on record (compare the LaSalle Quartet at just over 12 – DG, 11/71).

In this regard the DSQ are just surpassed by the Quatuor Diotima (Naïve, 6/16); that neither of these modern accounts hangs heavy is partly due to their broad palette of tone colours, tending in the case of the Danes towards a clean-limbed purity. More than either the Ardittis (Naïve, 12/91) or the Quartetto Italiano (Philips, 7/71, 4/88) – less idiomatically polar in this piece than you'd expect – the DSQ powerfully evoke the historical moment of the piece, poised as it is on the cusp of Webern's incipient hero-worship of Schoenberg and adoption of his 12-note technique.

We might expect the DSQ above others to find an earthy vigour unmistakably prefiguring Nielsen in the cross-rhythms of the Scherzo of Beethoven's Op 135. All the same, the 1826-ity of the quartet is respected in its playful opening exchanges, sounding more or less as though a single generation has passed since Haydn laid down his pen. All the pieces on this final instalment of the 'Prism' series stand on a threshold, and in this Op 135 Beethoven does so with the vitality and humour of the *Diabelli* Variations. The DSQ bring quiet radiance rather than sentimentality to the 'deathbed chorale' commonly appended to *The Art of Fugue*; the incomplete fugue unfolds in spacious legato lines, articulated as a string quartet rather than a keyboard transcription, in tune with the cool, Rothko-esque mood of secular devotion that infuses the series as a whole.

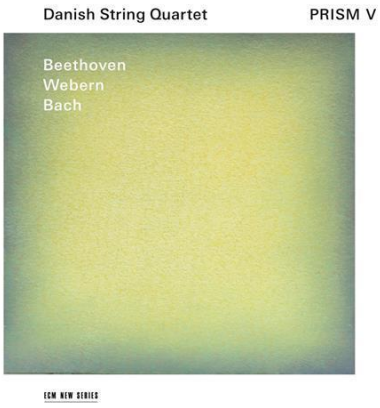
Danish String Quartet

the Strad

April 20, 2023

Danish Quartet: Prism V

By Robin Stowell



The Danish's 'Prism' series 'passes a linear beam of light' from Bach's seminal contrapuntal writing to Beethoven's late quartets, which then function as the prismatic pathway to a related, more recent work. Bach's solemn organ chorale prelude BWV668 and Contrapunctus XIV from *The Art of Fugue* provide the bookends for this final instalment, the players responding naturally and subtly to each other and bringing clarity and fluidity to their contrapuntal interaction, despite a predominantly smooth, sustained approach. The blending of timbre and secure intonation are matched by playing of conversational vitality in the opening Allegro and fiery scherzo of Beethoven's op.135. The slow movement's meditative variations are conveyed with radiance and intensity – though the initial sotto voce indication is largely ignored – and the finale is negotiated with seasoned skill and authority, the impassioned intensity and anguish of its introductory material contrasting sharply with the affirmative joy and vigour of its Allegro.

The fundamental motif of Webern's tripartite, single-movement String Quartet (1905) links well with op.135's finale, signalling its serial potential before releasing a sound world warmed by late-Romantic tonality and textures, exquisitely shaded and balanced. Throughout, ECM's engineers do full justice to these refined, coherent and erudite performances, which combine an exhilarating sweep with minute attention to details of phrasing and timbre.

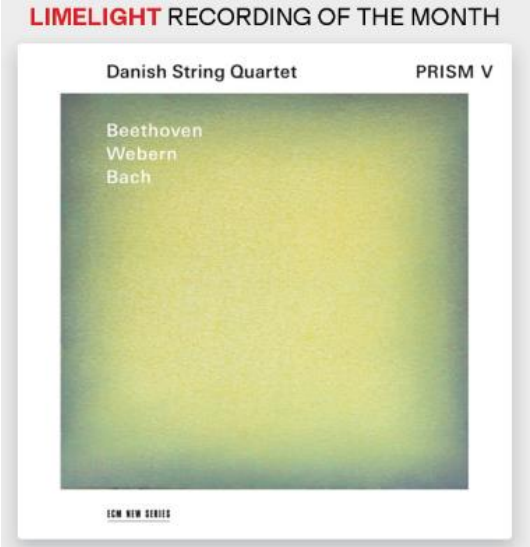
LIMELIGHT

July 24, 2023

Prism V (Danish String Quartet)

Beethoven's final utterance and Webern's earliest conclude Danish String Quartet series.

By Clive Paget



The Danish String Quartet's Prism project has been one of the most stimulating series of recent years. Each volume has linked a Bach fugue with one of Beethoven's five late quartets, which, in turn, has pointed the way towards an important quartet by a later composer. It's a typically thoughtful conceit from four players (Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and Frederik Øland violins, Asbjørn Nørgaard viola, and Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin cello) whose bonds of friendship go back to school music camps and beyond.

For those new to the series, Prism I (recorded as long ago as 2016), placed Beethoven's Op. 127 in E-flat (the first of the late quartets) alongside Mozart's arrangement of a Bach fugue and Shostakovich's bleak String Quartet No. 15. The connections in Prism II saw Beethoven's Op. 130 rubbing shoulders with Schnittke's Third Quartet; Prism III coupled Beethoven's unconventional Op. 131 with Bartók's quirky First Quartet; and Prism IV revealed Mendelssohn's debt to Beethoven by presenting the latter's Op. 132 next to Mendelssohn's Second Quartet (both works being in A minor). And so, we reach the finish line with Prism V.

The disc opens with the chorale prelude *Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit*. The sleeve notes suggest a family legend recalling these as words spoken on his deathbed as Bach contemplated the ending to his unfinished *Art of Fugue*. Here the DSQ thins out the tone to resemble a viol consort, lacing the work's contemplative calm with melancholy. The ensemble – as always with these players – is exemplary.

The subsequent performance of Beethoven's String Quartet No. 16 in F, the composer's final word on the subject, couldn't be bettered. Whether live or on record, there's a palpable sense of camaraderie about the DSQ. Smiles and light-hearted friendship are perfectly suited to Beethoven's amiable Op. 135. Switching gears, the tone here is full-bodied yet flexible with a cheerful lightness at the top and an almost rustic warmth at the bottom.

With its quixotic changes of mood, the opening movement draws out an affable yet technically immaculate performance full of character and playfulness. Everything here is flexibly sprung, and there's a cheekiness that is irresistible. The brief *Vivace* is delightfully puckish,

the *Lento assai* beautifully paced, the players digging deep to plumb the music's emotional depths. After a probing, inward-looking beginning, the conversational "Muss es sein?" "Es muss sein!" finale saunters on its way with a relaxed poise and occasional good-natured flights of caprice towards a deftly finessed conclusion.

Weberns String Quartet was composed in 1905. Inspired by both Schoenberg, who he was studying with at the time, and Beethoven, it opens with what sounds like Webern's own take on "Muss es sein?" "Es muss sein!" before heading off into a flurry of propositions and considerations. It' written in Webern's early, almost lush style – therefore not at all hard to approach – and the Danes' passionate reading is full of imaginative touches. Its wispy corners are skilfully negotiated with impressively pinpoint intonation.

Finally, the disc – and cycle – comes full circle, allowing Bach the last word. And with *The Art of the Fugue's*famously unfinished "Contrapunctus 14" it is the very last word indeed. This is solemn music-making and played with enormous reverence. Listening to these works back-to-back, you can't help hearing both Beethoven *and* Webern in Bach's developing contrapuntal web, which, after all, is the whole point of the Prism series.

