EMERSON STRING QUARTET

"Arguably the world's best group of chamber musicians." – *Fortune*

IMG Artists

EMERSON STRING QUARTET
Biography

Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer – violins
Lawrence Dutton – viola
Paul Watkins – cello

The Emerson String Quartet has maintained its status as one of the world's premier chamber music ensembles for more than four decades. "With musicians like this," wrote a reviewer for *The Times (London)*, "there must be some hope for humanity." The Quartet has made more than 30 acclaimed recordings, and has been honored with nine GRAMMYs® (including two for Best Classical Album), three Gramophone Awards, the Avery Fisher Prize, and Musical America's "Ensemble of the Year" award. The Quartet collaborates with some of today's most esteemed composers to premiere new works, keeping the string quartet form alive and relevant. The group has partnered in performance with such stellar soloists as Renée Fleming, Barbara Hannigan, Evgeny Kissin, Emanuel Ax, and Yefim Bronfman, to name a few.

In the 2021-2022 season, the Quartet will give the New York premiere of André Previn's *Penelope* at Carnegie Hall, alongside soprano Renée Fleming, actress Uma Thurman, and pianist Simone Dinnerstein, before reprising the program in a concert at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. In addition to touring major American venues extensively, the Quartet returns to Chamber Music Society of Louisville, where they will complete the second half of a Beethoven cycle they began in spring 2020. Finally, the Quartet embarks on a six-city tour of Europe, with stops in Athens, Madrid, Pisa, Florence, Milan, and London's Southbank Centre where they will present the Emerson in a complete Shostakovich cycle, one of the staples in their repertoire.

The Quartet's extensive discography includes the complete string quartets of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Bartok, Webern, and Shostakovich, as well as multi-CD sets of the major works of Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, and Dvorak. In 2018, Deutsche Grammophon issued a box of the Emerson Complete Recordings on the label. In October 2020, the group released a recording of Schumann's three string quartets for the Pentatone label. In the preceding year, the Quartet joined forces with GRAMMY®-winning pianist Evgeny Kissin to release their debut collaborative album for Deutsche Grammophon, recorded live at a sold-out Carnegie Hall concert in 2018.

Formed in 1976 and based in New York City, the Emerson String Quartet was one of the first quartets to have its violinists alternate in the first chair position. The Quartet, which takes its name from the American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, balances busy performing careers with a commitment to teaching, and serves as Quartet-in-Residence at Stony Brook University. In 2013, cellist Paul Watkins—a distinguished soloist, award-wining conductor, and devoted chamber musician—joined the original members of the Quartet to form today's group.

In the spring of 2016, the State University of New York awarded full-time Stony Brook faculty members Philip Setzer and Lawrence Dutton the status of Distinguished Professor, and conferred the title of Honorary Distinguished Professor on part-time faculty members Eugene Drucker and Paul Watkins. The Quartet's members also hold honorary doctorates from Middlebury College, the College of Wooster, Bard College, and the University of Hartford. In January of 2015, the

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Quartet received the Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award, Chamber Music America's highest honor, in recognition of its significant and lasting contribution to the chamber music field.

The Emerson String Quartet enthusiastically endorses Thomastik strings.

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"The Emerson performances represented an extraordinary fusion of experience and authority with audacity and freshness."
— ***The Boston Globe***

"... with musicians like this there must be some hope for humanity."
— ***The Times (London)***

AUGUST 2021 – PLEASE DO NOT ALTER THIS BIOGRAPHY WITHOUT PRIOR APPROVAL

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EMERSON QUARTET
Individual Biographies

Violinist **Eugene Drucker**, a founding member of the Emerson String Quartet, is also an active soloist. He has appeared with the orchestras of Montreal, Brussels, Antwerp, Liege, Hartford, Richmond, Omaha, Jerusalem and the Rhineland-Palatinate, as well as with the American Symphony Orchestra and Aspen Chamber Symphony. A graduate of Columbia University and the Juilliard School, where he studied with Oscar Shumsky, Mr. Drucker was concertmaster of the Juilliard Orchestra, with which he appeared as soloist several times. He made his New York debut as a Concert Artists Guild winner in the fall of 1976, after having won prizes at the Montreal Competition and the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels. Mr. Drucker has recorded the complete unaccompanied works of Bach, reissued by Parnassus Records, and the complete sonatas and duos of Bartók for Biddulph Recordings. His novel, *The Savior*, was published by Simon & Schuster in 2007 and has appeared in a German translation called *Wintersonate*, published by Osburg Verlag in Berlin. Having served on the faculty of Stony Brook University since 2002, Mr. Drucker was recently named an Honorary Distinguished Professor by the State University of New York. His compositional debut, a setting of four sonnets by Shakespeare, was premiered by baritone Andrew Nolen and the Escher String Quartet at Stony Brook in 2008; the songs have appeared as part of a 2-CD release called "Stony Brook Soundings," issued by Bridge Recordings in the spring of 2010. More recent compositions include *Madness and the Death of Ophelia* for female speaker/singer and string quartet. Eugene Drucker lives in New York with his wife, cellist Roberta Cooper, and their son Julian.
Violins: Antonius Stradivarius (Cremona, 1686), Samuel Zygmuntowicz (NY, NY 2002), Ryan Soltis (Moyie Springs, Idaho, 2015)

Violinist **Philip Setzer**, a founding member of the Emerson String Quartet, was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and began studying violin at the age of five with his parents, both former violinists in the Cleveland Orchestra. He continued his studies with Josef Gingold and Rafael Druian, and later at the Juilliard School with Oscar Shumsky. In 1967, Mr. Setzer won second prize at the Marjorie Merriweather Post Competition in Washington, DC, and in 1976 received a Bronze Medal at the Queen Elisabeth International Competition in Brussels. He has appeared with the National Symphony, Aspen Chamber Symphony (David Robertson, conductor), Memphis Symphony (Michael Stern), New Mexico and Puerto Rico Symphonies (Guillermo Figueroa), Omaha and Anchorage Symphonies (David Loebel) and on several occasions with the Cleveland Orchestra (Louis Lane). He has also participated in the Marlboro Music Festival. In April of 1989, Mr. Setzer premiered Paul Epstein's *Matinee Concerto*. This piece, dedicated to and written for Mr. Setzer, has since been performed by him in Hartford, New York, Cleveland, Boston and Aspen.
Currently serving as the Distinguished Professor of Violin and Chamber Music at SUNY Stony Brook and Visiting Faculty of the Cleveland Institute of Music, Mr. Setzer has given master classes at schools around the

world, including The Curtis Institute, London's Royal Academy of Music, The San Francisco Conservatory, UCLA and The Mannes School. Mr. Setzer is also the Director of the Shouse Institute, the teaching division of the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival in Detroit. Mr. Setzer has also been a regular faculty member of the Isaac Stern Chamber Music Workshops at Carnegie Hall and the Jerusalem Music Center, and his article about those workshops appeared in *The New York Times* on the occasion of Isaac Stern's 80th birthday celebration.

A versatile musician with innovative vision and dedication to keep the art form of the string quartet alive and relevant, Mr. Setzer is the mastermind behind the Emerson's two highly praised collaborative theater productions: *The Noise of Time*, premiered at Lincoln Center in 2001 and directed by Simon McBurney, is a multi-media production about the life of Shostakovich and has given about 60 performances throughout the world; in 2016, Mr. Setzer teamed up with writer-director James Glossman and co-created the Emerson's latest music/theater project, *Shostakovich and the Black Monk: A Russian Fantasy.* Premiered at the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, *Black Monk* has been performed at the Tanglewood Music Festival, Princeton University, Wolf Trap, Ravinia Festival and Lotte Concert Hall in Seoul Korea. Mr. Setzer has also been touring and recording the piano trio repertoire with David Finckel and Wu Han.

Philip Setzer exclusively uses Thomastik Dominant and Vision strings.

Violin: Samuel Zygmuntowicz (Brooklyn, NY 2011)

Lawrence Dutton, violist of the nine-time Grammy winning Emerson String Quartet, has collaborated with many of the world's great performing artists, including Isaac Stern, Mstislav Rostropovich, Oscar Shumsky, Leon Fleisher, Sir Paul McCartney, Renee Fleming, Sir James Galway, Andre Previn, Menahem Pressler, Walter Trampler, Rudolf Firkusny, Emanuel Ax, Yefim Bronfman, Lynn Harrell, Joseph Kalichstein, Misha Dichter, Jan DeGaetani, Edgar Meyer, Joshua Bell, and Elmar Oliveira, among others. He has also performed as guest artist with numerous chamber music ensembles such as the Juilliard and Guarneri Quartets, the Beaux Arts Trio and the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio. Since 2001, Mr. Dutton has been the Artistic Advisor of the Hoch Chamber Music Series, presenting three concerts at Concordia College in Bronxville, NY. He has been featured on three albums with the Grammy winning jazz bassist John Patitucci on the Concord Jazz label and with the Beaux Arts Trio recorded the Shostakovich Piano Quintet, Op. 57, and the Fauré G minor Piano Quartet, Op. 45, on the Philips label. His Aspen Music Festival recording with Jan DeGaetani for Bridge records was nominated for a Grammy award. Mr. Dutton has appeared as soloist with many American and European orchestras including those of Germany, Belgium, New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Colorado, and Virginia, among others. He has also appeared as guest artist at the music festivals of Aspen, Santa Fe, Ravinia, La Jolla, the Heifetz Institute, the Great Mountains Festival in Korea, Chamber Music Northwest, the Rome Chamber Music Festival and the Great Lakes Festival. With the late Isaac Stern he had collaborated in the International Chamber Music Encounters both at Carnegie Hall and in Jerusalem. Currently Distinguished Professor of Viola and Chamber Music at Stony Brook University and at the Robert McDuffie School for Strings at Mercer University in Georgia, Mr. Dutton began violin studies with Margaret Pardee and on viola with Francis Tursi at the Eastman School. He earned his Bachelors and Masters degrees at the Juilliard School, where he studied with Lillian Fuchs and has received

Honorary Doctorates from Middlebury College in Vermont, The College of Wooster in Ohio, Bard College in New York and The Hartt School of Music in Connecticut. Most recently, Mr. Dutton and the other members of the Emerson Quartet were presented the 2015 Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award from Chamber Music America and were recipients of the Avery Fisher Award in 2004. They were also inducted into the American Classical Music Hall of Fame in 2010 and were Musical America's Ensemble of the year for 2000. Mr. Dutton resides in Bronxville, NY with his wife violinist Elizabeth Lim-Dutton and their three sons Luke, Jesse and Samuel.

Mr. Dutton exclusively uses Thomastik Spirocore strings.

Viola: Samuel Zygmuntowicz (Brooklyn, NY 2003).

Acclaimed for his inspirational performances and eloquent musicianship, **Paul Watkins** enjoys a distinguished career as concerto soloist, chamber musician and conductor. Born in 1970, he studied with William Pleeth, Melissa Phelps and Johannes Goritzki, and at the age of 20 was appointed Principal Cellist of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. During his solo career he has collaborated with world renowned conductors including Sakari Oramo, Gianandrea Noseda, Sir Mark Elder, Andris Nelsons, Sir Andrew Davis, and Sir Charles Mackerras. He performs regularly with all the major British orchestras and others further afield, including with the Norwegian Radio, Royal Flemish Philharmonic, Melbourne Symphony and Queensland Orchestras. He has also made eight concerto appearances at the BBC Proms, most recently with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales in the world premiere of the cello concerto composed for him by his brother, Huw Watkins, and premiered (and was the dedicatee of) Mark-Anthony Turnage's cello concerto. Highlights of recent seasons include concerto appearances with the Hong Kong Philharmonic, Bournemouth Symphony, and the BBC Symphony under Semyon Bychkov, a tour with the European Union Youth Orchestra under the baton of Bernard Haitink, and his US concerto debut with the Colorado Symphony. A dedicated chamber musician, Watkins was a member of the Nash Ensemble from 1997 to 2013, and joined the Emerson String Quartet in May 2013. He is a regular guest artist at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in New York and Music@Menlo, and in 2014 he was appointed Artistic Director of the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival in Detroit. Watkins also maintains a busy career as a conductor and, since winning the 2002 Leeds Conducting Competition, has conducted all the major British orchestras. Further afield he has conducted the Royal Flemish Philharmonic, Vienna Chamber Orchestra, Prague Symphony, Ensemble Orchestral de Paris, Tampere Philharmonic, Netherlands Radio Chamber Philharmonic and the Melbourne Symphony, Queensland and Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestras. Paul Watkins is an exclusive recording artist with Chandos Records and his recent releases include Britten's Cello Symphony, the Delius, Elgar, Lutoslawski and Walton cello concertos, and discs of British and American music for cello and piano with Huw Watkins. His first recording as a conductor, of the Berg and Britten violin concertos with Daniel Hope, received a Grammy® nomination.

Cello: Domenico Montagnana and Matteo Goffriller in Venice, c.1730.

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Emerson String Quartet

Critical Acclaim

“They have achieved-and maintain-their exalted place in the hierarchy of American quartets for good reason: at this point in their career, the Emerson’s members understand as second nature the importance of clarifying the specific character of individual phrases and balancing them all into an elegant whole, and they can turn on a dime to create quicksilver variations of mood.”

The Gramophone

"The performances were everything we have come to expect from this superb ensemble: technically resourceful, musically insightful, cohesive, full of character and always interesting."

The New York Times

"Few string quartets have regularly displayed such individuality among members -- an ideal stance for coloring and differentiating the complex strands of the fugues."

The Philadelphia Inquirer

“Let’s make one thing perfectly clear: The “old” Emerson String Quartet never phoned one in. But this new group — Mr. Watkins alongside the violinists Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer, and the violist Lawrence Dutton — complemented their customary power, finesse and unanimity with a fresh, palpable vigor at Tully, and it was electrifying.”

The New York Times

“The group remains one of our best chamber ensembles, not merely precise but expressive and intelligent to the last ounce.”

OC Register

“For nearly 40 years, the Emerson String Quartet has commanded a certain reverence from music lovers. Its polished and authoritative performances, its comprehensive and mighty discography, its fearless embrace of the new and unusual as well as the classics — all have placed this string quartet high in the pantheon of chamber music.”

Seattle Times

“Their revelatory account of Beethoven's Op. 131 at Lincoln Hall embraced the music's strangeness with warmth and humanity.”

The Oregonian

"The precision and grace with which the ensemble dispatched the opening of the final movement was breathtaking, and by the adrenaline-pumping coda it was difficult to sit still."

Andante.com

"Arguably the world's best group of chamber musicians."

Fortune

"The Emerson has staked its claim to being the one indispensable quartet in a world that is constantly creating more, excellent ensembles."

Newsday

"These are high-powered performances with at times terrifying attack and explosive accenting…they are mightily impressive."

Gramophone

"…the Emerson played with vigor and style …infusing the familiar music with energy and transparency."

Houston Chronicle

"The Emerson String Quartet…has the easy virtuosity, precise sense of ensemble, rhythmic vigor and rich polished tone…"

The Washington Post

"… with musicians like this there must be some hope for humanity."