Bach and Webern aside, this is a cycle that has exhibited an engaging individuality, a freshness of phrasing, and an overwhelming sense of rightness when it comes to Beethoven. That places these discs very high indeed on the list of modern interpretations. Let's hope ECM records the other 11 quartets soon.

Danish String Quartet

The New York Times

April 21, 2023

The Danish String Quartet Spins Through Schubert

By Joshua Barone

Schubert's song "Gretchen am Spinnrade" famously imitates a spinning wheel in the piano: the left hand repeating the rhythm of a pedal, and the right whirling a phrase in perpetual motion. It's not exact, but it is evocative, like the Goethe poetry it's based on.

At Zankel Hall on Thursday, that spirit of repetition — oblique and constantly transforming — coursed through the third installment of the Danish String Quartet's "Doppelgänger" project, which pairs Schubert's late quartets with new commissions, and closes with an arrangement of a lied: in this case, "Gretchen."

Before that came Schubert's "Rosamunde" Quartet, a relatively light work among its "Doppelgänger" siblings, and the single-movement "Quartettsatz," as well as the world premiere of Anna Thorvaldsdottir's "Rituals," a slippery but entrancing series of permutations in which a set of musical gestures are rearranged like matter.

That piece rarely repeats itself, but the Schubert ones do; the violist Asbjorn Norgaard, speaking from the stage, described the "Rosamunde" as one of the most repetitive works in the quartet repertoire. (Philip Glass would like a word.) But it was less so on Thursday as the Danes — Norgaard, as well as the violinists Frederik Oland and Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen, and the cellist Fredrik Schoyen Sjolin — skipped the written reprises of the first two movements' opening sections.

Those cuts make for a slightly shorter performance, perhaps not even easily noticed by a casual listener, but not a materially different experience. More striking was the playing itself, in both the "Rosamunde" and the "Quartettsatz": unshowy, soft with an ember glow, charismatically dancing. Phrases were passed around with ease; rhythms and voices doubled seamlessly. At any given moment there was, as David Allen recently observed in The New York Times, the impression that each note had been considered. This was ensemble music at its purest — a consensus interpretation, rendered selflessly in service of the group as instrument.

Thorvaldsdottir's "Rituals" wasn't written as a direct response to Schubert, but in the context of Thursday's program it came off as something of a distant cousin; her work is less interested in repeating whole passages, but like her Viennese predecessor she obsesses here over gestures, reshaping them, foregrounding and obscuring them, layering them in explorations of counterpoint and compatibility.

Read into the title what you will: daily routines, ceremonies, religion. They all are implied in the piece's nine sections — effectively made 11 by two "Ascension" interludes with the rich harmony of a chorale and the serene lyricism of a hymn. The segments flow into one another without pause, except for some written rests, and unfold organically, each little motif introduced then recurring in a new guise.

At the start are sputtering bows and glissando slides over a droning foundation that is occasionally built out into briefly sustained, then shifting chords. Those textures — others come along, including percussive col legno and open fifths that flip steady ground into weightless suspension — glide among the instruments, a vocabulary ordered then reordered, always expressing a fresh thought. Thorvaldsdottir, in a mode characteristically abstract yet suggestive, could prolong an idea like this ad infinitum. But at 21 minutes, her score speaks with poetic concision, ending before it has overstated its point.

About poetry: The Danes concluded their recital with a Schubertian arrangement of "Gretchen am Spinnrade," in which the first violin acted as the soprano. But they also introduced a fifth instrument, a music box. As Oland turned its handle, the machine spun out a roll of paper punched with the swirling piano line — seeming to repeat itself but, in its small changes, irresistibly

Moving.

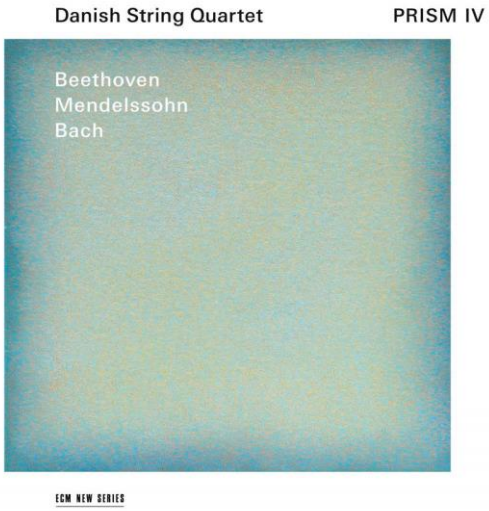
Danish String Quartet

GRAMOPHONE
THE WORLD'S BEST CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEWS

September 2022

Prism IV: Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Bach

By Peter Quantrill



Phrased in two (like Schiff) instead of four (Gould), the G minor Fugue from Book 1 of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* concentrates the mind for the rigours of Op 132. Here too the DSQ do not equate profundity with ponderousness. Just as in their Nielsen (Dacapo, 2013), I appreciate how their accents articulate the line rather than breaking it up.

Not for the first time I find myself wondering as a counterfactual what the *Adagio* of the Ninth would sound like if orchestral ensembles could emulate the shared sense of purpose of quartets playing the 'Heiliger Dankgesang'; also how the character of each late quartet would change had Beethoven added metronome marks as he did for the symphonies. All of which is to admire the stillness without stasis of the DSQ's pulse for the movement and how they ease, phrase to phrase, between an unearthly pure tone and a warmer *cantabile*, never stretching the envelope to expressionist extremes.

To read how the 18-year-old Mendelssohn picked up in Op 13 where Beethoven left off is one thing, to hear it in action quite another, and the performance of each work here interprets the other. The angelic play of the contrasting material of the 'Heiliger Dankgesang' as well as its sublime hymnody are elaborated in both inner movements of the Mendelssohn, lending unusual gravity as well as grace to the Intermezzo.

The finales of both quartets draw a directly comparable strength and grit from the DSQ, with only Mendelssohn's recitative sections tending towards a wiriness otherwise absent from the full-blooded studio sound. In concert, anything after the relentless momentum of Op 132's finale would be too much; at home, the consummate breadth of Op 13's introduction turns the page on a new chapter, and the DSQ make compelling storytellers.

Danish String Quartet

LIMELIGHT
Music, Arts & Culture

August 2, 2022

Prism IV (Danish String Quartet)

Finessed, insightful playing makes a strong claim for attention.

Editor's Choice - September 2022

By Michael Quinn

The penultimate volume in the Danish String Quartet's *Prism* series linking Bach fugues with string quartets by Beethoven and later composers boasts revelatory playing, finessed and fierce, that penetrates to the bone, fibre and heart of the protean Lutheran's successors' music. Where previous instalments highlighted 20th-century quartets by Bartók, Schnittke and Shostakovich, here the focus shifts backwards in time to Mendelssohn.

The jumping-off point is the G Minor "Little Fugue" (BWV861) from the first book of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* in an arrangement by Emanuel Aloys Förster, whom Beethoven admired enough to recommend students to him. In truth, it's a workmanlike arrangement, but one whose subdued, unsettled temperament is realised by the Danish foursome with a duly adroit and spryly voiced exactitude that prepares the ground for what is to follow.

That work's leading four-note motif, transposed down a seventh for the cello, provides the kernel (intentional or not) for the first movement of Beethoven's String Quartet No 15 in A Minor (Op.132). The catalogue is well stocked with recommendable recordings of this venerable late work, to which can be added this candid, soul-bearing reading.

Noticeable from the off, in the sprung, buoyant opening where dark undercurrents pull away from surface splendour, is the alert, precisely proportioned sense of reciprocity in the Danish quartet's playing. In Beethoven's chamber music, as in life, the onus is on listening before responding. That attitude reaps considerable rewards here in the finely balanced interplay between all four voices that registers in dazzling contrapuntal complexity, in daringly delineated contrasts and in often movingly expressive intimacy.

That latter quality distinguishes the major-key second movement, realised with faultless balance, the transcendental trio beautifully described. But it is in the third, *Molto adagio*, movement with its becoming, altogether affecting slow-motion keening, that the Danish String Quartet lock eloquent antlers with the Alban Berg Quartet's benchmark live recording (EMI Classics). As hushed as it is intense, it is the precision of the playing here, in tempo, temperament and exquisite detailing that so compels.

The miniature fourth movement deports itself with an almost prim sense of propriety, selflessly serving as the conduit between what has been and what is to follow, deftly seeding the ground for the surging *Allegro appassionato* finale. Initially sketched as the conclusion to the Ninth Symphony (subsequently abandoned for its now indelible choral ending), it is an exultant exercise in that most

Beethovenian of traits: resolution. And is superbly realised here.

Also cast in A Minor, the 18-year-old Mendelssohn's ardently articulate Second String Quartet was composed in homage a mere matter of months after Beethoven's death in 1826. Unabashedly indebted to the classical titan's Op. 132 and its immediate quartet sibling, No 16 (Op. 135), it also anticipates fast-emerging romanticism. The Danish String Quartet occupy this Janus-faced cusp with relishable fire and finesse to imbue a youthful outpouring with all the considered maturity it merits.

Recorded sound in the 14th-century Reitstadel in Neumarkt, Bavaria is exemplary. The booklet includes characteristically erudite, self-recommending, notes by Paul Griffiths and the Danish String Quartet.

TheDanishStringQuartet

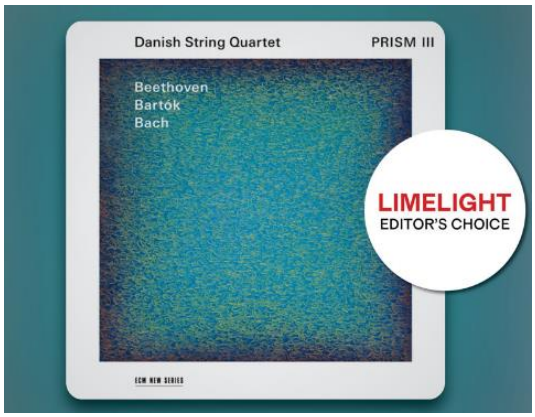
LIMELIGHT
Music, Arts & Culture

March 26, 2021

Prism III (Danish String Quartet)

Scintillating Scandinavian string playing shines a new light on Beethoven's art.

By Will Yeoman



"Each album presents a particular Bach fugue that is connected to a late Beethoven quartet that is in turn connected to a quartet by a later master. A beam of music is split through Beethoven's prism."

That's part of the reasoning the Danish String Quartet – Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen (violins), Asbjørn Nørgaard (viola) and Frederik Schøyen Sjölin (cello) – give for embarking on their five-volume and live concert series PRISM project, which takes Beethoven's last five string quartets and shows how it relates both to a Bach fugue (often in the same key) and a post-Beethoven string quartet.

As the Quartet's note to this third and latest volume in the series also explains, Beethoven was "obsessed" with Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* during his last years, and "derived many of the melodic motifs in his five late quartets" from it.

Prism I features Beethoven's String Quartet No 12, Op. 127 in E Flat, a Bach fugue in the same key and Shostakovich's String Quartet No 15 in E Flat Minor. Prism II comprises Beethoven's String Quartet No 13, Op. 130, another Bach fugue (B Flat Minor) and Schnittke's String Quartet No 3.

Prism III brings us to Beethoven's String Quartet No 14 in C Sharp Minor, Op. 131, which the Danish String Quartet follow with Bartók's String Quartet No 1 from 1909 and Bach's Fugue in C Sharp Minor BWV849 from *The Well-Tempered Clavier* Book I, arranged by Viennese composer Emanuel Aloys Förster (1748-1823).

One can't help but think the image of a prism refracting light on the otherwise pitch-black album cover Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* (1973) would have suited this project very well. Because it's about illumination, in the sense of providing opportunities for us to make connections, whether historical, theoretical or intuitive, between three seemingly wildly disparate works for string quartet (the Bach fugues in arrangement, of course; Paul Griffiths in his thoughtful contribution to the booklet literature notes some necessary

over-dubbing by the viola part for the 5-voice fugue).

It's also about awakening our consciousness to innovation within tradition, of which Beethoven's extensive use of the fugue is but one example. But the Danish String Quartet don't oversell such features, here allowing the first-movement fugue in the Beethoven to unfold like carefully partitioned mist, creating just the right sense of mystery and suspense for the following movements – whether galumphing, galloping, searingly serioso or spinning kaleidoscopically through a series of variations – to be heard with fresh ears and open heart.

The Bartók not only benefits from this superb opening gambit in the sense of "make it new"; also revealed is a passionate intensity and perhaps bitterness which is Beethovian in spirit.

By the time we get to Bach's sublime C Sharp Minor fugue – which this listener, and presumably most of you, will be used to hearing on piano, or possibly harpsichord – we're in a different headspace, and hear in the unfurling of subjects and countersubjects, the dense polyphony and dramatic stretti, not just the ghost of a Renaissance *ricercar* but a prefiguration of Beethoven's genius.

Fanciful, maybe; but it's that kind of imaginative cohabitation which playing of the calibre of the Danish String Quartet's makes possible.

Danish String Quartet

GRAMOPHONE
THE WORLD'S BEST CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEWS

May 2021

JS Bach · Bartók · Beethoven

'Prism III'
JS Bach Fugue, BWV849 (arr EA Förster)
Bartók String Quartet No 1, Op 7 Sz40
Beethoven String Quartet No 14, Op 131
Danish Quartet
ECM New Series Ⓕ 485 5417 (77' • DDD)

When Beethoven shares the theme of Op 131's *Andante* between the two violins, it's like two friends, not always but on this occasion in agreement, finishing the other's sentences. That's how the Mirò Quartet play it, so do the Takács. The Danish String Quartet fiddles phrase like Gemini: you would have to be following the score, or listening very intently on good equipment, to hear the theme pass between them. The same principle of tonal matching across all four instruments holds for the quartet's opening fugue, smooth and yet frozen like the ice supporting Schubert's hurdy-gurdy man – as though, after the *Grosse Fuge*, the nature of the genre as a carrier of argument had changed for ever.

This is how I hear the members of the DSQ approaching the 20th-century composers who picked up the gauntlet of late Beethoven for themselves: Nielsen (on Dacapo, 7/07), Shostakovich (in the first volume of this 'Prism' series, 12/18) and Bartók, in this exquisite account of the First Quartet. Some may find them aloof and measured by the side of the Takács, but for me the DSQ open the curtain on the kind of private world Schoenberg discovered in breathing 'the air of other planets' in his Second Quartet. The engineering, too, creates the illusion of a limitless black space from which Bartók's central *Allegretto* emerges at first indistinct and then hurtling towards us like some not-so-heavenly body on grainy footage from a spaceship camera.