The Times (London)

"The last movement of Haydn's String Quartet in D major was played with brio, nimbleness, and a forward drive. One sat on the edge of one's seat."

New York Sun

"The Emerson performances represented an extraordinary fusion of experience and authority with audacity and freshness."

The Boston Globe

"The Emerson is one of the most impressive of American string quartets."

The New York Times

"I very much doubt whether Haydn ever heard his music sound like this; and if that is so, then I think it was a deprivation much to be regretted on his behalf."

Fanfare

“The Emerson quartet’s reading of Beethoven’s Op. 130 with the ‘Grosse Fuge’ was a definite statement of the group’s high-impact personality and style – a physical and expressive marriage of individual liberty and cohesive ensemble.”

Detroit News and Free Press

“But the Emersons are so technically proficient that they can play the most demanding passages cleanly. These musicians perform at the highest level, and this seven-CD set [*Beethoven: The String Quartets*] highlights their brilliance and sheer ability.”

Ted Libby for NPR

“This was playing of the highest order: the four players sounded as if they were one musical voice, and energy and drive were sustained to the very end.”

The Calgary Herald

“Much of what this New York-based quartet achieve comes from the extraordinary communication they have across the group. With an intangible thread bonding these consummate musicians together, the playing in Op 12 was finely measured and immediate in its appeal.”

The Scotsman

“An ensemble so polished it can leave audiences with their jaws agape… The ensemble fulfilled every emotional expectation in climatic moments, but still managed to surprise the audience with dramatic suspensions in phrasing and an uncanny ability to glide fluidly from one phrase to the next.”

The Post-Standard

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The New York Times

August 26, 2021

Celebrated String Quartet Will Disband, Ending 47-Year Run

The Emerson String Quartet, known for its energy and nuance, will retire in 2023 so its members can pursue solo projects.

By Javier C. Hernández

The Emerson String Quartet, a renowned chamber ensemble known for its lively, nuanced playing, announced on Thursday that it would disband in 2023, after nearly a half-century.

The quartet's members said they had decided it was time to move on so they could focus on teaching and solo work.

"It's not in any way that we're tired of playing the music or being with each other," Philip Setzer, 70, a violinist and a founding member of the quartet, said in an interview. "At a certain point you think, 'Let's end when we're all really playing our best and the group sounds good.' And when people are going to be surprised we're stopping and not, 'Oh, you're still playing?' "

The quartet, which began as a student group at the Juilliard School before turning professional in 1976, is one of best-known in the world. Its members have made more than 30 recordings

together and have won nine Grammy Awards.

In addition to Setzer, the ensemble includes Eugene Drucker, 69, a violinist who is another founding member; the violist Lawrence Dutton, 67, joined in 1977, and the cellist Paul Watkins, 51, in 2013.

Drucker said discussions about moving on began several years ago, when he was asked by a financial adviser about his retirement plans.

“We’ve been playing together for a really long time,” he said in an interview. “It’s been a great, long ride for us. The literature that we’ve been privileged to play is just amazing.”

While the quartet will disband, its members plan to continue to come together to teach at the Emerson String Quartet Institute, an academic program founded at Stony Brook University in 2017.

Named for the essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, the group has collaborated with classical stars like Renée Fleming and has been widely praised for its interpretations of works by composers as varied as Shostakovich and Mendelssohn. Its repertory has encompassed hundreds of pieces.

In the upcoming season, its penultimate, the quartet is scheduled to perform “Penelope,” the final work by the composer André Previn, with Fleming at Carnegie Hall in January and at the Kennedy Center in Washington in February. The group will also embark on a six-city tour of Europe in March.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

VULTURE

August 26, 2021

After 45 Years, the Emerson String Quartet Is Disbanding

By Justin Davidson

The Emerson String Quartet, a mild-mannered foursome that for 45 years has dominated its genre with playing that ranges from tripping elegance to brutal stomp, is closing up shop. Not immediately, of course — in the classical-music world, bookings stretch out way ahead and all good-byes are long — but two years from now, the group will disband. That gives it time for at least one more New York premiere, an all-Beethoven road show, and a European tour plus an entire valedictory season. Even such a slow-motion shutdown is momentous because the Emersons will leave an immense storehouse of recordings, protégés, and memories plus a legacy of lofty standards.

The string quartet holds a princely position among classical-music genres because it has endured since the 18th century and yet proved wildly adaptable to stylistic evolution. It has a dual reputation as a confessional vehicle, distilling composers' most intimate and profound thoughts, and as an expressive laboratory, where musical adventurers could experiment freely. In recent decades, though, the form — like classical music in general — has struggled to hold its turf in an ever more varied musical landscape. Still, many younger quartets have maintained, and even raised, the traditions of excellence and inquisitiveness. "That's one thing that gives us hope for the future," says cellist Paul Watkins. "There's a level of instrumental skill among many young quartet players that is sort of at its height."

When the Emerson Quartet formed as a student ensemble in 1976, a triumvirate of American groups — the Juilliard, Guarneri, and Cleveland Quartets — monopolized the national scene. (Only the Juilliard Quartet still exists, though its membership has turned over many times.) In some ways, the Emerson is the last of the old-style brand-name ensembles, blessed with stability, a loyal audience, and a long-term recording contract. (The group has been exceptionally stable: The two violinists, Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer, co-founded the group in 1976, violist Lawrence Dutton joined the following year, and cellist David Finckel arrived in 1979. That was it, until Watkins replaced Finckel in 2013.)

As a business, the touring string quartet has become an increasingly difficult proposition to maintain. In a typical season, the group's members spend nearly half the year on the road, not just performing and rehearsing but also dealing with a constant whirl of visas, plane tickets for five (the extra seat is for the cello), taxes paid in a dozen different countries, contracts, scheduling, program notes, interviews, bookkeeping, and so on. Revenue from recordings long ago dropped to nominal levels. Even at the top of its game — and it has rarely dipped below that level — the group bounced from the world's most prestigious stages to local libraries and back again.

Over the decades, the Emersonians have taken an encyclopedic approach to the standard repertoire, performing the complete quartets of Beethoven, Bartók, and Shostakovich, sometimes in marathon concert series. They occasionally ranged outside their comfort zone, venturing into contemporary music and theatrical productions. During the 2021–22 season, they will give the New York premiere of *Penelope*, the late André Previn's final composition, a collaboration with Tom Stoppard scored for soprano, narrator, piano, and string quartet.

But the Emerson's chief accomplishment was to show how convincingly and consistently four separate temperaments and techniques could fuse into a single organism. "I was in my 20s when the Emerson's Bartók recording came out" in 1988, says Watkins, who is considerably younger than his colleagues. "I remember putting those LPs on the turntable and being blown away by the level of virtuosity and energy and skill and power." And, Watkins insists, that dynamism hasn't waned. "Even now, whenever we step out onstage and play a Beethoven quartet, we try to make it as fresh and new as possible. The challenge of maintaining a high technical standard as one's body ages makes these pieces all the more interesting. There's still plenty of energy left."

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

broadway WORLD Classical Music

September 16, 2020

Emerson Quartet Releases New Schumann Recording On Pentatone

This recording adds another master composer's quartet oeuvre to the Emersons' impressive discography.

The Emerson String Quartet, widely regarded as one of the world's premier chamber music ensembles since its founding in 1976, makes its PENTATONE debut with a recording of Schumann's three string quartets.

The artistic power of Schumann, whose life was dominated by alternating periods of depression and manic creativity, seems particularly fitting during the uncertain times of a global pandemic. This music inspires and consoles the members of the Quartet, and their hope is that it may likewise inspire listeners. "At a time when lives, livelihoods and the performing arts have been threatened by a worldwide crisis," says Eugene Drucker, "we are grateful for the opportunity to share a labor of love that pre-dated the pandemic: our recording of Schumann's three quartets, opus 41."

Written in the summer of 1842 during an exceptional surge of creativity, these three quartets formed the beginning of an impassioned and prolific six-month period during which most of Schumann's best chamber music was created. Inspired by the example of Beethoven, Schumann's quartets display a mastery of traditional forms, combined with typically "Schumannian" fantasy and lyricism, particularly in the inner movements. As such, they underline a new level of maturity in Schumann's artistic development, surpassing the fantastical aesthetic of previous years.

"During this shutdown," adds Drucker, "some of us may find it difficult to channel the organizational and creative energies that have filled our lives until now. Sometimes it's hard even to practice our instruments without a clear idea of what or when we'll rehearse, or where our next concert might take place. With such uncertainty, it's helpful to think of the mood swings - the

alternating periods of depression and manic creativity - that governed Schumann's life. Feeling vulnerable, we are inspired by the artistic strength of this fragile genius."

The players of the Emerson String Quartet draw out the extraordinary freshness and originality of Schumann's quartets. This recording adds another master composer's quartet oeuvre to the Emersons' impressive discography, which includes three GRAMMY Award-winning recordings of complete string quartets - of Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Shostakovich as well as recordings of the complete Brahms, Bartók and Webern quartet output.

"We've lived with this music [by Schumann] intermittently since our early years," says Drucker, "having recorded opus 41 no. 3 in the mid-1980s and occasionally performed the other two works within the next decade. But our immersion in the entire opus...has been enormously gratifying for us."

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

LEO WEEKLY

February 5, 2020

A Festival Celebrating Beethoven's 250th!

By Marty Rosen

In 1840, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the most prominent intellectual of his time, wrote about Ludwig van Beethoven's music, saying that it addressed "vaster conceptions and aspirations than music has attempted before."

Long before that, as early as 1805, Americans had embraced Beethoven as a kindred spirit, a champion of republicanism, a visionary humanist and artist-hero whose grand gestures and formidable structures were inspired by both nature and the events of his time.

The scope and range of Beethoven's influence on American (and world) culture since that time is incalculable. Just consider this: In the 1960s, leaders of the Black Power movement, such as Stokely Carmichael and Macolm X, claimed Beethoven as an icon of Black culture, advancing a plausible claim that the German-born composer was descended from Spanish Moors who had immigrated to Belgium and then on to Germany, where Beethoven was born in 1770.

This year marks the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth, and all over the world, people are celebrating his legacy with special events (parades, exhibits, concerts, marathon performances of the nine symphonies and the like).

One of the most fascinating celebrations of the year is taking place in Louisville:

The Chamber Music Society of Louisville's Beethoven Festival 2020, featuring the Emerson String Quartet performing all of Beethoven's works for the medium. The six-concert Festival begins this weekend and concludes in November.

The Emerson String Quartet — which is named after Ralph Waldo Emerson, by the way — has a special relationship with the Beethoven Quartets: They earned a Grammy for their Deutsche Grammophon recording of the Beethoven cycle (one of nine Grammys they've earned over the years).

And according to violinist Philip Setzer, the Emerson String Quartet also has a special relationship with the Chamber Music Society of Louisville. Ben Franklin, a longtime CMS board member and past president of the organization (he was also mayor of Druid Hills for some 30 years), was an ardent champion of the Emerson String Quartet and had developed a personal bond with the players over the many years the group has come to Louisville. Before he died, in 2018, knowing that he would never get to hear the concerts, he left instructions in his will to make this enormous undertaking possible for the Chamber Music Society.

"Ben would pick us up," said Setzer. "He'd drive us to the hotel, take us to lunch. Over the years, we became close, and this is an event that is truly built on friendship. I think it's something that Beethoven would have appreciated, because his own career was very much supported by individuals who supported his work. Beethoven himself was the first important composer to sell tickets to his own concerts. He'd have people coming to his flat to buy tickets. He never had a court appointment and almost built his career in a way to thumb his nose at the court."

The concert series will play out across three concerts this spring with two concerts this weekend and one in March (Feb. 8-9 and March 1). The series continues in the fall (Oct. 25 and Nov. 21-22).

Each of the spring concerts will feature two works from Beethoven's first set of six quartets ("Opus 18") and one of the three "Opus 59" (Rasumovsky) quartets, from 1806. The first six (often referred to as the "Early Quartets"), were composed just as Beethoven was establishing himself as the preeminent composer of his generation. By the time of the 1806 set (the first group of so-called "Middle Quartets"), Beethoven was a towering figure

These three concerts will highlight a fundamental fact about Beethoven: His growth as a composer isn't so much "evolutionary" as "revolutionary." And hearing these string quartets is the best way to comprehend that revolution. The quartet offers a nimble, transparent medium for music. A small ensemble of virtuosic and communicative performers can create mercurial sonic landscapes, textures and rhythms that dazzle and delight the mind, soul and ear in ways no other combination can.

It is exactly that pinpoint control of volume, tone and texture for which the Emerson String Quartet (violins, Philip Setzer and Eugene Drucker; viola, Lawrence Dutton; cello, Paul Watkins) is justly revered. You can listen to examples of the quartet playing Beethoven on YouTube, or if you have the gear, you can listen via a superb sound system. But that's not the same as being in the space where the music is being played — especially when the space was specifically designed for performing this kind of music.

I studied acoustics with Paul Brink, a long-time faculty member at the UofL School of Music. Dr. Brink, who recently passed away, routinely took his acoustics students into the Margaret Comstock Recital Hall to listen and study its properties. It is an extraordinary listening space. Opportunities don't come along very often to hear some of humanity's greatest musical works performed by an elite ensemble in a perfect space. If you can make it to all (or any) of these concerts, you should.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

ABC

September 12, 2019

Lessons in great relationships from a string quartet

By Janine Marshman

Successful relationships of more than 40 years are something to celebrate. Perhaps even envy.

America's Emerson String Quartet has been active for 43 years. Three quarters of the group, violinists Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer and violist Lawrence Dutton, have been playing together since they formed the ensemble in 1976. Cellist Paul Watkins has been part of the group for almost seven years. Few groups could claim such longevity and so many original members.

In 2019, the group returned to Australia for the first time in 19 years with Musica Viva. ABC Classic found out some of the secrets behind this enduring relationship.

Prize individuality, but know how to work together

"One of the really special things about this quartet is that it prizes individuality, as well as losing your own personality in the quartet," said cellist Paul Watkins. Even in conversation, you can see this at play. Individuality shines, but they still work seamlessly together as dialogue and opinions pass between members.

To value individuality, you also have to accept eccentricities. Watkins quipped that playing together for a long time is "... generally a nice feeling if you can end up putting up with each other's quirks."

They've found ways to do this. Violinist Eugene Drucker explained:

"We have very distinct personalities, also different ways of expressing ourselves verbally, so we have to cut each other some slack."

Cutting people slack is often easier said than done. How do you do that over more than 40 years?

Have a sense of humour

For Drucker, humour was essential to the way the group functions. It helped to give a healthy distance to the uncertainties and challenges of busy touring life and rehearsals.

"Things don't always go your way when you're trying to function at peak level."