The C sharp minor Fugue of Bach is well placed as an encore, at once affording relief by retreating into yet another alien world, yet retrospectively handing us the melodic key to Op 131 and inviting us to turn again and repeat the course. On a second time around, or fourth or fifth, the mellifluous purity of the DSQ's intonation becomes less an object of admiration in itself than a means to enjoy the playful negotiation of the prefatory third and sixth movements, the patient humour of the *Andante*'s variations – with a wonderfully timed pay-off, hardly more than a smile – and even the finale's gritty Schubertian tarantella. In the DSQ's company, I'll be content to go round in contrapuntal circles for some time to come. **Peter Quantrill**

Beethoven – selected comparison:
Takács Qt (5/05) (DECC) 470 849-2DH3
Bartók – selected comparison:
Takács Qt (4/98) (DECC) ⊳ 455 297-2DH2

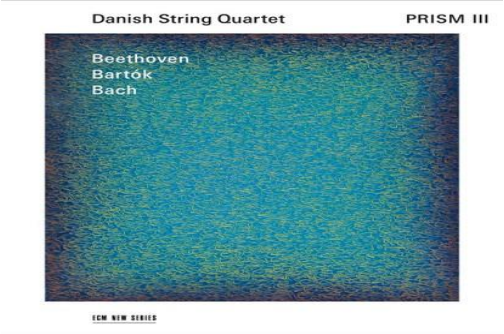
Danish String Quartet

BBC music MAGAZINE

May 13, 2021

Prism III (Danish String Quartet)

By Christopher Dingle



The Danish String Quartet's *Prism* series is building into an exceptionally rewarding venture. As in the previous volumes, this third instalment partners a late Beethoven quartet (the C sharp minor) with a related Bach fugue and a later quartet that might be regarded as a kindred spirit. In this case, Bartók's First Quartet provides a stimulating evolution from Beethoven's fugal writing and penchant for variations, creating a juxtaposition that illuminates both works.

The remarkable precision of the Danish is apparent throughout, moving as one organism whether in the wilder moments of Bartók's final movement or the slow-moving counterpoint that opens the Beethoven. The Danish bring a concentrated introspection to both opening movements along with a suitably disconcerting sense of the abstruse. As Beethoven's fugue works itself out, there are some passages where a little more shape would be welcome; and the pacing of the central movement's variations is not always convincing. These are minor quibbles, though, in performances that are generally packed full of character. The shifts between shrouded mystery and full-throated outbursts in the *Allegretto* of the Bartók are gripping, while the more extrovert moments of the Beethoven find motifs are passed between the instruments with the flair and relish of expert jugglers. Bach's fugue, in the same key that Beethoven's quartet opens in, feels like an inevitable homecoming in a stimulating and compelling disc.

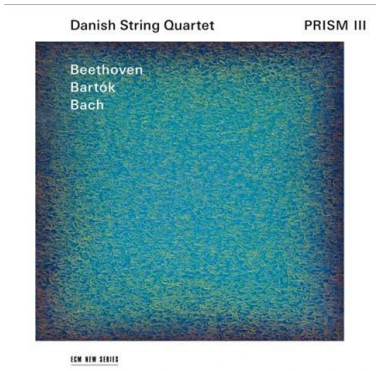
Danish String Quartet

the Strad

April 27, 2021

Danish Quartet: Prism III

By David Kettle



In their disarmingly frank booklet note, the Danish Quartet players confess to having been quite confused by Beethoven's late quartets as young musicians. Indeed, this third disc in a series delving into those pioneering works feels like a journey of discovery, not only in its repertoire – with Beethoven's op.131 set alongside Bartók's First Quartet, on which its influence is clear, as well as a Bach fugue, which exerted its own influence – but also in the Danish players' questioning accounts.

Their Beethoven is expertly shaped and articulated, somewhat cool, but delivered with a clarity of intent and unity of voice that both feel like the result of a long consideration of the music and its meanings. Their opening fugue is beautifully austere though somewhat foursquare, but it's shot through with a remarkable sustained intensity, and following slightly hesitant extroversion in the second and fifth movements, they manage to make the work's gruff conclusion both brusque and vulnerable. It doesn't make for easy listening but it's thrillingly daring, and it takes the listener on the same journey into the work's complexities and contradictions that the Danish players have evidently taken.

Their Bartók First Quartet is just as gripping, again with rhythms as precise as clockwork and a wonderfully liquid dance of a second movement, although a rather gritted-teeth finale, and they deliver the Bach C sharp minor Fugue with a strong sense of forward movement. This is a brilliantly compelling disc, captured in close, authentic sound.

Danish String Quartet

BBC MUSIC
November 2019

Great Danes make some revelatory connections

Julian Haylock finds that all roads lead to Beethoven in the Danish Quartet's latest imaginative programme

CHAMBER CHOICE

Joining the dots: the Danish String Quartet impress

Prism II

JS Bach: Fugue in B minor, BWV 869 (arr. Förster);
Beethoven: String Quartet No. 13 in B flat;
Schnittke: String Quartet No. 3
Danish Quartet
ECM 4818564 74:16 mins

As Paul Griffiths describes eloquently in his exemplary booklet annotations, there are profound familial connections here between the contrapuntal intensity of Bach's B minor Fugue from Book I of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (heard here in an inspired arrangement by Beethoven's friend, Emmanuel Aloys Förster), Beethoven's 'Grosse Fuge' (presented, as originally intended, as the finale of the Op. 130 Quartet) and Schnittke's Third Quartet. The quartet refers overtly to the 'Grosse Fuge' as the music's virtual progenitor and (almost subliminally) to the Bach fugue.

Fascinatingly, in this second of the Danish Quartet's *Prism* series based around Beethoven's late quartets, they trace the prismatic connections between the three pieces in the order Bach-Schnittke-Beethoven, creating a revelatory connected soundscape in which (even after the agonised hectoring of the Schnittke) Beethoven's super-compressed introspection feels even more (at times wildly) unsettling than usual.

It's little wonder that Beethoven decided to hide himself away at a local tavern during an early private performance of his quartet with its 'Grosse Fuge', afraid that no one would understand it: he was right!

> It is the 'Grosse fuge' that inspires the most insightful playing of all

Here, though, the Danes make sense of this work while bringing it to life. They create the haunting impression of the 'Alla danza tedesca' having already been playing for some time before we actually hear it, yet it is the 'Grosse Fuge' that perhaps inspires the most insightful playing of all, with vibrato kept to an intonation-clarifying minimum and passages of dotted-rhythm thrusting delivered with a rapier-like precision, offset by oases of profound calm.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

Danish String Quartet

theStrad
VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

November 2019

Danish Quartet: Prism II

By Tim Homfray

Description: Three composers seen through a glittering Nordic prism
Musicians: Danish Quartet
Works: BACH Fugue in B minor (Well-Tempered Clavier, Bk 1) (arr. Emanuel Aloys Förster) SCHNITTKE String Quartet no.3 BEETHOVEN String Quartet in B flat major op.130
Catalogue Number: ECM NEW SERIES 481 8564

This is the second in the Danish Quartet's Prism series, drawing connecting lines from a Bach fugue through a late Beethoven quartet to one of a subsequent composer. In this set Bach's B minor Fugue comes first, its chromaticisms heralding the Grosse Fuge and Schnittke's borrowing from the same work. The playing is spare, with little vibrato, mostly legato, leaning into the falling seconds. That same sparseness features at the opening of Schnittke's Third Quartet, with its quotations from a Lassus motet, the Grosse Fuge theme and Shostakovich's 'DSCH' signature (D, E flat, C, B). In the hectic discourse of the second-movement Agitato the foursome play with fierce, dry attack, their tone ringing and focused. In the strange, shifting landscape of the third movement Pesante there is colour and raw power, as well as gentleness.
In the B flat major Quartet op.130 they make much of Beethoven's strong contrasts, of dynamics and character (although ignoring his first-movement exposition repeat). The second movement twinkles, with excellent playing from leader Frederik Øland. The Cavatina has depth and profundity. The Grosse Fuge has all the qualities of the CD brought together: constant clarity of texture and sharing of part-writing. This is all vivid, propulsive playing, sometimes granitic, at others pliant. It is always gripping.