He acknowledged one of his quirks as sometimes coming across as a little formal, which other members will sometimes turn into a joke. "For example, everyone says stuff like 'Bartok Two' or 'Shostakovich Five.' To me that makes it sound like one of those movies like Rocky II, Rocky III ... I always prefer to refer to things as, you know, Bartok's Fifth Quartet. It's just a quirk that I have." Violinist Philip Setzer was quick to jump in "But we forgive him for that."

Understand how to give and take criticism

For groups at the top of their game like the Emersons, feedback is key to maintaining peak performance. "We're extremely critical of what we're doing, about ourselves and about the quartet as a whole," said Setzer.

It isn't easy.

"It's hard to take criticism. And it's even harder to take criticism from someone who's been giving you criticism for going on 50 years now with Gene [Drucker] or 40 plus years with Larry [violist Lawrence Dutton], and even seven years with Paul. Because a lot of times it's the same thing, and you don't want to hear somebody say, 'I've told you this, I don't know HOW many times.'"

So how do they manage the criticism? According to Setzer, "We try to focus on the music and what's not sounding right. And not get into a thing like, 'why are YOU doing that?'" It's also important to remember the reasons behind the criticism.

"We are really trying to help each other sound good, and make the quartet sound its best."

Empathy is also important. "If we're going through a bad spell ourselves individually ... you're more vulnerable when you get criticism right? ...But I do feel with this group that we try to support each other," said Setzer.

Embrace change

Change can be daunting. When the Emerson Quartet's cellist of 34 years, David Finckel, decided to leave the group in 2013 to pursue other commitments, the remaining members knew they wanted to keep going. The idea of auditioning someone new after playing together for so long wasn't an appealing prospect.

But the group was lucky. According to Drucker, they were already aware of Watkins as a cellist, and to invite him to join the group they made: "...basically one phone call, and that's how it went."

They've embraced the change enthusiastically. Watkins joining the group was a "gift." "It's given us a longer lease on life actually," said Drucker.

Dare to be different (but do it for the right reasons)

In their 43 years, the group has often done things differently. They were one of the first, if not the first, professional quartets to not assign the position of first violin to a single player. When they started, it was remarkable.

As students, Drucker and Setzer were used to switching roles, but at one point, they were told to "make a decision." According to Setzer, "for us, the decision was to keep doing what we were doing ... If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Even one of their early mentors questioned the

choice, but the group said, "he came around."

The group was one of the first to collaborate across art forms during the 1990s. They still push genre boundaries. Last year it was a theatre piece with string quartet, about Shostakovich's obsession with turning Chekhov's *The Black Monk* into an opera. This July they performed, *Penelope,* a new a monodrama by André Previn, with text by Tom Stoppard.

Penelope was Previn's last work, and the composition was completed by his editor following Previn's death in February 2019. The premiere took place at the prestigious Tanglewood festival and featured the star power of soprano Renée Fleming and Hollywood actress Uma Thurman, as well as the Emersons and pianist Simone Dinnerstein. "There was a great deal of intensity leading up to the premiere," said Drucker.

Despite their history of doing things differently, Setzer noted that they don't pursue innovation for innovation's sake. "Anything that maybe we've gotten credit for being innovative about came about because of an artistic reason, not because oh like, 'let's figure out what can we do that would really make a splash.'"

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Berkshire Eagle

July 19, 2019

A world-premiere at Tanglewood

By Katherine Abbott

Penelope is coming down to dinner slowly on the night Odysseus comes home. The high-walled courtyard with its cypress pillars is full of noise. She has stayed as long as she could in the shelter of the loom, in her workroom, and the sea below the house is dark in the dusk.

She is standing on the stairs, looking down into the firelight, when a workman comes into the hall with a tall, ragged, calloused man.

"I had no breath, no heartbeat. My flesh was cold, my eyes blind. Thus my body spoke to my mind. There was some trickery here too deep for me to plumb."

Tom Stoppard, the Tony and Academy award-winning Czech-born British playwright, imagines their meeting.

Penelope is passionate, astute and furious. Her husband has been gone for 20 years. She was nursing her infant son when he left, one early morning. She is in her 40s now. Her house is full of drunk men trying to control her and force her to marry one of them.

And she will tell her story, in a drama with music Andre Previn has composed for soprano Renee Fleming, in a world premiere at Tanglewood on Wednesday.

Eugene Drucker, violinist in the Grammy-winning Emerson Quartet, remembers a meeting with them in his apartment in New York City two years ago, talking about the work that would become Penelope. Fleming wanted Previn to write a role for her, a mature woman, Drucker said, talking by phone from New York after a rehearsal for the new work.

It has evolved with a worldclass team. The Emerson Quartet and Fleming have worked with Previn often over many years. Stoppard has written the libretto, Uma Thurman has taken on the role of the narrator, and pianist Simone Dinnerstein joins them after touring a piece that Philip Glass wrote for her.

But what was meant as a 90th birthday celebration is now a memorial.

Previn was still working on the piece when he died, in February, Drucker said. He had nearly completed it, and David Fetherolf, his editor of 22 years and close friend, has worked with the musicians to realize the work.

Previn created it as a Tanglewood commission, as part of his long and versatile history with the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

"He was a great jazz pianist," Drucker said, remembering four-hand jazz with Oscar Peterson and solo improvisations. Previn also played Mozart beautifully, he said.

In the piano line here, in fraught moments, Drucker hears a dissonant edge, like Bartok or Stravinsky, and in the strings a fluid interweaving. The blending of voice and strings lifts with a free tone, clear phrasing and jazz chords. And he feels moments of tone painting, the music holding the feeling of the scene — Penelope proposing a contest, and the drunken bravado of the men in her hall.

Penelope is a diplomat and a strategist. For years now, more than a hundred armed men have camped out in her house, and she has held her husband's land together.

In her culture, Drucker said, men would sack cities, take the women and children and put the men to the sword. And the women do not often have much say.

"I became aware, recently," he said, "of a new translation of the Odyssey by Emily Wilson — the first time it has been translated by a woman."

Dinnerstein recommended it to him, and he is reading it as he prepares for the first performances of Penelope. It fascinates him, he said. He hears her voice as distinct from the translations he remembers reading in college and afterward, and she and Stoppard emphasize for him some disturbing and problematic elements in the story — like the harsh punishment of the house girls who had lain with the men in Odysseus' house, and the deaths of the men.

"And the double standard," he said. "Odysseus has affairs on his travels, and Penelope is faithful to him. It's an ancient culture, but these issues are alive now. The double standard especially has relevance, with the #Metoo movement and so many men exposed as vile people."

In Stoppard's words, he hears the rhythms of the Greek he remembers in translation, and deliberate anachronisms meant to be jarring — one-eyed giants who snacked on sailors, or Helen as the beauty queen of Sparta.

Drucker has admired Stoppard for many years, since he first saw "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead," when he was 15 or 16.

"He's brilliant," Drucker said. "And I'm not sure he has written anything like this before," a work for one or two voices with music.

But Stoppard has often played with time in his work, moving between countries and centuries.

"Playing with time makes sense here," Drucker said. In a poem written 2,700 years ago or more from an oral tradition recalling even older events, the language is contemporary. And so is the feeling.

Stoppard emphasizes for him that Penelope has a strong desire for Odysseus. Sitting at her loom, she remembers bathing him when he came in sweating.

" he would have me undress him and empty a pitcher over his steaming back, his breast, his hard thighs, and serve him till I was sated."

In rehearsal, Drucker said, Dinnerstein asked whether that I was a typo, but he is sure it is meant. Penelope stays faithful to her husband because he rouses her.

She keeps the suitors at bay even in the face of her son's insistence. He is watching them sap his inheritance, eat his food, wreck his land, and he wants her to marry.

And when Odysseus finally comes home, and walks into his house alone, ragged and unarmed — she devises a test that gets a weapon into his hands.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

Los Angeles Times

May 6, 2019

'Shostakovich and the Black Monk' imagines the Chekhov short story as an opera by the Russian composer

By Eric Althoff

The opera "Shostakovich and the Black Monk: A Russian Fantasy," pictured in its 2017 Tanglewood performance, will have a one-day performance on May 14 at the Segerstrom Center of the Arts in Costa Mesa, featuring the Emerson Quartet and actor brothers Sean and Mackenzie Astin.

Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich died in 1975 without completing his dream of setting Anton Chekhov's short story, "The Black Monk," as an opera.

Thanks to playwright James Glossman and musician Philip Setzer, Shostakovich's work is "finished" with the duo's "Shostakovich and the Black Monk: A Russian Fantasy," which will have its West Coast premiere at the Segerstrom Center for the Performing Arts in Costa Mesa on May 14.

With his compositions, Shostakovich drew the ire of Joseph Stalin, who decreed all Soviet music should be patriotic and celebratory of communist ideals. Shostakovich went against the leader's decree and watched helplessly as many of his friends and family "disappeared" under the Soviet leader's purges.

"It's clear that toward the end of Shostakovich's life, he takes the project off the back burner and really tries to finish it," said Setzer, who not only arranged the music for "Black Monk" but will also play violin in the Emerson Quartet for the performance. "Shostakovich was, I would say, obsessed with this story, and the interesting part of it is why."

The May 14 performance of "Shostakovich and the Black Monk: A Russian Fantasy" will be the first time brothers Mackenzie and Sean Astin have shared the stage together professionally. Mackenzie stepped in as a last-minute replacement and will be playing the Russian composer.

The arc of the play has Shostakovich (Mackenzie Astin) working to write his opera based on the Chekhov story about a scholar haunted by visions of a ghostly black monk. The more the hero of the Chekov story, Kavrin (Alex Grossman) is "cured" of his madness, the less creative he becomes.

It's a bit of a meta experience, with audiences watching the play-within-a-play come alive before them. Multimedia projections also bring to life some of the elements as the composer translates Chekhov's short story into music.

"I think there was a lot of music that was in his head, and he simply just physically couldn't write out a whole opera," said Setzer, adding that elements of Shostakovich's 14th and 15th string quartets appear in the orchestral score for "Black Monk."

"He thought that not just his career was finished but probably his life as well because so many of his friends had been sent away or shot for doing less."

Sean Astin ("The Lord of the Rings," "The Goonies," "Rudy") co-stars in the show as Stalin and Pesotsky.

Astin, who had traveled with the show to the East Coast as well as overseas, lobbied director Glossman to cast his brother, Mackenzie, as a fill-in; the director had already come to the same notion, having known Mackenzie from the John Astin Theater, named for the brothers' father, at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

"Everyone is going to be surrounding him because it's his first time and [they] want him to feel comfortable," Sean said.

His younger brother stepped in less than two weeks before curtain.

"Because it's a staged reading, there's a net that you're usually working without, which is nice for someone who is doing this for the first time," Mackenzie said.

Although the brothers have been in films together before, this will be the first time they have shared a stage professionally. Theater is in their blood, thanks to their parents' work on the stage and in front of the camera.

Sean said that the multimedia projections allow the story of "Black Monk" to unfold along with Shostakovich's arc as he fashions his opera.

"Once you understand the play-within-a-play thing, it's kind of magical to see how Shostakovich is purging his own personal demons while trying to accomplish something of beauty that he always wished he could," he said.

The Emerson Quartet, which Setzer formed over 40 years ago, will perform the score for "Black Monk." Setzer's wife, Linda Setzer, also appears in the play portraying Irina Shostakovich, Dmitri's wife.

"Irina makes this long speech about her husband over the slow movement of the 14th Quartet," Setzer said of his wife's biggest scene in the show. "In a sense, it's an aria. It's just that she's not singing it; she speaks it. But it easily could have been an aria if [Shostakovich] had finished the opera … we're trying to finish the story for him without stepping over the line of actually saying we're going to write this opera he didn't. We're too respectful of his genius to try and do that."

Mackenzie Astin hopes people will leave Segerstrom with a better appreciation of how dangerous it can be for artists to create works critical of a repressive regime.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

Pasatiempo

May 10, 2019

The playing's the thing: The Emerson String Quartet

By Mark Shulgold

Philip Setzer admits he's heard one question a lot these days: When will the violinist and his colleagues in the renowned Emerson String Quartet call it a day? After 43 years together — with only one change in personnel — the ensemble has never slowed down, touring and recording on a regular basis. The subject of retirement has come up among the four players, he said. But only briefly.

"As long as we're still good, and we're still getting along, we'll keep going," Setzer noted in a conversation from his New York home. "We haven't set a date or anything. We're all still in our 60s, but I'm 68. We're getting up there."

At 7:30 p.m. Friday, May 10, the group will appear at the Lensic Performing Arts Center. Fans of the quartet who attend the concert might notice how years of concertizing have taken their toll: Setzer and his colleagues no longer stand when they play. "I've been having knee troubles lately," he said. After 15 years as the only prominent quartet to eschew chairs, Setzer, violinist Eugene Drucker, and violist Lawrence Dutton have joined cellist Paul Watkins (who replaced David Finckel in 2013) at chair level.

But then, another unique visual element hasn't changed: Setzer and Drucker will continue to trade places in the first and second chairs from one work to the next. "Gene and I used to swap parts back when we were students [at Juilliard, both studying with Oscar Shumsky]. We go back 50 years doing that. It was a great way to learn each violin part. Funny thing, both of our fathers played second violin — Gene's in a string quartet, mine in the Cleveland Orchestra."

Whether standing or sitting, the Emerson has long enjoyed an international reputation as one of the world's great quartets. With that, the group understands that the expectations of audiences and critics remain high. "It's always a challenge to play this music at the highest level," Setzer said. But that's what the players have been doing since Setzer helped to found the quartet in New York in 1976. Numerous honors have come their way, including the coveted Avery Fisher Prize and being named Ensemble of the Year by the industry publication *Musical America*. The group has released 30 CDs, nine of which have garnered Grammy awards.

Does Setzer ever pull one of those old recordings off the shelf, just for comparison's sake? "No, I don't listen to them," he said. "Only the particular one we're currently working on. But I'm sure we've changed over the years. You have to change, of course. And you should. My playing certainly has changed. I started out imitating other groups. I tried playing like Robert Mann [of the Juilliard String Quartet] or Arnold Steinhardt [of the Guarneri String

Quartet]. But you find your own voice over the years."

Friday's concert includes works by two early masters of the string quartet: Beethoven, in the first of his three familiar *Rasumovsky*quartets, and Mozart, represented by his A-major Quartet, the fifth of six he dedicated to Haydn. "The Mozart is not performed that often," Setzer said. "Maybe because it's very difficult." He noted its graceful slow movement, an extended set of variations showcasing individual players.

The quartet will also play English composer Benjamin Britten's String Quartet No. 3. "It's a very important work. This was the last piece he wrote," the violinist said. "It was literally written on his deathbed. In the final movement, he takes his leave of this world." Aware that the Britten may not be familiar to his audience, Setzer indicated that he might say a few words about the piece. "I know it's become a fad for quartet players to talk onstage. And I'm OK with that. People like it when you talk to them, as long as it doesn't turn into a lecture."

Setzer acknowledged that the one-time stuffy world of chamber music is opening up, led by a new generation of energetic young groups making waves. For example, the Vision String Quartet not only stands in concert, but plays from memory, including even complex Bartók compositions.

That's a bit of a stretch for Setzer and his colleagues. "Actually, we have played the Shostakovich 15th Quartet without scores, but that's about it."

The Emerson is not merely aware of the new look of music performance — they have also become innovators, themselves. Recently, Setzer collaborated with stage director James Glossman in a theatrical presentation bearing the intriguing title *Shostakovich and the Black Monk: A Russian Fantasy*.

"It's about the 40-year struggle by Shostakovich to write an opera on Chekhov's [1894] novella, *The Black Monk*. Theater has always been a love of mine," Setzer said. "I got the idea for it by playing [Shostakovich's] music, particularly his last two quartets. They're like little dramas, and we are, in a sense, four characters in a play. I'm very excited about it, because it gets people who are used to attending a concert to experience theater, and audiences familiar with theater to experience a concert."

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

CHICAGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

March 12, 2018

The Emerson String Quartet teams with its most stellar partner yet

By Kyle MacMillan

During its more than four-decade history, the Emerson String Quartet has frequently teamed up with a range of notable musicians, including pianists Jeffrey Kahane, Elisabeth Leonskaja and Menahem Pressler; bassist Edgar Meyer; cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, and flutist Carol Wincenc. For its latest collaboration, the quartet will perform with perhaps its highest-profile partner yet, pianist Evgeny Kissin.

"I don't know how we compare to other string quartets of our age and experience," said Welsh cellist Paul Watkins, who joined the quartet in 2013. "But it seems to me that certainly since I've been in the quartet, we've done a lot of collaboration, and I think that's good."

Besides offering the quartet a chance to perform repertoire it couldn't perform on its own, such partnerships give the Emerson a chance to bring other artistic perspectives into its music-making. "I think that gives us a different kind of energy and can sometimes — and certainly in the case of Kissin — change the way that we play," said Watkins of the Emerson, which will join forces with Kissin for a concert April 15 as part of the SCP Chamber Music Series. "We've never been an insular string quartet. Some quartets, I believe, even have unspoken rules that their members don't collaborate with anybody else while the quartet is playing in season. We're not like that."

In looking for suitable collaborators, the Emerson draws on old acquaintances or seeks out artists its members have come to admire. "For example," Watkins said, "there are people now that I think would be wonderful artists to collaborate with, people I've worked with in the United Kingdom, and I'm hoping in the next few years we might be able to arrange some things with new people."

One of the most "joyous collaborations" the group has had in recent years, the cellist said, has been with the Calidore String Quartet, formed in 2010 at the Colburn School, the music conservatory in Los Angeles. Watkins praised the group, which the Emerson has mentored, as one of the world's top young quartets; his ensemble has enjoyed performing sextets and octets by Bruckner, Mendelssohn and Shostakovich with the Calidore during the past year or so.

Kissin, the formidable Russian-born pianist, sprang onto the international stage in 1984 when he was 12 years old, performing and recording Chopin's Piano Concertos Nos. 1 and 2 with the Moscow State Philharmonic. He began touring the following year and has enjoyed a towering career as a soloist since. (After the Emerson concert, he returns for an SCP Piano recital on May 13.)

Because he is such a forceful and distinctive soloist, Kissin might not seem at first blush to be an obvious

choice as a quartet partner. “Even though he’s not done a tremendous amount of chamber-music collaboration in the past,” Watkins said, “now at this stage in his career he is interested in branching out and doing other things.”

The Kissin-Emerson association has been in the works for nearly two years, a period in which the pianist and quartet have attended each other’s concerts and carried on extensive discussions. The first time the five musicians played together was at the beginning of this year, when they undertook a tour together in Europe.

“From the first notes we played with him, we were just really struck with the extraordinary command of the instrument that he has but also this amazingly deep ringing sound that he brings out of the piano in whatever he plays,” Watkins said. “But he’s also a master in adapting his style, and perhaps that was something of a surprise to us. It’s been remarkable to witness how he has melded his playing with ours.”

Kissin and the Emerson’s concert in Orchestra Hall, their first together in the United States, kicks off a short American tour that also will include stops at New York’s Carnegie Hall and Boston’s Jordan Hall. They will perform three bedrock chamber works: Mozart’s Piano Quartet in G Minor, K. 478; Fauré’s Piano Quartet No. 1 and Dvořák’s Piano Quintet No. 2. “It’s a big program,” Watkins said. “I suppose the Fauré would be the piece which is perhaps least associated with someone like Kissin, but they are all really substantial piano parts, and I think they highlight different qualities in Kissin’s, well, genius really.”

Watkins has been particularly impressed with the attention that the pianist pays to the bass line — where the cellist typically resides — and not just the flashier action in the right hand. In Mozart’s Piano Quartet, the cello often doubles the pianist’s left hand, and Watkins said teaming with Kissin in that work has made his playing richer and darker.

“I think we’ve all felt that to a certain extent,” Watkins said. “He’s a big player. He has an enormous sound. We’ve not been noted for our small and delicate sound over the years as a quartet, but even for us, he has brought out a kind of vibrancy, I think, in our playing, which has surprised even us. And that’s one of the most interesting things about collaboration.”

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Boston Globe

July 6, 2017

Exploring a Shostakovich obsession

By David Weininger

The Emerson String Quartet in rehearsal for its upcoming performance of "Shostakovich and the Black Monk: A Russian Fantasy."

Of all the Emerson String Quartet's achievements during its 41-year existence, one that gives Philip Setzer special pride is its early and vigorous advocacy for the string quartets of Dmitri Shostakovich. These days, when performances and recordings of most of the composer's 15 quartets proliferate, that doesn't seem like a big deal.

But, Setzer said during a recent interview from his New Jersey home, even as recently as 25 years ago performances of anything other than the always popular Eighth Quartet were rarities, especially among American ensembles. "One of the things I'm proudest of with the [Emerson]," Setzer said, "is that we were one of the first

American groups to champion it and play all of it."

Often while performing Shostakovich quartets, Setzer, one of the Emerson's two violinists, had the sense that "these pieces are little plays with four characters," and his role was as much dramatic as musical. That insight led to "The Noise of Time," a 2000 theatrical treatment of Shostakovich's tortured life told in nonlinear fashion, centered on the Emerson's performance of his 15th and final quartet.

During that production, Gerard McBurney — a scholar of Russian music and the brother of the show's director, Simon McBurney — asked Setzer if he knew "The Black Monk," a Chekhov short story that fascinated Shostakovich and that he tried to make into an opera at multiple points, including during the last years of his life. Setzer had never heard of the Chekhov story, but he filed it away in the back of his head, thought about it from time to time, and let it undergo the kind of gestation that ambitious, unconventional projects usually require.

The eventual result was "Shostakovich and the Black Monk: A Russian Fantasy," created by Setzer and writer-director James Glossman. The show seeks to unlock Shostakovich's obsession with "The Black Monk" by interweaving the story with his own biography. The show premiered at the Great Lakes Chamber Festival in Michigan in June, and it comes to Tanglewood on July 19, with a cast that includes David Strathairn, Jay O. Sanders, and Setzer's wife, Linda.

Where "The Noise of Time" centered on Shostakovich's 15th Quartet, most of the music from "Shostakovich and the Black Monk" comes from the 14th, the most accessible of the final three, which together form a skeletal triptych in which mortality is a frequent undercurrent.

"There's no proof for this, but I'm convinced that some or maybe a lot of the music that was in his head for the opera went into his last two quartets, especially the 14th," Setzer explained. Part of his evidence for that claim is a remark Shostakovich made about the quartet in which he refers to a certain stretch of music as "the Italian bit." That music bears more than a passing resemblance to a once-popular serenade by the Italian composer Gaetano Braga, and that piece plays a significant role in Chekhov's story. And Shostakovich had at some point made an arrangement of the Braga serenade, presumably for the opera he was never to complete.

So what is the story that cast such a long-lasting spell over the composer? "The Black Monk" centers on a young academic, Kovrin, who, in ill health, goes to an orchard to visit an old mentor and his daughter, Tanya, with whom he falls in love. One night Kovrin sees an apparition of a monk, dressed entirely in black, come drifting across the orchard, making Kovrin feel inexplicably happy.

The monk begins to visit him frequently, feeding Kovrin's ego and telling him how special and unusual he is. This eventually drives Kovrin mad, and Tanya (whom he has since married) sends him away for treatment. He is cured but finds himself bereft, longing for the madness that made him feel unique, better than everyone else. At the end of his life, sick with tuberculosis and no longer with Tanya, Kovrin is visited one last time by the black monk, and dies "with a blissful smile on his face."

It is, Setzer said, "a really creepy ghost story," but he thinks the key to its appeal to the composer is Kovrin's realization, at the end, that he was happier being mad than being a functional member of normal society. Ever since Shostakovich incurred Stalin's wrath for the modernist tendencies of his music, the composer was forced to walk a very fine line between accommodation to his

rulers and preserving the compositional voice whose very expression might endanger his life.

"To give the devil even a small part of your soul is a huge loss, and the guilt is something Shostakovich suffered the rest of his life," Setzer said. "He played a very dangerous game and I have tremendous respect for him and his courage, but he did make compromises and had to live with that. Kovrin compromises too and in the long run, he loses himself."

Setzer and Glossman have layered the two stories — Chekhov's and Shostakovich's — together in a phantasmagorical way, against excerpts from Shostakovich's quartets and (of course) Braga's serenade. The three-movement 14th Quartet is played complete, though in a fragmented way: The first movement is the show's overture; the second begins with an ethereal violin solo that's played as the backdrop to a monologue by Irina Shostakovich (Linda Setzer) about her husband; the last movement ends the show, as the fates of Shostakovich and Kovrin become mysteriously entwined.

"I think that if it works," Setzer said of the show, "the reason is that, rather than that we figured out how to do the action and then we put the music to it, it's that this is all springing out of the music. It's because the genesis is from the right place."

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

July 10, 2017

Dramatizing Shostakovich

By Victor Khatutsky

The Emerson String Quartet will collaborate with seven actors in a new theatrical realization, "Shostakovich and The Black Monk: A Russian Fantasy" at the Seiji Ozawa Hall on Wednesday, July 19that 8 PM. Co-commissioned by Tanglewood Music Festival, the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival and Princeton University Concerts, the concept premiered at the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival on last month. James Glossman, wrote and directed this timely and interesting discourse on the suppressive influence on culture in Stalin's Russia. A fantasy based on Shostakovich's 50-year obsession with creating an opera from Anton Chekhov's short story, "The Black Monk," this musical play treats the composer's life-long struggle for freedom and sanity against his own demons. Described by James Glossman as a "Valentine to the human spirit," it reflects on the sarcastic Russian reactions which often inspired Shostakovich.

The writer-adapter and the founding violinist from the quartet both responded to our questions.

***BMInt*: Phil, how did this project come about?**

Philip Setzer**:** Chekhov wrote, "When a person is born, he can embark on only one of three roads in life: if you go to the right, the wolves will eat you; if you go left, you'll eat the wolves; if you go straight, you'll eat yourself." This is a perfect description of the life of Dmitri Shostakovich, as well as the character Kovrin in Chekhov's story, "The Black Monk."I didn't know this Chekhov story until my friend, Gerard McBurney, mentioned it years ago during our work together with his brother, Simon, on another music/theater collaboration about Shostakovich, "The Noise of Time." Gerard told me that Shostakovich loved the story and had long planned to write an opera based on it—a project that never came to fruition. I filed this information in the "that might be interesting to explore someday" part of my brain.

I have admired James Glossman's work as a director, writer and actor for many years. In the course of our friendship, we've often talked about wanting to collaborate on something. Last year, I told him about Shostakovich and The Black Monk, and he loved the idea of trying to create something together. Jim gives me much more credit than my role in this project warrants. I may have planted the seed, but he took that idea and wrote a brilliant script, masterfully interweaving Shostakovich's life with the Chekhov story.

Some would argue that Shostakovich's music is quite figurative by itself. How would you describe the genre of your production in comparison to that?

Glossman: What we are attempting to do in this production is to uncover and explore certain theatrical/dramatic extensions and parallels for these particular works of Shostakovich, which might then, in performance, evoke certain aspects of his life and work for an audience. The intent is for the music of the quartet and the dramatic

performance by the ensemble of actors to work in tandem to create, for the audience, perhaps a taste, a visceral sense, of the struggle to create, over decades, a life's work under seemingly impossible pressures.

Setzer: The word "figurative" is an interesting one. It has two dictionary meanings:

- departing from a literal use of words; metaphorical, and
- representing forms that are recognizably derived from life.

In a sense, Shostakovich's music clearly fits both definitions. Our theater piece could also be defined both ways. First of all, our production is presented as if it comes from Shostakovich's mind. It is his fantasy, his fascination with the Chekhov story, his nightmares and ghosts, and, of course, his music. That music is both derived from his life and is metaphorical in the sense that it represents his artistic reaction to the horrors that he witnessed–sometimes cooperated with—and often fought against as best he could, under the circumstances.

The story of those horrors—and of Shostakovich's relationship with the Soviet regime—is by now pretty well known. What does his interest in a somewhat bizarre story by Chekhov add to that?

Glossman**:** Through exploring Shostakovich's long-term fascination with Chekhov's haunting 19th-century parable of madness vs sanity, implicitly (and at times explicitly) juxtaposed by Chekhov with questions of Freedom vs conformity, we begin to find, in our speculative music-theater piece, a series of thematic "sidelights" that throw into high relief the composer's struggles both with Stalin and his oppressive regime, as well as with the irresistible ravages of time and his own body as well.

Setzer: One of the most interesting aspects of telling this story is addressing and exploring the fact that Shostakovich was fascinated, if not obsessed with, The Black Monk. What Jim Glossman has so effectively accomplished is to interweave Shostakovich's own story with the Chekhov in a way that has one reflect the other. It should be clear by the end that, if the black monk is the figure of death and/or the devil, clearly Stalin is that and something much more horrific in Shostakovich's mind. Another thing to keep in mind is that both Shostakovich and Chekhov never lost their senses of humor, as acerbic, sarcastic or subtle as they may have been.

Compared to the high drama of some of the earlier quartets, the 14th is a relatively low key piece. What was the trigger that started your exploration of its context?

Setzer: It's true that the 14th Quartet is not as overtly dramatic or tragic as, say, the 3rd, 8th, 13th or 15th quartets, but there is great sadness in the slow movement, the music of which recurs at the end of the whole quartet (and the end of our production). It does end in the key of F-sharp major and there is a sense of redemption, but it is also elegiac and very touching. As with most of Shostakovich's music, there are some terrifying moments (in the 1st and last movements), in which he lifts his mask a shows us the terror underneath.

Glossman: It might only be useful for me to add that, when Phil first suggested our beginning to work on the development of this performance, he had already found a number of strong suggestions within both the music and the literature for building our piece around the 14th—and as soon as I first re-read the Chekhov while listening to a recording of that quartet, I felt immediately and powerfully that this was absolutely the right choice.

There is a connection between the quartet and the story via the Italian theme, which is not at all typical for DSCH quartets.