Danish String Quartet

LIMELIGHT
AUSTRALIA'S CLASSICAL MUSIC AND ARTS MAGAZINE

October 28, 2019

PRISM II (DANISH STRING QUARTET)

★★★★★

Scandi foursome refract a beam of musical light.

By Steve Moffatt

Like many top international chamber music ensembles the Danish String Quartet started out as a student group at music school. Three of the founding members – Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, Frederik Øland and Asbjørn Nørgaard – had met at a summer camp where they started playing together.

However there was one piece of music that outfoxed them. "This late Beethoven quartet had a different flavour from that of most other music we had encountered. It felt as if it had fallen down from outer space on to our music stands, disconnected from music history and tradition," the group says.

Later joined by Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, the young quartet soon attracted a following with their cutting edge performances of the standard classical repertoire, as well as tapping into the rich world of Scandinavian folk music.

They soon caught the eye of the ECM label's founder Manfred Eicher and a residency at the Lincoln Center in New York sealed their reputation as one of the most exciting young string quartets on the scene today.

Last year they launched their ambitious five-album *Prism* project. Each album has as its light source a Bach fugue that is connected to a late Beethoven quartet that is in turn connected to a quartet by a later composer. "A beam of music is split through Beethoven's prism," as they put it.

The first volume refracted from the prelude and fugue in E Flat Major from *The Well-Tempered Clavier* through Shostakovich's final quartet to Beethoven's No 12, Op. 127. For *Prism II* the fugue in C Minor leads intriguingly into Alfred Schnittke's String Quartet No 3 before finishing with Beethoven's Op. 130 with its *Grosse Fuge* ending.

The Schnittke is an inspired conduit with its references back to early music – a Lassus cadence opens the work – before he quotes Shostakovich's musical signature and then the *Grosse Fuge* and other snatches of Beethoven. Besides, it is a thunderingly good piece.

The album works particularly well and the performances – with Sørensen and Øland switching lead duties – are from the top drawer with empathetic ensemble work, authoritative attack and attention to nuance and shifting moods – a must in any reading of the Op. 130.

Although a young group, these players have been performing together for several years and there is a tightness and maturity here combined with an electric energy and willingness to take risks – all of which pay off handsomely. Bring on *Prism III*!

Danish String Quartet

GRAMOPHONE
THE WORLD'S BEST CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEWS

November 30, 2018

Prism I (Danish Quartet)

By Richard Bratby

Air from another planet: when the Danish String Quartet first encountered late Beethoven it felt to them (as they explain in the booklet) 'as if it had fallen down from outer space onto our music stands'. This new release is an attempt to recapture that sense of strangeness, the idea being to use Beethoven as a 'prism' through which to revisit earlier and later music. Here, the Quartet Op 127 refracts a Bach fugue and Shostakovich's Quartet No 15, with the tonality of E flat as the common element.

The effect, on listening straight through, is unexpected. The Bach serves as a brief prelude, and the Shostakovich follows with very little break. The DSQ's pure, transparent playing immediately lifts the sense of static, oppressive fatality that can (some might say, should) hang over this work. It's certainly not that the group's playing lacks commitment: the strange, almost savage snarls that end their crescendos at the start of the second-movement Serenade are deeply unsettling. But there's definitely a sense of movement, indeed song, in even the slowest music. The ending isn't so much a fade into extinction as a question left hanging – to be answered by the opening chords of the Beethoven: jagged, assertive and destabilising.

It feels like a controlled discharge of accumulated emotional energy, and while the playing is exquisitely refined (listen to the sudden, luminous change in texture at 5'00" in the finale), this performance never loses its sense of rhythmic danger. These aren't warm interpretations; they repel as readily as they attract. But they're thought-provoking, and often startlingly beautiful. And anyway, perhaps one shouldn't draw too close to this music. Didn't Beethoven say 'I'm speaking to my God'?

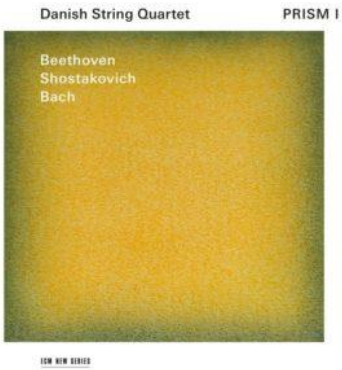
Danish String Quartet

Sequenza 21/
The Contemporary Classical Music Community

December 14, 2018

Best Chamber Music CDs of 2018

By Christian Carey



Prism I is the first of five CDs by the Danish String Quartet, each featuring a work by Bach, a work by Beethoven, and a complementary piece. The key of E-flat is the central focus of this recording. J.S. Bach's Fugue in E-flat major (transcribed from Book Two of the *Well-Tempered Clavier)* is a buoyant opener. Shostakovich's last string quartet, in E-flat minor, vividly contrasts with it. Shostakovich brings together pensive passages, a funeral march, and what appears to be a reprise of the "knock on the door" from the Eighth Quartet, meant to describe the danger of the secret police to the composer: all intimations of fragility and mortality.

The disc concludes with the first of Beethoven's late quartets, Op. 127 in, you guessed it, E-flat major. Writing for strings, it is fascinating to note how these composers have responded to this key. E-flat can be tricky: the instruments only have thirds (G and D), not roots, of the tonic and dominant triads to play as open strings, which lends interesting chordal voicings to these pieces. From the muted angst of the Shostakovich quartet's opening to the nobility and grandeur embodied by Beethoven's finale, the Danish Quartet are expressive and authoritative throughout. Looking forward to what else will be refracted through the Prism series.

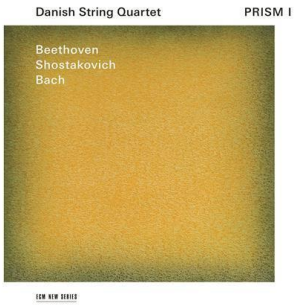
Danish String Quartet

theStrad
VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

November 30, 2018

Danish String Quartet: Prism 1

By Robin Stowell



The Danish Quartet's 'Prism' project explores Bach's influence on Beethoven's last quartets (via Mozart's five transcriptions of fugues from The Well-Tempered Clavier) and, through Beethoven, on works by more recent composers. Disc 1 is firmly in E flat!

These players perform Bach's Fugue BWV876 with intelligence and sophistication, their relaxed, intuitive approach to texture, sonority and phrasing allowing contrapuntal transparency. Their powerfully characterised account of Beethoven's op.127 focuses on the slow movement's moving variations, expressively realised, but their first movement is pleasingly paced, with notation scrupulously observed and sonorities skilfully blended, and they invest the jaunty scherzo with suitably rhythmic dynamism. Their finale, however, seems laboured and underplayed, lacking the energy, tension and drive of some competing ensembles.

The six unsettling Adagio movements of Shostakovich's death-ridden, valedictory op.144 are realised with intensity and wide-ranging instrumental colour, from the sombre, contemplative Elegy, through the Serenade's strikingly characterised anguish and ironic waltz to the Intermezzo, its violin cadenza powerfully delivered by Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen. The impressionistic Nocturne and the initially impassioned Funeral March, punctuated by striking solos, lead to an Epilogue of reminiscences played with an unusual understanding, sympathy and feeling. The recording is well balanced, the acoustic providing both ambience and intimacy.