Setzer**:** Shostakovich refers to "that Italian thing" in the 14th Quartet and, of course, this seems clearly to be influenced by Braga's "Angel's Serenade" which is referred to by Chekhov in the story and would have been part of the opera. We know this because we have an arrangement of the Braga made by Shostakovich, so it seems clear that he was planning to include it in the opera. The song is very beautiful, seemingly almost too sweet, but if you look at the lyrics, it's a kind of "Death and the Maiden" story with a young girl telling her mother she hears voices singing and calling to her. Her mother can't hear it and sends the music back to the angels. It's a bit creepy actually, and perhaps this intrigued Shostakovich (as it might have intrigued Chekhov as well).

We perform the Braga in our own version, for soprano and string quartet. (We're fortunate that Ali Breneman, the actress who plays Tanya, has such a lovely singing voice.) Other excerpts from the Shostakovich string quartets are drawn upon to complement both stories —Shostakovich's and Chekhov's. I found it surprisingly easy to find the right music for the action, using certain sections and sometimes repeating them, much the way good film music functions.

This reminds one of 'Shostakovich light', his highly ambivalent persona as a film composer.

Setzer**:** Shostakovich did write some "light" music for films, but he also wrote great music for *Hamlet* and *King Lear* and was extremely good at it. I tried to use his music, at times, in this way. Interestingly, it is, of course, also the way music functions in an opera (in between the songs).

I believe that some of the music that was in Shostakovich's head for the opera ended up in the 14th and 15th string quartets. He simply didn't have the time or strength to write out a whole opera score. The swirling music in the Recitative and the Epilogue of the 15th strikes me as *Black Mon*k music. And so that's how we decided to use this music. We play the 14th in its entirety, but not continuously. The 1st movement is played as an overture, most of the 2nd movement as a musical dialogue with Irina Shostakovich's monologue about her husband, and the end of the 2nd, continuing into the 3rdand last movement, follows the end of the Chekhov story and, eventually, arrives at the end of Shostakovich's story as well.

Glossman: There is certainly a connection between the manner in which Shostakovich often used his music in the service of a theatrical narrative in his film and theater work, and much of this work has great authority and power, particularly, of course, in some of the Shakespeare adaptations. The composer's relationship with—and feelings about—this work, and all the vast volume of work he undertook throughout his life in order somehow to thread the often microscopic needle between "survival" and "achievement," is very much the spine, the creative core, of "The Black Monk: A Russian Fantasy."

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

Detroit Free Press

June 14, 2017

Music and drama mix in Great Lakes fest's boldest undertaking ever

By David Lyman

It began, as so many projects do, with a passing conversation.

It was 2000, and Philip Setzer, a founding violinist of the renowned Emerson String Quartet, was speaking with Gerard McBurney, a British composer and music scholar. Knowing that Setzer had a deep interest in the music of Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich, McBurney said he understood that late in his life, Shostakovich had grown quite obsessed with a short story by Anton Chekhov.

"The story is called 'The Black Monk,' " says Setzer. "I wasn't familiar with it, but apparently, Shostakovich intended to turn the story into an opera. He wanted it to be his last major project, but his hands weren't really working and ... ." Setzer just stops.

Shostakovich died before he could do anything with the opera, and it's clear that, for Setzer, the composer's inability to realize that dream was something of a tragedy.

Setzer decided to explore the Chekhov tale himself. Written in 1893, the story tells of a scholar named Kovrin and his encounters with a black monk so mysterious that he verges on the mystical.

"It's a haunting story," says Setzer, who found himself nearly as captivated by it as Shostakovich had been. His fascination grew, though, when he began to see parallels between the Chekhov story and Shostakovich's "String Quartet No. 14," completed two years before the composer's death in 1975.

He mentioned the connection to his longtime friend, stage director James Glossman, a voracious reader of 20th-Century history and a huge Chekhov fan. Like Setzer, Glossman was floored by the connections between the two works.

"When I went back and reread the story, the association between the two was obvious," says Glossman. "I knew a lot about the struggles of Russian artists under the Soviet government, but I was stunned at how many of the same small details and the kind of government-inspired paranoia were in the Chekhov story. If you know anything about the lives of Soviet artists who lived between the 1920s and 1970s, you know that there was a sort of insanity that they were subjected to."

'Unprecedented' effort

For years, Setzer and Glossman had talked about finding a project in which they could work together, a project in which they could weave together theater and music. This was it.

The work they have created, titled "Shostakovich and the Black Monk: A Russian Fantasy," has its world premiere Saturday as the centerpiece of the 2017 Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival. It is being presented in association with Wayne State University. By the standards of the Great Lakes fest, it's a mammoth production. The Emerson String Quartet will perform, along with seven costumed actors who portray Shostakovich, Joseph Stalin and dozens of other characters. The cast includes Len Cariou ("Sweeney Todd," CBS's "Blue Bloods") and Jay O. Sanders ("The Day After Tomorrow," "Green Lantern"). In addition, the production features projected images that help paint a vivid portrait of the worlds in which Chekhov and Shostakovich lived.

"This is the largest and most ambitious artistic undertaking in the festival's history," says executive director Maury Okun. "Obviously, we've presented projects of enormous significance in the past, but the scope and the breadth of this project is, for us, unprecedented."

For Shostakovich, the fascination with "The Black Monk" wasn't based on any particular connection with Chekhov, whom he never met. (Chekhov died in 1904, while Shostakovich was born in 1906.) Rather, it was the story itself.

After taking refuge in the country to restore his mental health, the tale's leading character, Kovrin, encounters a black monk who alternately haunts him and proclaims him a genius. Shostakovich had his own black monk-type character in the person of Stalin, the Soviet leader who at one time praised him and then attacked him.

Although Shostakovich had experienced monumental successes and was known throughout the music world by the time he was in his mid-20s, he soon found himself running afoul of the Soviet Union's communist hierarchy. Its members were traditionalists, and they disliked any works of art that dared to explore new directions or, in the case of music, new tonalities.

In 1936, when Shostakovich was 30, Moscow's Bolshoi Opera performed his "Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District." It was a significant honor for a composer so young to have his work featured at such a prestigious musical institution.

But that opening-night performance was attended by Stalin and several members of his Politburo, the executive committee of the ruling Communist Party.

The composer wrote to a friend that he was dismayed by the disdain that Stalin openly showed for "Lady Macbeth," but that was just the beginning. Two days later, Pravda, the all-powerful party

newspaper, published a front-page editorial about the production, carrying a headline that translated as "Muddle instead of music."

Soviet tightrope

For many artists, this sort of public vilification — widely rumored to be prompted by Stalin himself — would soon manifest itself as a lengthy prison term or an unexplained disappearance.

But Shostakovich found a way to walk an artistic tightrope, creating work that alluded to the horrors of official oppression, but never going so far that it would force the despot's hand.

He succeeded in staying out of jail, but the pressure on him was incessant. Buoyed by its share of victory in World War II, the Soviet Union began stepping up its attacks on artists in the late 1940s.

"There are many stories about how Shostakovich slept on his landing with a full suitcase," says Glossman. "He was ready for people to take him away and be shot in the head." He didn't want his wife or children to witness him being dragged away to what he regarded as an almost certain death sentence.

Stalin died in 1953, but the Soviet Union continued to exert control over Shostakovich and other artists. He continued to compose, and, indeed, some of his masterpieces are from the post-Stalin years. But nearly all of the music reflected the unrelenting anxiety of the Atomic Age and of the life he had been subjected to for so long.

"It was an unimaginable way for people to live," says Glossman. "You could be the toast of the town one moment, and the next, you're put away in an institution. Or worse."

There was something surreal about the lives Soviet artists had to lead in the period between the 1920s and 1970s. Suddenly, it's not hard to imagine that the otherworldly qualities we assign to the writing of Kafka might just be a response to the severe repression that surrounded him.

"That Shostakovich was able to continue to produce the way he did was a triumph," says Setzer. "I hope that after people see this production, they won't just be able to see how unbearable these aspects of his life were, but the remarkable tenacity he had. And the determination. To be so tortured. And so brilliant."

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

theStrad
VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890
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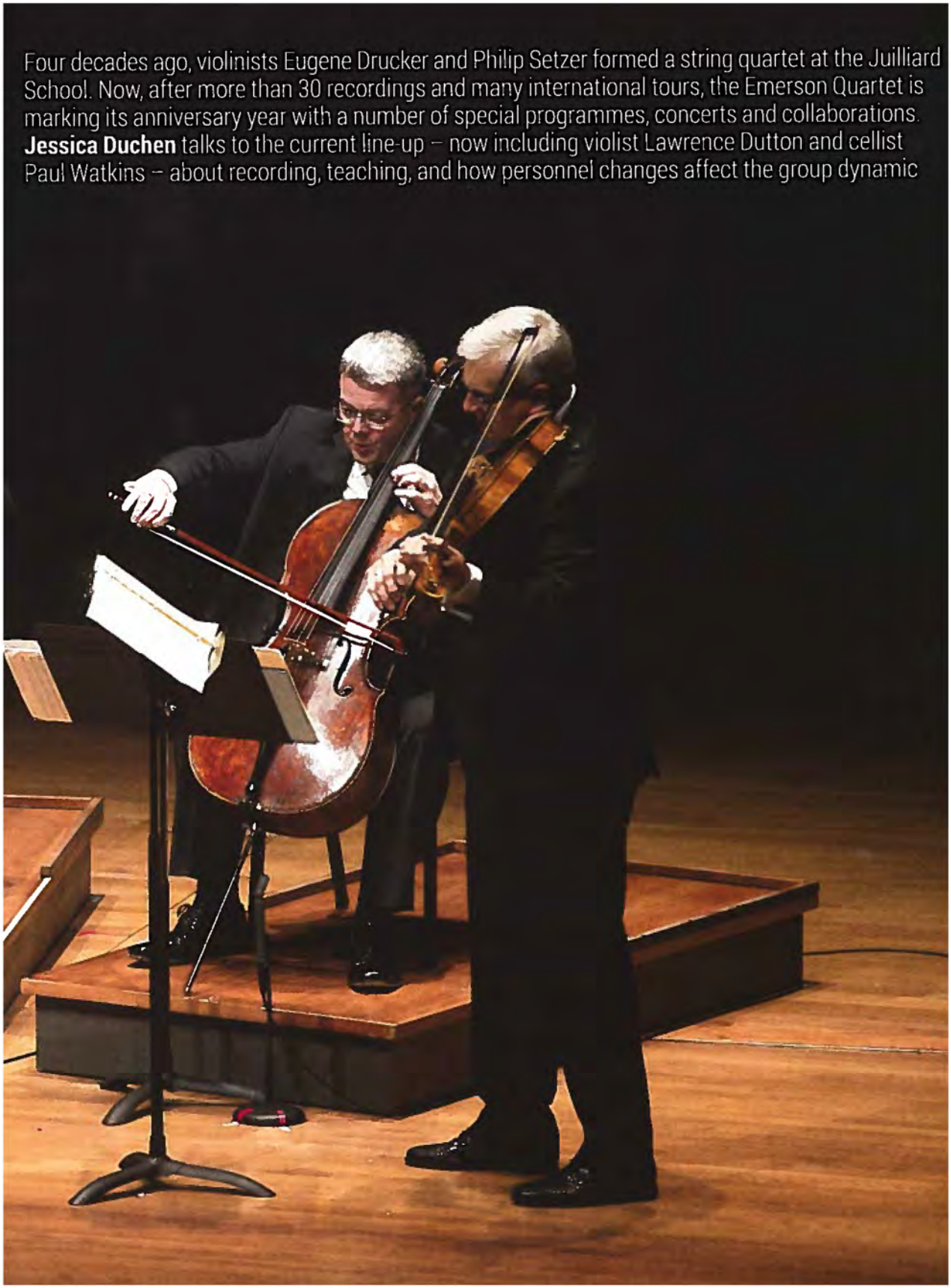
EQUAL TEMPERAMENT

David Finckel (centre) joined the four current members of the Emerson Quartet – (left-right) violinists Philip Setzer and Eugene Drucker, cellist Paul Watkins and violist Lawrence Dutton – for a special concert at Alice Tully Hall, New York, on 23 October 2016

Four decades ago, violinists Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer formed a string quartet at the Juilliard School. Now, after more than 30 recordings and many international tours, the Emerson Quartet is marking its anniversary year with a number of special programmes, concerts and collaborations. **Jessica Duchen** talks to the current line-up – now including violist Lawrence Dutton and cellist Paul Watkins – about recording, teaching, and how personnel changes affect the group dynamic



'It's helped that we had the same tastes, influences and musical gods'

The Emerson Quartet is in the midst of a starry season marking its 40th anniversary. Ever since the 1981 Bartók centenary cycle that first catapulted the group into the limelight, this lavish-toned and deep-thinking ensemble has been acclaimed as successor to American quartets such as the Juilliard and the Guarneri, its exceptionally wide repertoire encompassing everything from Haydn to Mark-Anthony Turnage. Yet the group has never rested on its laurels and now appears to be enjoying a new phase of life with its first new member in 34 years, the British cellist Paul Watkins.

It's been 40 years already!

Philip Setzer I don't know where all those years went. Gene Drucker and I met at Juilliard and started playing in a quartet in 1970, so in fact that's nearly 50 years. Larry Dutton came in in 1977, one year after we officially formed, and our former cellist David Finckel in 1979. Then it was 34 years until David left and our crazy Welshman joined us!

How have you been celebrating the anniversary?

Eugene Drucker Among the highlights were two concerts for the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center that tied together different threads from our career. We began with Beethoven and Bartók; we played the Mendelssohn Octet with a very fine young quartet, the Calidore, which we've mentored. The second programme featured Shostakovich's Quartet no.10, as Shostakovich has been a vital part of our repertoire for around 25 years, and our second performance of Mark-Anthony Turnage's new quartet, *Shroud*. Finally we played the Schubert Quintet, reuniting with David Finckel. In May we're playing at Carnegie Hall with Maurizio Pollini in the Brahms Piano Quintet – our first time ever playing with him.

Can you remind us why you chose the name 'Emerson'?

ED Phil and I, with two fellow students, made the leap to professional group late in 1976, America's bicentennial year. We wanted an American name with cultural rather than political overtones. The poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson seemed a good choice, partly because of the progressive feeling of his philosophy – insofar as any of us understood his philosophy. He led the Transcendentalist movement, which we knew was an important force for social good in the 19th-century US. And the name 'Emerson String Quartet' had a nice ring to it.

What do you think is the secret to your longevity as an ensemble?

PS Well, there's an element of luck. As with any relationship, you don't know how people are going to change, or how it's going to wear over time. Having success helps, and that's one of the difficult things for a group starting out. The worst part was the first several years because we weren't having success – it was tough financially and everyone was doing other things to pay the rent.

Peter Mennin, the then president of Juilliard, came to one of our student concerts and told us that if we could stay together for five years, we might make it in the profession. We were puzzled – but five years later, in 1981, we did all the Bartók quartets in one concert to celebrate the composer's centenary and that really launched us. So he was right.