Danish String Quartet

theStrad
VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

May 2018

DANISH QUARTET

ALICE TULLY HALL 25 FEBRUARY 2018

From the first notes of Haydn's String Quartet op.1 no.1 'La chasse', the clarity, precision and depth of the Danish Quartet's playing captured the ear. This afternoon programme of four quartets, each with a 'hunting' theme, provided surprising variety, and the group (right) positively shone in each. In the Haydn – the final Presto in particular – the semiquaver runs sparkled while the Adagio was elegant without being too slow. Mozart's 'Hunt' Quartet op.17 followed: almost never before have I wanted to clap after each movement in thanksgiving and joy. The accompaniment in the opening Allegro vivace assai perfectly supported the top line, and the cello solo in the Adagio was especially lovely, but perhaps most impressive of all was the quartet's flawless articulation. The final movement was almost too fast, but the overall performance was an utter delight.

Next was Jörg Widmann's *Jagdquartett* , with the group capturing the character and spirit of the hunt in this difficult work with great energy and passion. Their control of the extended techniques was tremendously impressive, but even more captivating was their highly musical interpretation – allowing music to breathe, layering the parts thoughtfully and shaping phrases carefully in what could otherwise have sounded like chaos.

Brahms's op.67 Quartet followed the interval with flawless ensemble and seemingly minimal effort required by those playing the opening Vivace's difficult inner parts. The Agitato in particular was immensely satisfying. It is a movement that can sound repetitive, but no note played by the Danish is ever stagnant, unchanging or misplaced.

LEAH HOLLINGSWORTH

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Danish String Quartet

theStrad
VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

February 2018

Danish Quartet: Last Leaf

By Tom Woodall

Following its first disc of Nordic folk music (*Wood Works*, reviewed December 2014), the Danish Quartet has moved to ECM and recorded a disc of contemporary British and Danish music (reviewed August 2016). It now returns, on ECM, to its successful side project with *Last Leaf*, an album that, like *Wood Works*, arranged Nordic traditional tunes in string quartet format.

New for this album, there are touches of extra instrumentation: cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin plays the double bass at times, while first violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen doubles on harmonium, piano and glockenspiel. A second development is a number of pieces composed from within the group (three by Sjölin and one by Sørensen), demonstrating the quartet's immersion in this music. Otherwise, though, Last Leaf picks up where Wood Works left off: well-paced arrangements of myriad dance tunes from across the Nordic countries – from more refined waltzes and minuets to the wilder fare of polskas and reels.

Across all the pieces, the quartet's crystalline sound (in a well-balanced recording) conjures a magical atmosphere and nods to the strident tone of Nordic fiddle playing.

Danish String Quartet

GRAMOPHONE
THE WORLD'S BEST CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEWS

December 2017

Last Leaf

By Andrew Mellor

'Last Leaf' refers to the last leaf of parchment in the Codex Runicus, a tome dating from around 1300 that contains one of the earliest pieces of Nordic legislation but also, on that final page, the secular song 'Drømte mig en drøm' ('Dreamed me a dream'). This album is arranged as a sort of codex in itself: a heartfelt, thoroughly researched and exquisitely performed journey through that and other Nordic folk songs, dances and hymns from the past five centuries that ends with the single piece that inspired it.

That piece, 'one of the most beautiful Danish hymns we know of', according to the Danish Quartet, is 'Now Found is the Fairest of Roses', in which the theologian HA Brorson laid his yuletide text over a Lutheran funeral chorale. It is played here with the combination of focused lightness and floating tension that the DSQ might deploy in a Beethoven slow movement. In the end, it slips away – the most saddening but smile-inducing moment in an album that traverses simple emotions but taps something deep at the same time.

Indeed, the quartet pose a parallel question in the booklet: 'Can a rustic folk dance conjure up feelings of melancholy and contemplation?' The ensemble's considered arrangements provide an answer as much as their performances. Repetition presents an opportunity to layer, weave, darken and question. Never do any of the arrangements drift into the schmaltzy (we hear a double bass, a harmonium, a piano and a glockenspiel in addition to the four strings of the ensemble). When presented with unusual material, as in the arrangements the ensemble has discovered by the 18th-century Danish fiddler Rasmus Storm, the performances mine its unusual qualities. There are three original works by cellist Frederik Sjölin, the best of them *Naja's Waltz*, which moves from a light pizzicato to a deep-throated song.

'In the old days', continues the quartet's own booklet note, 'you were considered a good fiddler if you knew a lot of tunes, you could play loudly for a very long time and most importantly, you kept the beat.' They certainly do the latter. But they also invest this music with the sort of ensemble precision, subtlety of colour and well-timed abandon that they do Shostakovich and the rest of them. The best album of folk ditties from a string quartet you'll ever hear? Probably.

Danish String Quartet

npr music

October 6, 2017

An Old Danish Dance In The Key Of Melancholy

By Tom Huizenga

Classical and folk music continue to intermingle in fascinating ways. The intersections stretch back far beyond Bach, who cleverly slipped a German folk song into his *Goldberg Variations*. Later, composers like Ralph Vaughan Williams and Béla Bartók combed the countryside, collecting tunes from villagers. And a recent piece, *Steel Hammer*, by Pulitzer-winner Julia Wolfe, draws inspiration from the folk ballad "John Henry."

The members of the Danish String Quartet also have affection for folk. They are plenty happy playing Haydn and Brahms, but their new album, *Last Leaf*, is entirely devoted to old Nordic folk melodies and dances, which they've arranged for string quartet. The oldest date to around 1300, but there are newer ones, and even a couple faux-folk tunes composed by the group's cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin.

"Æ Rømeser" is an 18th-century dance from the village of Sønderho, situated at the southern end of Fanø, one of the many Danish islands that hug the country's west coast. The Danish String Quartet's arrangement is smart, evocative and touching.

After a somber introduction, the first violin teases out a bittersweet theme, which gets infused with loads of personality. The piece sounds like a melancholy song without words, backed by a droning squeezebox, and a toe-tapping dance tune all at the same time.

A beautiful viola solo, midway through, adds to the wistful vibe before the main theme comes back around and the music builds to a joyous climax. A solo fiddle returns to whisper the melody as a mist of plucked strings evaporates.

4:00

Click to listen or visit http://n.pr/2kHoqlz

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Danish String Quartet

Forbes

October 4, 2017

Classical CD Of The Week: Folk Music For String Quartet, Out Of The Woodwork

The folksiness of Scandinavian traditional music has all the associative ingratiating quality of the smell of pine cones, fresh straw and moonshine, but none of hog pen and swamp. By seizing these works from the Hardanger fiddle and re-creating them for string quartet, the Danish String Quartet manages to add sophistication to the ever-morphing, never static originals without neutering their vitality. You might think of it Crossover – symphonic, melancholic; classical spilling out from its usual confines, or Neo-Folk, or you might just think of it as damn fine music: entertaining firstly, incidentally sophisticated, and decidedly gripping. Every time *Wood Works* pops into my CD player, which is well-above average frequently, I want to write about it. Every time until now I hesitated, not knowing how I might treat something out of the realm of my presumed, nominal expertise. Until now, when I figured I simply wouldn't give two flying hoots about strictures of form. Which, incidentally, is how the Danish String Quartet seems to operate – and very successfully, too!

Danish String Quartet

STRINGS

December 2016

Danish String Quartet: Thomas Adès, Per Nørgård, Hans Abrahamsen

Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen and Frederik Øland, violin; Asbjørn Nørgaard, viola; Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, cello (ECM New Series)

Speaking about this fine new album with NPR, Danish String Quartet violist Asbjørn Nørgaard noted a key moment in the celebrated ensemble's story. He said that as teens, after coming to identify classical chamber music with Mozart, Bach, and Brahms, they were assigned Hans Abrahamsen's *10 Preludes*.

A sort of lightbulb went off.

The same kind of illuminating moment—of meeting new possibilities after stepping out of a metaphorical box—may very well hit listeners in the same way. The Danish String Quartet players, who are fiercely lauded at the moment, craft confident, spellbinding performances, at times radiating with the kind of steely energy aligned with rock, and at others achieving a delicate, enigmatic, and at times haunting character. The record spotlights contemporary composers Thomas Adès', Per Nørgard's, and Abrahamsen's first stabs at string-quartet writing, in 1994, 1952, and 1973, respectively.

Alongside the aforementioned *10 Preludes*, which closes the album, is Adès' *Arcadiana* and the aptly named *Quartetto Breve*, a two-movement work by Nørgard. There's a lot to bite off and chew. In the Adès, their performance of *O Albion*, an achingly gorgeous movement, contrasts with the others, which are rife with textures drawn from punchy and prickling pizzicatos, whispery glissando harmonics, and other brash textures.

Here, you get the same washing effect as in the most tender Beethoven movement. In the lusher Nørgard, the players deftly negotiate contrasts in tone and dynamics; the second movement has gritty and gripping lines that unfold with a mesmerizing spirit. A folksy violin solo highlights the quartet's range. *10 Preludes*, which the composer likened to mini stories, unfolds like a dream.

The last three movements are particularly gratifying with driving patterns and bold textures. The last movement rounds out the album with an unexpected throwback to classical chamber-music writing. It bounds with a brisk and peppy energy.

—*Cristina Schreil*

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Danish String Quartet

BBC MUSIC

August 2016

MUSIC CHAMBER CHOICE

Exquisite nightmares

Helen Wallace relishes the Danish String Quartet's atmospheric album

POWERFUL VISIONS: the Danish Quartet reveal surprising kinships with Adès

ABRAHAMSEN • ADÈS • NØRGÅRD

Adès: Arcadiana; Nørgård: Quartet No. 1 (Quartetto Breve); Abrahamsen: Preludes

Danish Quartet

ECM 481 2585 46:45 mins

Adès's *Arcadiana* sprang into being in 1994, reaching back to a Venice haunted by Britten and Liszt in a series of seven idylls of hallucinogenic intensity. Curious young quartets immediately recognised a work of genius: this recording and the Quatuor Varèse's (see following review) brings the tally to eight. Here vaulting imagination is so precisely mapped that poor performances are rare; but for sheer range and penetrating intelligence, this is my favourite. In the Danes' hands the Elgarian 'O Albion' sheds its pale shroud and breaks the heart, while drunken pizzicatos and slithering dissolution in 'Auf dem Wassen zu singen' have a thrilling abandon, and 'tango mortale' comes at you with the force of nightmare.

The Elgarian 'O Albion' sheds its pale shroud and breaks the heart

What's fascinating is how these exquisite *visions fugitives* are clear kin to Abrahamsen's kaleidoscopic 10 Preludes (1973). These terse miniatures seem to ask questions about the nature of composition at that point in time, answering each with probing wit, captured here with bristling style. More powerful still is Nørgård's first quartet from 1952: Bartók and Holmboe are present in the explosive rhythms of the *Allegro*, but already the 20-year-old composer is playing with intervals rather than keys, interrogating their intensity, their translucence and opacity from different perspectives.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

RECORDING ★★★★★

ON THE WEBSITE

Hear extracts from this recording and the rest of this month's choices on the BBC Music Magazine website *www.classical-music.com*

Danish String Quartet

The Guardian

April 21, 2016

Adès/Nørgard/Abrahamsen: Works for String Quartet CD review – grace and grit

★★★★★

By Kate Molleson

Among all the dauntingly good young string quartets currently doing the rounds, the Danish String Quartet stand out: not because they're shinier or plusher or pushier than the rest, but because of their nimble charisma, stylish repertoire and the way their light and grainy shading can turn on a dime.

Their last album was a set of winsome Nordic folk tunes; now comes this classy ECM debut with three bold early works by contemporary composers. Hans Abrahamsen described the exploded landscapes of his 10 Preludes as "short stories"; Thomas Adès called his Arcadiana "images associated with ideas of the idyll", while Per Nørgard's Quartetto Breve is seven handsomely sculpted minutes of almost-tonality. It's an exacting programme requiring grace, grit and clarity and the Danish players sound terrific – lithe and glassy in the Abrahamsen, richer in the Nørgard, able to capture the picturesque watery shimmer of the Adès but also the slime and murk below the surface. It's a sophisticated performance.

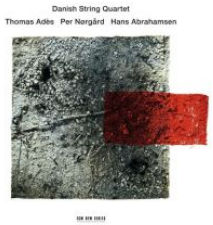
Danish String Quartet

GRAMOPHONE
THE CLASSICAL MUSIC MAGAZINE

June 2016

ADÈS Arcadiana NØRGÅRD String Quartet No 1 ABRAHAMSEN String Quartet No 1

By Andrew Mellor



Though recorded five months earlier, this disc closely resembles a concert the Danish Quartet gave in October, marking the beginning of Thomas Adès's Sonning Prize residency in Copenhagen. Out goes the highly reactive performance of Adès's Piano Quintet (with the composer on keys) and in comes Per Nørgård's little *Quartetto breve*, which makes a useful central pivot in a mirror-like programme where Adès's *Arcadiana* reflects Abrahamsen's *10 Preludes* and vice versa.

Both the longer pieces present lessons in how to be disciplined with your material: Adès and Abrahamsen set themselves rigorous tasks and fulfil them as simply and as briefly as possible (which doesn't mean the results are either simple or brief). *Arcadiana* looks at the same material as if through seven different twists of a kaleidoscope. In *10 Preludes*, each movement looks backwards to its predecessor and forwards to its successor, arriving at a C major Classical pastiche that 'sorts out the loose ends' (Abrahamsen).

10 Preludes is something of a petri dish, a touchstone for the composer himself who has returned to it for technical and thematic inspiration since 1973. Its 'étude' footing (in a materialistic sense) shows, but the music is both energetic and extremely careful; the ninth prelude operates almost entirely on a unison but winds up among the most complex and fascinating.

I have reservations about *Arcadiana*, only because it shows how far Adès has come (since 1993) when viewed against a more recent masterpiece such as *In Seven Days*, which in a sense has the same goal but achieves more with less. Per Nørgård doesn't look at the same object multiple times in his *Quartetto breve*; instead his piece from 1952 foreshadows his tapping of that Sibelian meta-flow which would deliver such powerful symphonies some years later. He explores a bunch of varied textures and themes along the way, but each arrives on its own terms. The Danish Quartet are more sepia-toned in *Arcadiana* than the Calder Quartet on their recent Signum recording, and the approach works. Elsewhere, the Danish are remarkable, as ever – capable of intense blend, extreme dynamic variation (in which they seem glued together), perfect intonation even on harmonics, and constant vitality and flow.