To be honest, I think we argued more in those first few years than in the next 35. But it also helped that we had the same tastes, influences and musical gods. And probably the most important thing of all is that each of us has a good sense of humour. If you can't laugh at each other, and at yourself, you're probably not going to last very long. ▹

Who were among your biggest influences?


Eugene Drucker

PS Phil and I both studied with Oscar Shumsky, David Finckel with Rostropovich. They were our biggest influences, as well as Robert Mann of the Juilliard Quartet, and the Guarneri Quartet with Arnold Steinhardt. But we also used to listen to a lot of recordings, and not only to string players. David and I would listen to singers and analyse their vibrato – I am a huge Fischer-Dieskau fan. Listening to music together helped us develop in the same direction.

Why did you and Gene decide to play both first and second violins? How do you divide the work?

PS We decided early on, and split it up right away, instead of doing it as we went along. We each had certain pieces we felt strongly about – curiously, there were very few in which we both wanted to play first violin. We tried to divide everything equally where possible, so in the Beethoven op.18 quartets we took three each. Gene does three of the five middle quartets and I do three of the five late ones. People imagine we sat around arguing for ages, but figuring it out was very easy.

It was Gene's idea, back in 1970. There were two reasons. First, we wanted to eliminate this first violin/second violin thing. Secondly, both our fathers played second violin in quartets, mine with his fellow members of the Cleveland Orchestra, and Gene's father, Ernest Drucker, for three years with the Busch Quartet. So we both had a respect for the second violin and we both wanted to play the inner voice as well as first violin. It wasn't just to share the glory.

How did you choose Paul as your new cellist?

PS It was his accent! Just kidding – Larry met him first, playing some concerts with Menahem Pressler, and he told us that if David ever decided to leave, this cellist would be the perfect person to replace him. I'm friendly with Jaime Laredo, Paul's father-in-law, so I'd heard about him; then I worked with him at the Music@Menlo festival, which David co-runs with his wife Wu Han. We played Brahms quintets and it felt fantastic. So when David did indeed decide to leave, we called Paul to see if he'd consider moving to the US.

He came over for a few days to read through some repertoire with us. After about three hours we stopped for lunch. Paul said that his wife was happy with the idea of moving back to the States, so as far as he was concerned, 'If you want me, I'm yours.' He offered to go out while we discussed it, but the three of us looked at each other, said nothing and just reached over simultaneously to shake his hand.

Paul Watkins It was love at first play. In the first five or ten minutes, I thought: 'This just feels right.' It was the chemistry – I think the fact that we clicked together so well without having to say much was a good sign, because the less one says, the better.

How has Paul changed the group's sound?

ED Both Paul and David have wonderfully warm, rich sounds, but David's tended towards the tenor side, to borrow vocal terminology, and Paul's tends more towards the bass-baritone. Since the cello is the foundation of the sonority, I think it may have added some depth to our sound. We have a marvellous, collegial atmosphere within the group and feel very relaxed together, so the music making is more expansive. We still hope to have a lot of drive when the music calls for it, though.

PW They have changed my playing too. I think they've brought out demonstrative and expressive qualities in my playing that perhaps I used more sparingly in other chamber music groups.

Your style sometimes divides opinion: for those used to the more modern 'historically informed' sound, perhaps your sheer beauty of tone can seem overwhelming. How do you view this?


Lawrence Dutton

ED I've read every conceivable thing about our performances, and hopefully the positive outweighs the negative, although I don't quite know what to believe. I don't think we strive for beauty of sound above all else; it's important to me individually, but as a means of expression, an avenue towards discovering the heart of a particular piece or composer.

PW It's become clear to me that what my colleagues value is clarity: putting the composer's intentions across in the clearest possible way. I wouldn't even call it an 'old-school' style, because they were educated in the 1970s and 1980s, which is hardly old-school. Sometimes we temper our playing a bit – we've looked recently at some Britten quartets and Purcell viol fantasias, and we've adapted our playing

Below The Emersons at the 1990 Grammy Awards, where they won in both the Chamber Music and Classical Album categories

Above A group of winners: James Levine, Leonard Bernstein and the Emersons in February 1990, shortly after each of them had received Grammys

to that. I love the joy of playing with these guys because they make such beautiful sounds. That's why I became a musician: to make a beautiful sound!

What role does teaching play in your life and work?
PS Since 2000 we've been quartet-in-residence at Stony Brook University, New York. Larry and I both teach full-time and the others join us for the chamber music. We're planning to start an 'Emerson Quartet Institute' there, which will have an academic component – hopefully a two-year course in which people can be steeped in string quartets. We give masterclasses when we're travelling, and coach groups at the Great Lakes Festival in Detroit, of which Paul is artistic director. I love teaching, I love the people I work with and it keeps me fresh and young!


Paul Watkins

DG is re-releasing your discography on 52 CDs. Which recordings are you particularly proud of?
ED I don't often hear our recordings, but when I recently listened to the opening of Bartók no.1 I was struck by the intensity and youthful quality of the elegiac first movement. I also remember very well the Cavatina in the Beethoven op.130. We decided to record it in the morning because we thought we'd be fresher, but I had doubts because it's so intimate; I thought 'I don't need to be fresh, I just need to be relaxed and completely warmed up'. The first take didn't go to our satisfaction, but then – after a certain amount of inner turmoil – the second take went almost exactly the way we wanted it to sound. That was the kind of moment one looks for in recordings when everything sort of clicks.

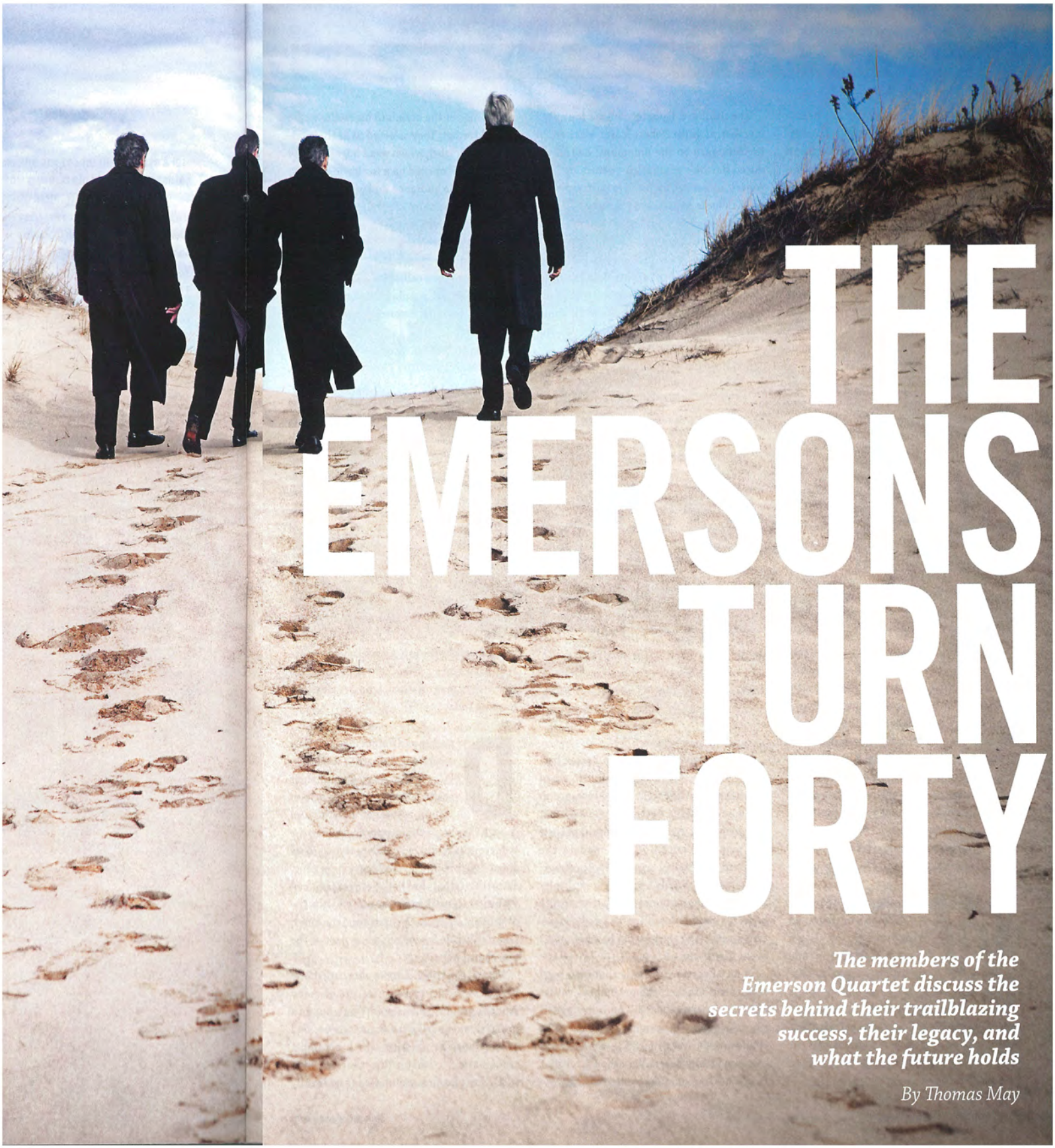

Philip Setzer

PS The 'Old World, New World' recording of Dvořák, with Menahem Pressler, was very special. The Bartók was our first recording and our first major success. Then, of course, recording the Beethovens is like giving the Shakespeare plays to a group of actors. The Shostakovich cycle was special, too, because they were done live, over three years – a big portion of our lives.

I'll never forget recording the Schubert Cello Quintet with Rostropovich. David had studied with him, so that was the contact point. We were in a little wood-lined church in Germany in December, and on the day we were supposed to record the slow movement in the afternoon, we had to go to a big lunch with the mayor. Afterwards we felt very full and tired, so the first take didn't go too well, and when we'd listened to a little of the playback, Slava declared: 'My friends, ve go have nyap!' We had the nap, and came back in the evening, after dark. They'd stopped all the traffic around the church for our two days; through the window, in the light of the street lamp, you could see the snow coming down and there was that feeling of quietness when it snows. And that was how we recorded the slow movement. It couldn't have been a more perfect setting.

How do you see the future for string quartets? Which young ensembles do you rate highly?
ED Political developments aside, I'm optimistic: there are plenty of fine young string quartets on the scene. We've taken pride in the groups we've mentored and we hope there'll be enough interest among audiences in the next few generations in the art of quartet playing. We know the players are there: more and more talented young musicians are ready to embrace the challenges, fulfilments and sometimes sacrifices that have to be made in order to have a life as a string quartet.

The Calidore Quartet, with which we worked, won a prize at the University of Michigan with a high cash award and around the same time gave its NY debut recital. Then there's the Escher Quartet, with which I recently played at Stony Brook – I've started to compose and the players chose to perform one of my pieces. It's wonderful to see young groups like these developing.
PS People often ask me whether there's a future for string quartets when the audiences are mostly grey-haired. We could play in a nightclub setting to appeal to 20-year-olds, but I don't think we need to worry about it quite so much; I wonder whether, as people get older, we begin to value deeper experiences more, perhaps because you suddenly begin to wonder how long you'll be around to enjoy them. Then you want to experience them while you can. ●



THE EMERSONS TURN FORTY

The members of the Emerson Quartet discuss the secrets behind their trailblazing success, their legacy, and what the future holds

By Thomas May

The Emerson Quartet has been a dominant fixture in the chamber-music scene for so long now that it takes a considerable leap of imagination to picture what it was like for the ensemble 40 years ago, at the beginning of their adventure. The world was a vastly different place, of course, when they embarked on that debut season in 1976—though the sense of one crisis overlapping the next remains eerily familiar. The Watergate scandal still painfully recent, the nation faced its first election since Richard Nixon's resignation, while the Fall of Saigon the previous year had just brought the bitter conflict in Vietnam to its traumatic end.

Against this backdrop of domestic and international anxieties, the American bicentennial prompted thoughts of more hopeful times. "We chose our name because we liked what Ralph Waldo Emerson stood for," recalls Eugene Drucker, who, with fellow violinist Philip Setzer, cofounded the Emerson String Quartet. Preferring to steer clear of "a politician or statesman," they hit upon the iconic American essayist and thinker, Drucker says, "because we knew he was a great idealist and had a profound effect on many people in the arts, and also espoused a lot of good social ideas."

At the time, there were few fulltime string quartets on the scene—whether as models or competitors. Setzer singles out the Juilliard, Guarneri, Cleveland, and Tokyo—"which was a little closer to our age" —noting that the situation today is much more competitive for young ensembles trying to make their mark. "But you also have more opportunities now. People talk about classical music as dying, and yet you see this burst of young musicians."

It's a renaissance of quartet playing that the Emersons in many ways helped trigger.

What really put the foursome on the map was their bold programming of all six Bartok quartets in one marathon concert at Alice Tully Hall in March 1981—in homage to the centenary of the composer's birth. "It seemed a crazy idea and everyone thought it wouldn't work," recalls Setzer, "but it became one of those magical evenings when people got more and more into it."

The Juilliard Quartet, whose founding member, violinist Robert Mann, was a shaping influence on the Emersons, had introduced Bartok's great 20th-century cycle to American audiences, but live performances of the whole set tended to divvy them up over two concerts, in non-chronological order. The effect is very different when they are presented in chronological order, notes Drucker. "We had to prepare very carefully, almost like athletes. It requires not only stamina, but being able to keep all those pieces in top shape in our fingers at one time."

> **We shared completely similar opinions on what was good playing and what was bad playing. I don't think that happens as often anymore.**
>
> ***—David Finckel***

The Emersons' triumph with Bartok heralded future successes with cycles of Beethoven and Shostakovich—interpretations impelled by electrifying energy but also deeply felt, fusing the strengths of their two major American quartet models: the Juilliard and Guarneri quartets. The Emerson Quartet's highly acclaimed, multiple-award-winning accounts of these repertoire bedrocks became definitive for a new generation discovering the joys of chamber music in the digital era.

"A lot of career success is about timing," says David Finckel, the ensemble's cellist until his departure in 2013 for other adventures. "We were at the right place at the right time in our career in 1983, when digital recording really began. Very soon after that Deutsche Grammophon wanted to have new recordings of the standard literature in the digital format. They selected us as the quartet for their label, which was a huge break for us because it opened up a worldwide recording and radio audience and also the whole European continent."

The Emersons in turn became game changers for several new waves of quartet players by providing a fresh model of success. Welsh-born cellist Paul Watkins, who became Finckel's replacement, was only 6 years old when the Emersons launched their first season.

"The quartets I grew up listening to were the recordings by the Quartetto Italiano, which is a very different beast. I can remember quite specifically the first thing I heard by the Emersons was their Bartok box. That was absolutely astonishing and a real talking point among musicians of my generation in the early 1990s."