Danish String Quartet

npr music

December 12, 2014

Best Classical Albums Of 2014

Danish String Quartet: 'Wood Works'

Artist: Danish String Quartet
Album: Wood Works

It was a good year for Danish music, with excellent recordings of symphonies by Carl Nielsen, Per Nørgård and Poul Ruders, plus two lovely albums of Rued Langgaard's string quartets. But the most striking of all is *Wood Works*, a musical journey through Nordic folk music guided by the extraordinarily gifted Danish String Quartet. "Sønderho Bridal Triology — Part II," with its colorful grooves, turns out to be a 400-year-old wedding song from the Danish island of Fanø. There are stops in other Nordic hamlets for local versions of polkas and jigs, all played with such unmannered charm that you might wish the group would give up its usual diet of Haydn and Brahms. — *Tom Huizenga*

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Danish String Quartet

theStrad

VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

November 25, 2014

Wood Works

A young Scandinavian ensemble turns to the region's folk roots

By Tim Woodall

Musicians

Danish Quartet

Composer

Folk music

Catalogue number

Dacapo 8.226081

After recordings of Brahms, Haydn and two discs of Nielsen's quartets, the members of the Danish Quartet – currently BBC New Generation Artists – turn their attention to entirely different music. 'Wood Works' is an obvious alternative route for a classical quartet from this corner of the world: a set of arrangements of traditional Scandinavian folk tunes. But this clearly lovingly crafted album is much more substantial than other string quartet side-projects. The four players – three Danes and a Norwegian – have developed a reedy, crystal clear group sound for this repertoire that evokes the mournful timbre of Nordic string playing. Closely recorded, the sound is dry but warm, picking up every turn of phrase in sharp detail.

First violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen leads a merry Danish jig, Sekstur from Vendsyssel/The Peat Dance, which culminates in a runaway, fingerboard-thumping cadenza. The Sønderho Bridal Trilogy whispers, glides and cajoles. In both joie de vivre and melancholy moments, the quartet's performances feel authentic, but not slavishly so. The subtle but characterful arrangements do not stick to a single script. O Fredrik, O Fredrik is a rhythmically bustling piece of folk minimalism that develops into a genuinely funky jazz quartet. Swedish ballad Ack Värmeland, du sköna morphs into Schubertian Romanticism. Highly recommended.

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Danish String Quartet

GRAMOPHONE

March 2013

The Danish String Quartet convey an air of film-star energy

Brahms · Haydn

Brahms String Quartet No 2, Op 51 No 2
Haydn String Quartet, 'Lark', Op 64 No 5
Danish Quartet
C-Avi Music Ⓕ AVI8553264 (48' • DDD)

The Danish Quartet compare and contrast Haydn and Brahms

The cover of this disc looks a bit like a blond (with hair product) *Reservoir Dogs*, and there's certainly an air of film-star energy to this recording. Although they have been around for a surprisingly long time, the Danish String Quartet (formerly known as the Young Danish String Quartet) still have the puppyish energy they had 11 years ago, but now that enthusiasm has the lustre of maturity that was missing in their earliest recordings of the Nielsen quartets for Kontrapunkt (10/93). Their recording of Haydn's *Lark* Quartet and the tense, Beethoven-influenced Op 51 A minor Quartet of Brahms compares and contrasts one of Haydn's best-known chamber works with one of Brahms's less popular pieces.

These works are both virtuoso in their own way, though the Haydn is more overt in its technical demands; and in particular here, the slightly staid accompaniment of the finale is given its own validity and bounce by the energy with which it is played, and even gives the phosphorescent top line under which it sits extra momentum as a result. The overarching feeling one gets when listening to the Haydn is of light and space – a sense that is carried over to the Brahms, but perhaps with less reason. There are points in the latter, particularly in the *Andante*, when the harmony and inner parts move with such intense direction by way of yearning melody, harmonic dissonance and resolution that the music cries out for a more sustained approach than the Danish Quartet seem willing to give it. There is, though, a deliciously discombobulating lack of pulse in the opening of the first movement, which takes so long to shake off once it has righted itself that you really are compelled to listen with keener ears, which is ultimately what this work really needs. **Caroline Gill**

Danish String Quartet

The New York Times

November 23, 2012

Danish String Quartet, With Haydn and Brahms

HAYDN: STRING QUARTET IN D (OP. 64, NO. 5); BRAHMS STRING QUARTET IN A MINOR (OP. 51, NO. 2)

By Anthony Tommasini

In 2004 the Young Danish String Quartet, as it was then called, made an impressive New York debut at Scandinavia House. The players, who had met at the Royal Danish Conservatory in Copenhagen, were certainly young: all under 21. They were also clearly accomplished and ambitious.

Since then the quartet has wisely dropped "young" from its name and, as the Danish String Quartet, has secured a position as a significant ensemble. In 2008 a Norwegian cellist, Fredrik Schoyen Sjolin, became part of the group, joining the violinists Frederik Oland and Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen and the violist Asbjorn Norgaard. The players are still young: all under 30.

A new recording, which pairs Haydn's Quartet in D (Op. 64, No. 5, "Lark") and Brahms's Quartet in A minor (Op. 51, No. 2), makes clear why this fast-rising ensemble has been having such international success in recent seasons. This is one of the most stylish and spirited accounts of a Haydn quartet to come along in a while.

All the benchmarks of superior quartet playing are here: integrated sound, impeccable intonation, judicious balances. Scurrying passagework, especially in the perpetual-motion finale, is dispatched with fleetness and clarity.

But what makes the performance special is the maturity and calm of the playing, even during virtuosic passages that whisk by. This is music making of wonderful ease and naturalness.

Brahms's Quartet in A minor is a hard piece to bring off, with its curious blend of noble sentiment and restless impetuosity. The Danish String Quartet conveys both the work's arching structure and its moment-to-moment inventiveness. The players bring deep, rich Brahmsian sound to the passages with thick harmonic textures. Yet the playing is never weighty or dense.

A very fine recording.

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Danish Quartet
Discography

ECM

ECM 2532	**Prism V**: Bach – Chorale prelude "Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit," BWV 668; Beethoven – String Quartet No. 16 in F major, Op. 135; Bach – The Art of Fugue, BWV 1080: Contrapunctus 14 (April 2023)
ECM 2532	**Prism IV**: Bach – The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I: Fugue in G minor, BWV 861; Beethoven – String Quartet No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132; Mendelssohn – String Quartet No. 2 in A minor, Op. 13 (June 2022)
ECM 2532	**Prism III**: Beethoven – String Quartet No. 14 in C-sharp minor, Op. 131; Bartók – String Quartet No. 1, Op. 7, SZ. 40; Bach – The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I (arr. Emanuel Aloys Förster) (March 2021)
ECM 2562	**Prism II**: Bach – Fugue in B-flat minor, BWV 869 (arr. Emanuel Aloys Förster); Schnittke – String Quartet No. 3; Beethoven – String Quartet No. 13 in B-flat major, Op. 130 (September 2019)
ECM 2561	**Prism I**: Bach – Fugue in E-flat major, BWV 876 (arr. Mozart); Shostakovich – Quartet No. 15 in E-flat minor, Op. 144; Beethoven – Quartet No. 12 in E-flat minor, Op. 127 (September 2018)
ECM 2550	**Last Leaf**: A collection of Nordic folk music (September 2017)
ECM 2453	**Adès, Nørgård & Abrahamsen**: Thomas Adès – Arcadiana, for string quartet, Op. 12; Per Nørgård – String quartet no.1; Hans Abrahamsen – 10 Preludes for String Quartet (April 2016)

Dacapo

8.226081	**Wood Works**: A collection of Nordic folk music (September 2014)
6.220522	**Nielsen**: String Quartets, Vol. 2: String Quartet in F minor, Op.5; String Quartet in E flat major, Op.14 (April 2008)
6.220521	**Nielsen**: String Quartets, Vol. 1: String Quartet in G minor, Op.13; String Quartet in F major, Op.44; String Quintet in G major (March 2007; The Danish String Quartet; Tim Frederiksen, viola)

4260085532643 **Haydn·Brahms**: Haydn – String Quartet in D No. 63, Op.64, No. 3 Hob. III: 63; Brahms – String Quartet in a minor Op. 51, No. 2.