Ryan Meehan, who plays violin with the Calidore Quartet, summarizes what his ensemble has gained from being mentored by the Emersons during a recently concluded three-year residency at Stony Brook University: "We've all grown up listening to the Emerson recordings our whole lives. As teachers, they know how to allow you to retain your own voice and style and yet guide you in learning the rep. And because they are still performing, they have a perspective that other mentors lack who are not performing today."

Drucker and Setzer met as fellow newbies at Juilliard in the 1969–70 academic year. One of their academic requirements was to play in a student quartet, and though they began in separate ensembles, the two eventually discovered they shared ideas about music making. Which isn't surprising, since their fathers had both been professional violinists. (Drucker senior played with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and the Busch Quartet, while Setzer's dad was part of the Cleveland Orchestra.)

Having the two violinists alternate in the first-chair position was a feature of many student groups, Setzer points out, but as a professional quartet the Emersons decided to continue the practice, which became a trademark. "It wasn't just that we both wanted to play first violin: Gene and I really

LISA-MARIE MAZZUCCO

Eugene Drucker, left, Philip Setzer, Lawrence Dutton, and Paul Watkins

enjoy playing first and second violin. It's important for violinists to keep sharpening *both* skills—the lead actor and the supporting role as well."

In the Emersons' inaugural season, their formation included violist Guillermo Figueroa and cellist Eric Wilson. By the following year, Lawrence Dutton had replaced Figueroa, and David Finckel joined as cellist in 1979, establishing the lineup that persisted unchanged for 34 years—until Finckel's replacement by Paul Watkins in 2013.

Finckel attributes this remarkable stability in part to a shared aesthetic vision: "We were and still are firmly rooted in the great 19th- and early-20th-century tradition of string playing that found its epitome in the expressive playing of Heifetz and Kreisler, and the incomparable cello playing of my teacher, Rostropovich."

Setzer and Drucker both emphasize that they absorbed this tradition from Oscar Shumsky, a key mentor at Juilliard. Even to this day, notes Paul Watkins, "rarely a rehearsal goes by without some reference to Shumsky. That's particularly lovely for me, since I was struck by his work when I was growing up in the UK and got to hear several of his performances at a later period in his career."

"We shared completely similar opinions on what was good playing and what was bad playing," Finckel remarks. "I don't think that happens as often anymore."

"I'm proud of the fact that we've been able to get along for so long," says violist Dutton.

"The beauty of it is that there's this wonderful tradition. Just as the Guarneri came out of the Budapest Quartet and the Juilliard came out of the Kolsch, we came out of the Guarneri and Juilliard. And we've passed this model on to younger generations. This repertoire is made to last and to be passed on."

But the practical realities of negotiating among four entirely separate egos demand more than a set of noble ideals about playing style. What about the friction that's inevitably generated in rehearsal, or from the stress of being on the road? "It's important to try different things rather than discussing it ahead of time," Setzer says. "Sometimes it is very hard to take and give criticism in a constructive way. We laugh and tease each other a lot. Probably the hardest part of what we do is all the traveling and trying to balance that with our families and friends."

"There will always be bumps in the road," according to Drucker, "especially in those first few years, when you're not getting a huge amount of recognition." A key bit of advice he offers younger players is "to not let yourself be thrown off balance by differences in style of playing or personality. You can be aware of those differences, but you have to keep the larger goal in mind and learn to value what the differences contribute."

Finckel believes that "you can't commercialize chamber music very easily—there are no glamorous conductors to put up on a poster. But what has attracted people to chamber music is precisely that. It's

> The music is always greater than you can possibly be, so there's a built-in challenge. If you ever reach a level that you think is good enough, you should just stop and not play anymore.
>
> *—Philip Setzer*

Top: David Finckel, founding cellist; Philip Setzer; Lawrence Dutton; and Eugene Drucker

something that has an immediate value that is right on the surface." He adds that the tradition they absorbed from mentors and try to pass on involves "not only the musical but the social skills that go into chamber music."

Another secret to their longevity, paradoxically, is based on an unrelenting sense of frustration—of never quite reaching the goal. Setzer describes this as "always being dissatisfied with what we do, but usually in a good way. The music is always greater than you can possibly be, so there's a built-in challenge. If you ever reach a level that you think is good enough, you should just stop and not play anymore." But along with that dissatisfaction, all of the longterm Emersons share a sense of pride about such accomplishments as their Bartok, Beethoven, and Shostakovich cycles. Playing Mozart's "Haydn" quartets and Beethoven quartets in particular, recalls Finckel, "was an experience of musical ecstasy I don't think you can find outside the string quartet in chamber music. The way Beethoven's quartets trace his life and artistic development is a human and cosmic journey that is somehow comparable to life itself: the youthful, aggressive, optimistic beginning, maturity and crisis, and then transcendence."

Another accomplishment they single out is *The Noise of Time*, a collaborative theater project with the British company Complicite and director Simon McBurney, based on the life and music of Shostakovich, that had an international run in several capitals. "This was territory that had never been tried before," says Setzer, "very rewarding and moving." So much so that, at the climax of this anniversary season, the ensemble is planning a new Shostakovich project, *The Black Monk*, which they will premiere next June at the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, where Paul Watkins also serves as artistic director. Setzer, who is the mastermind of the Emersons' thoughtful programming ideas, explains that this involves a Chekhov story Shostakovich long wanted to make into an opera but never completed, though some of the intended music found its way into his string quartets. "We're always looking at new things—and trying to not just keep playing the same couple of programs. It's important to always be challenging ourselves and coming up with new ideas and rep." In fact, the Emersons recently opened their anniversary season with the world premiere of a piece they commissioned from English composer Mark-Anthony Turnage. "It makes a nice full circle of my life," says Watkins.

"Since he wrote a Cello Concerto for the BBC Symphony that I played with the Nash Ensemble [which Watkins conducts], I've performed much of his music. When he knew that I was in the Emersons, he was keen to do this."

The remarkably smooth transition to the new lineup with Watkins is further evidence of the ensemble's successful modus operandi. Along with its longstanding principles, a sense of flexibility keeps the group energized and ready for the next challenge. "I never felt that I had to particularly change my style to get to play with them," notes Watkins. "That's the mark of the chamber musicians they are. They are still incredibly flexible at this stage in their career, very open to new ideas of playing."

And that comes down to the delicate balance between respect for tradition and hunger for innovation. Finckel believes that chamber music is the ideal medium to achieve this balance, because the music "is not something that happens to you, it's something you do. You need to engage with the music. And once you do, you become part of a relationship that builds between an audience and an ensemble of players communicating between themselves without a conductor. The audience becomes part of that circle and is just as important to the players."

Thomas May is a writer, critic, educator, and translator. Along with essays regularly commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony and Opera, the Juilliard School, and other leading institutions, he is a critic for the Seattle Times *and* Musical America *and blogs about the arts at memeteria.com.*

EMERSON
STRING QUARTET

THE NEW YORKER

October 24, 2016

CLASSICAL MUSIC

The Emerson String Quartet, as eminent as ever, marks its fortieth season with two programs presented by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, at Alice Tully Hall on Oct. 21 and Oct. 23 (featuring the New York première of a work by Mark-Anthony Turnage).

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

THE ASPEN TIMES

July 19, 2016

Aspen Music Festival celebrates 40 years of the Emerson String Quartet

By Andrew Travers

The Emerson String Quartet is celebrating its 40th anniversary with a concert at Harris Concert Hall tonight.

The nine-time Grammy-winning quartet, an institution in the classical-music world, is honoring its past while looking toward the future as it commemorates four decades.

"We all feel extraordinarily fortunate," said Emerson violinist Philip Setzer, who first came to the Aspen Music Festival and School as a student in 1968 and has returned regularly with the Emerson and other collaborators through the decades. "We were lucky to find each other. We came along at a time when there were not a lot of string quartets trying to make a living as string quartets."

Their early years coincided with a boom in classical-music recordings, Setzer noted, and the invention of the compact disc. This allowed the group to record and perform extensively from the string quartet repertoire. In honor of Emerson's anniversary, Deutsche Grammophon has released a 52-disc box set of its complete recordings.

The collected body of work allowed Setzer and the quartet the chance to reflect.

"I look at this box and think, 'My whole life fits into this little box,' but then I look through it and I'm like, 'My god, did we really do all of this?'" he said.

The quartet had its first and only change of personnel four years ago, when cellist David Finckel left the group. Paul Watkins took over his duties in 2013.

"In terms of getting along and all of that, it's extremely easy and the whole transition was as smooth as it possibly could be," Setzer said. "He has tremendous respect for David and was thrilled to come into the quartet. We work extremely well together. ... It brings a certain excitement, and that excitement is infectious."

Last year, the quartet released a recording of Alban Berg's "Lyric Suite," which will be the centerpiece of its concert today. The album includes the traditional instrumental-only version of the piece as well as one with its soprano vocals (performed by 2016 Aspen Institute artist-in-residence Renee Fleming). Tonight's concert will showcase the nonvocal version.

"Any time you record something, it's like the ultimate lesson and ultimate rehearsal," Setzer said of the quartet's preparations for today. "It's so complex in the way it's written yet at the same time so filled with emotion and extraordinarily, painfully beautiful — especially if you know the story behind it."

The story behind the "Lyric Suite" is an illicit love affair that inspired it, discovered in the 1970s in Berg's annotations of the piece.

The Berg will be bookended by Haydn's String Quartet in D Minor "Fifths" and Brahms' Second String Quartet — it's an evening of three heavy compositions spanning three centuries.

"Instead of having a concert where we started with something lighthearted or ended with something more positive, we decided to make the whole program dark," Setzer said.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

wnpr

July 28, 2016

Emerson CD Set Chronicles a Long, Amazing Journey

By Stephen Metcalf

I know a lot of you around here recall watching with admiration and amazement the steady rise of the Emerson String Quartet, as they moved from complete unknowns to a place at the very pinnacle of the string quartet world.

That's because you had a ringside seat: the Emersons showed up in our community in 1980, having been appointed to a one-year residency at The Hartt School, the performing arts conservatory of the University of Hartford. That one-year appointment stretched into a remarkable -- and I think we can safely say, never to be repeated -- 21-year ride.

More about that ride in a moment.

One of the hallmarks of the Emerson career -- at least, the first four decades of it -- was the steady string of recordings the quartet put out for Deutsche Grammophon. (Again, mostly because of the way the music business works these days, such a long single-label marriage is itself a phenomenon that will never be repeated.)

Thankfully, DG has just issued a plump boxed set containing all the recordings the foursome did for the label. The box runs to 52 discs.

It's available from Amazon, of course, or if you prefer to patronize a company that heroically offers classical recordings and nothing but classical recordings, from Arkiv Music.

The set is a nice souvenir of the Emersons' ambitious, wide-ranging musical appetite: the complete cycles of Beethoven, Shostakovich, Bartok, and Mendelssohn, plus assorted standard-rep specimens by Dvorak and Tchaikovsky, along with less-standard staff by Schuller, Ives, Harbison, Edgar Meyer and other moderns.

I should note year that the quartet's membership went unchanged for a remarkable 34 years, from 1979 to 2013, and these recordings were made during that period. In 2013, cellist David Finckel stepped away from the group and was replaced by Paul Watkins.

There is, as they say, some bonus material, including a disc of encores and a new introductory essay by Emerson violinist Eugene Drucker.

Back to the Emersons' dramatic journey, as we experienced it here in Hartford:

When the group arrived at Hartt (it was the school's first stab at engaging an outside resident string quartet) there was, in all candor, a fair amount of skepticism. The quartet members were in their 20s, barely out of graduate school. They were, to put it charitably, unheralded.

Their first concerts at the school's 400-seat Millard Auditorium were sparsely attended. There was some grumbling that maybe the residency idea hadn't been all that well thought out.

But the school, and the quartet, hung in there. And little by little things began to change. The group landed its recording deal with DG, and also began winning awards and prizes.

First a Grammy Award, and then a Gramophone Magazine award (that's the high-toned British classical music monthly), then some glowing national reviews. Then more Grammys (nine now and counting), then a residency at the Smithsonian, a Musical America "Ensemble of the Year" designation, etc., etc.

After a quiet and even unpromising beginning, their residency picked up steam. Their subscription concerts began to sell out. By and by, the concerts had to be moved to the university's 725-seat Lincoln Theatre, and in short order they started to fill *that* up.

Before our eyes, and without any special fanfare or strenuous publicity machine, the Emersons had gone from obscure newbies to rising stars to established eminences to -- in the view of many listeners and critics -- the preeminent quartet on the globe.

It really was an exhilarating journey, made all the more satisfying to behold because it had to do exclusively with talent and artistry.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

BWW music WORLD.COM

July 18, 2016

Emerson Quartet Celebrates 40th Anniversary Season

The upcoming 2016-17 season marks the Emerson String Quartet's 40th Anniversary -- a major milestone for a ground-breaking ensemble that has earned its place in the pantheon of the classical chamber music world. In celebration of this anniversary season, Universal Music Group has reissued their entire Deutsche Grammophon discography in a 52-CD box set, released July 15 in the U.S.

On August 1, the Emerson Quartet performs two concerts with eminent pianist Emanuel Ax in their first-ever Mostly Mozart performances together at Lincoln Center. Their programs include works by Schubert, Dvo?ák, Beethoven, Purcell and Mozart (please see full concert details below).

The Emerson stands apart in the history of string quartets with an unparalleled list of achievements over three decades: more than thirty acclaimed recordings, nine Grammys® (including two for Best Classical Album), three Gramophone Awards, the Avery Fisher Prize, Musical America's "Ensemble of the Year", and collaborations with many of the greatest artists of our time.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

CHICAGO on the aisle
The performing arts and other splendors -- for cultural travelers and local enthusiasts

July 4, 2016

Emerson String Quartet to explore late Haydn with one-night immersion at Ravinia Festival

By Lawrence B. Johnson

Philip Setzer, founding violinist with the celebrated Emerson String Quartet, calls the sort of program his foursome will play at the Ravina Festival on July 5 a form of biography: a body of works from the hand of a single composer.

In that light, the Emerson's novel Ravinia project might be called a summing-up chapter in the life of the 18th-century Austrian master Joseph Haydn. At one sitting (allowing for two intermissions), Setzer and his companions will play all six of the string quartets collectively published in 1799 as Haydn's Op. 76. The Emerson will repeat its Op. 76 survey at Tanglewood in the Massachusetts Berkshires on July 12.

While Haydn, the most revered composer in Europe through the last decades of the 18th century, earned much of his fame as "father of the symphony," connoisseurs have always held his prodigious body of string quartets in equally high regard. So deeply did Mozart, 24 years Haydn's junior, admire the older composer's quartets that he famously dedicated six of his own works in the form to Haydn.

Still, it is unusual in our own time for an ensemble to consecrate an extended evening to the quartets of Haydn – though not uncommon at all to devote such an undertaking to, say, the six string quartets of Bartók or the late quartets of Beethoven. But Setzer says the Haydn Op. 76 quartets hold a special place in the composer's artistic life and – for musicians and listeners alike – pay rich dividends in such an immersion.

"I think Haydn felt he had something to prove when he set out to write these quartets," says Setzer. "He had just returned to Vienna from his second extended visit to London, where he was treated like royalty and where his last 12 symphonies were all given their premieres. But this time, in 1795, he came home to Vienna to find a somewhat changed situation.

"Mozart, who had died just four years earlier, was now being played everywhere, and Beethoven was the new kid on the block (age 25 and lionized as a piano virtuoso). Haydn surely sensed the need to reaffirm his own creative powers, and the new quartets he wrote over the next several months absolutely achieved that."

Haydn was now 63 years old. From an early age, he had explored, stretched, essentially invented and then reshaped the string quartet, much as he did simultaneously with the symphony. The six pieces that came into the world as his Op. 76, says Setzer, once again took the string quartet to a new place.

"Haydn was looking for ways to expand sonata form (thematic exposition, development and modified restatement). Beethoven would pursue the same end in his three Op. 59 quartets, but those pieces are twice as long as Haydn's quartets, which offer six highly individual displays of concentration and invention."

At the same time, says Setzer, Haydn the lifelong musical jokester may have been in his seventh decade but his enthusiasm for sparking a good laugh was undiminished. For Haydn, it was the minuet – typically occurring third in the quartet's four-movement plan – that provided the occasion for mirth.

"By the time Haydn gets to Op. 76, his minuets are not what we would call dances," says the violinist. "He still doesn't use the term scherzo (Italian for 'I joke' or 'I jest'), which Beethoven soon would prefer, but the humorous edge is always there. How do you indicate 'presto' and call it a minuet?"

Perhaps the most famous non-minuet of these quartets is the driving, heavy-footed dance of Op. 76, No. 2, known as the "minuetto delle streghe" (the witches' minuet). Witty turns, however, do not define the greatness of these ambitious quartets. Their ultimate majesty, notes Setzer, resides in their quieter episodes.

"The six slow movements go beyond anything in his earlier quartets or anything else. The innovation is extraordinary, the constant playing with musical ideas, finding ways to deepen it. You don't think of Haydn – Papa Haydn as he was affectionately known — as being in touch with tragedy. But when you read about his life, you find a lot of sadness in it.

"And he adored Mozart. He had tried very hard to arrange for Mozart to come to London, but then Mozart became ill and it never worked out. Now here was Haydn back in Vienna and Mozart was gone. In these slow movements, I think you hear something of the heaviness in the aging composer's heart."

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

April 27, 2016

With shared musical vision, quartet stands the test of time

By Colin Eatock

For a man with nine Grammy Awards lined up on his bookshelf, violinist Philip Setzer of the Emerson String Quartet talks a modest game.

"We love all the incredible music that we've spent so much of our lives trying to figure out," Setzer says, looking back on 40 years of quartet playing. "And we've been extremely lucky."

Indeed, for the past four decades, the Emersons have been a fixture on the classical music scene. The group that Time magazine dubbed "America's greatest quartet" has played concerts in the thousands and has recorded almost four dozen discs.

Even more remarkably, there has been only one personnel change in the

quartet's history - the original cellist, David Finkel, was replaced in 2013 by Paul Watkins.

In Houston, the quartet's appearances are almost annual events. The group will be in town once again Thursday evening, at Rice University's Stude Hall, presented by Chamber Music Houston. This time, it'll play string quartets by Ludwig van Beethoven, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Dmitri Shostakovich.

Setzer recently spoke from his home in South Orange, N.J., about playing, touring and keeping it fresh.

Q: Some string quartets don't last a year. How have the Emersons stayed together for four decades?

A: We're honest people who don't have a hidden agenda. Our agenda is all about the music and making our quartet as good as we can be. We've stayed together because we've gotten along well, and we've shared the same vision about music.

We've had very few serious fights over the years. That said, there's enough difference in our ideas to make it interesting - you don't want everybody agreeing all the time. It's a question of finding the right balance.

Also, we were fortunate to start recording in the 1980s, when digital recording was coming to the fore and CDs were invented. Everyone was putting their LP records in the attic and buying CDs - and the record companies were raking in cash. We could record pretty much whatever we wanted, and we were recording as quickly as we could. We were in the right place at the right time.

Q: What opportunities were there for an American string quartet 40 years ago, when you started?

A: After the Second World War, a lot of European refugees came to the States who had grown up in cities like Berlin and Vienna - people who had classical music, and especially chamber music, as part of their heritage. When they came to this country, they brought this tradition with them. We were part of a burgeoning chamber-music scene, and string quartets were becoming more popular.

And it's still that way to a large extent. Every chamber-music organization that I'm aware of is run by a small group of people who are deeply committed to preserving this art form. They're the people who keep us going.

Q: Were your audiences quite so gray-haired back then?

A: They were gray back then, too! And there will always be an older group in the audience for classical music concerts. Often, younger people just don't have the time, with their jobs and their families. But as people get older, they do the things they've always wanted to do - whether it's seeing Shakespeare's history plays, or reading "War and Peace," or listening to all the Beethoven string quartets.

On the other side of the coin, there's a large number of really talented young people who are currently studying music in schools. Not all of them will end up playing professionally ... and those are the people who will still appreciate chamber music and will support it. If I didn't see so many young people interested in chamber music, I would be more worried about the future.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

ChamberMusic

Winter 2015


Dutton


Setzer

THE ONCE & FUTURE


Watkins


Drucker

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IMG *Artists*

America's most distinguished second-generation string quartet has constantly reinvented itself. Now—with a new cellist—they've opened yet another chapter.

BY Justin Davidson

EMERSONS

Scanning the history of the Emerson Quartet, with the group's recording of the Shostakovich quartets accompanying me on my research, I came across a black-and-white album cover from 1997. The setup is utterly artificial: Larry Dutton (viola) and David Finckel (cello, until recently) are wearing matching grey turtlenecks, while the fiddlers, Philip Setzer and Eugene Drucker, are dressed in black. But between clicks of the shutter, someone has evidently cracked a joke. The four guys are smiling and catching each other's glances with the same characteristic blend of separateness and agreement that I recognize from the music filling the room.

Over the decades, the Emerson Quartet has traversed vast stretches of musical terrain (including all of Beethoven, Bartók, Haydn, and Mendelssohn), none more glacially treacherous than Shostakovich. So many passages teeter between giddiness and ferocity that it makes you wonder how such pleasantly comfortable fellows acquired their expertise in the language of torment. Maybe it's that they have internalized the Russian skill of rendering a sentiment and its opposite at the same time. Or perhaps they've just been together long enough to understand the power of intimacy. One reason that Shostakovich's quartets are among that composer's most profound achievements is that they are unofficial records of the small, intense gatherings—a few friends, a bottle of vodka, some deeply held sentiments—in which real Soviet life was lived.

I have known the Emersonians for roughly 15 of their 37 years together, and have spent a lot of time trying to analyze the glue that binds them so tightly, yet keeps their personalities separate and free. They have circled the world together, watched each other's children grow, and leaned on one another through health problems and family deaths. When Setzer's wife Linda, an actress, appeared in a play in New Jersey, Drucker and Dutton attended. (Finckel was traveling.) When Dutton injured his shoulder and had to sit out part of a season, his colleagues volunteered to turn over his portion of the concert fees anyway. The men have always given each other a lot freedom to play other kinds of music or pursue ancillary careers. Drucker wrote a novel. Setzer and Dutton teach.

CMA Honors the Emerson String Quartet at National Conference

Chamber Music America will present the 2015 Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award to the Emersons on Sunday evening, January 18, at the New York Westin at Times Square. To attend the awards ceremony, reception, and banquet, please purchase tickets online before January 6 at **www.chamber-music.org/conference**. Registration for the conference itself is not required.

The quartet circa 1980 (top); circa 2002 (above); and in 2013 (opposite).

Finckel is now an ex-member, but he remains deeply embedded in the group's history and collective psyche. He has always divided his time into innumerable slivers. He tours with his wife, the pianist Wu Han, with whom he co-directs runs the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and founded a festival in Menlo Park, California, and produces CDs on his own label. He's always thinking about the next thing. "After you've done something so successfully for so long, it's foolish to keep pursuing the same things: You wind up trying to outdo yourself," he told me back in 2000, when the quartet was turning a dewy 25. "This is not tennis, where you wonder how many grand slams you can win. There's something about getting to the age we are now. I look around and a lot of our colleagues either continue to challenge themselves with new hurdles, or they find something they do well and they stick with it, which is kind of scary. We've never let ourselves do that." And so, when Finckel finally wanted out, his buddies wished him luck, embarked on a year's worth of valedictory concerts, and assured him they'd be fine without him. A new chapter for him meant a new one for the rest of them.

Last season, with the apparent ease of dancers switching partners at an Edwardian ball, Finckel slipped out of the quartet and Paul Watkins stepped in. Decades' worth of emotional dynamics and habits of mind have had to adjust around a new presence. Families, study groups, commando teams, and book clubs can have trouble accommodating new members without friction, but if the Emersonians are experiencing the pains of change, they're hiding it well.

Still, Watkins hasn't just taken a new job; he's joined a four-way marriage, which can be enjoyable without being easy. "I was intellectually prepared for the experience but probably not fully emotionally prepared," he says. "I'm still dealing with that."

I think back to the morning, about five years ago, when I arrived at Finckel's apartment on the Upper West Side to sit in on a rehearsal of Haydn's Op. 64, No. 3. Finckel speared the kilim with his endpin, gouging the parquet beneath. A couple of wooden cowboys with pasted-on moustaches lurked in a hallway. A sideboard groaned with Grammy Awards. The quartet began to play, and the Haydn sounded almost like a finished product, full of warmth and vinegary wit. The group ended the first movement with upraised bows and a unison laugh. Then they got to work. Within twenty minutes, they had sanded off splinters of uncertainty, sharpened contours, tuned chords, and relaxed the phrasing. What struck me was how little the four friends talked. Banter was banished, though fun was not. For me, there was something slightly odd about sitting there without an instrument, watching their total absorption. I wondered whether they'd ever be able to accommodate a new partner in their dance.

Drucker, a slender man with the melancholy intensity of a character in a German Romantic novel, was born into chamber music; in the 1940s, his father played second violin in the Busch Quartet. Setzer's parents were both members of the Cleveland Orchestra. The two formed their first quartet while they were students at Juilliard in 1970. In 1976, they dubbed themselves the Emerson Quartet, but it was still a startup venture with fluid personnel when they recruited

"TO SURVIVE SO LONG IN A LANDSCAPE LITTERED WITH DEAD AND DISMEMBERED ENSEMBLES REQUIRES A CODE OF BEHAVIOR... EVERY DECISION MUST BE UNANIMOUS."

Dutton, who had none of Setzer's or Drucker's family connections to music. An exuberant, athletic man with large hands and a big smile, Dutton had picked up the violin in the Long Island public school system, and then literally outgrew it. "I can't play violin anymore," he told me. "It's too wimpy, my muscles can't handle it." In high school, he switched to viola.

Finckel was a shy kid from Madison, New Jersey, who in the mid-1970s played in the Colonial Symphony, a part-time orchestra that rehearsed around the corner from his house. The conductor was the violinist Oscar Shumsky, whose name meant nothing to Finckel but whose Yoda-like wisdom drew a band of Juilliard acolytes across the Hudson. "I was the local boy, and I was enormously intimidated by all the Juilliard kids," Finckel recalls. "They had a swagger, quick tongues, and lots of chops." Among the hotshots were Setzer and Drucker, who didn't let on how impressed they were with Finckel's playing. Several years later, after Finckel had moved to Manhattan and was scrounging freelance gigs, Setzer arrived at his apartment with a bottle of scotch, a pile of scores, and an invitation to audition to become the quartet's new cellist. After the initial nervousness dissipated, that first experience "was unbelievable," Finckel says. "It was like the perfect fit of a glove—every crevice filled correctly. It was in tune, it was in time, it was clear. It was so easy!"

Musical chemistry glued the four together, and mutual respect kept them attached. But to survive so long in a landscape littered with dead and dismembered ensembles requires a code of behavior. Article No. 1: No voting. Every decision must be unanimous. There are no other articles.

The friends long ago cast one another other in roles. Drucker is the intense intellectual with an orderly mind. Dutton is more impulsive, eager to try out a new interpretive idea on the spur of the moment, driving Drucker crazy. Setzer is the peacemaker, always ready with a one-liner. But these are caricatures. In reality, all four are both exacting and flexible, passing around authority like a fugue melody.

When necessary, they play with miraculous unity, their bows switching direction like a flock of starlings, striking accents with prenegotiated intensity and pushing crescendos to the identical altitude. Their first task is to breathe together, but as Dutton is fond of pointing out, blending is easy—and only one task among many. The greater challenge is to remain distinct. "You wouldn't want to see a play with four of the same character," Setzer says. In the Emerson Quartet, four personalities do not amalgamate into one.

In its new configuration, the group's been working through the Beethoven quartets again, and Watkins is quietly making his presence felt. Finckel played the opening of Op. 59, No. 1 like a gunslinger pushing through a set of saloon doors, announcing his presence with restrained energy and nudging his colleagues to respond with a big, arresting sound. Watkins admires Finckel's playing but, by his own account, brings a more subdued personality and a darker, woodier sound. "The pleasure I've always derived from chamber music is enveloping the other players and insinuating myself into the texture. I like to flood the group rather than attract a spotlight."

How these differences will play out in the long run, whether Finckel's departure portends others, and whether the ensemble can continue to evolve—these are questions not even the quartet's members can answer. Making music is too immersive, too note-to-note and measure-to-measure to leave much time for such imponderables. Besides, the task of folding a new member into an old fraternity is still far from complete.

"I'm from Wales, and as a kid we learned about coal mines," Watkins says. "In school, they'd show us these cutaways of how far down into the earth a mine shaft went," deeper than the Empire State Building is tall. "I'd say that, with the quartet, I've gotten about ten floors below the surface. But there's another hundred left to go."

Justin Davidson has been music and architecture critic for New York *magazine since 2007. During his previous, decade-long stint at* Newsday, *he received a Pulitzer Prize for his critical writings.*

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The New York Times

April 12, 2014

A Venerable Tapestry, Woven Anew

Emerson String Quartet Adapts to a Different Cellist

By Corinna da Fonseca Willheim

The Emerson String Quartet: from left, Eugene Drucker, Philip Setzer, Paul Watkins and Lawrence Dutton. Mr. Watkins joined the ensemble last year, replacing David Finckel.

The stringent harmonies of Shostakovich's broody String Quartet No. 12 filled the living room of Eugene Drucker's Upper West Side apartment on a recent morning as the Emerson String Quartet rehearsed. Mr. Drucker and Philip Setzer, the quartet's founding violinists, sat on one side of the room opposite the violist Lawrence Dutton. With his back to the window, the cellist Paul Watkins had a view of a bookcase lined with nine Grammy Awards and side tables bristling with framed photographs of musicians paying handwritten tributes to the quartet's reign in the chamber music pantheon: Bernstein, Levine, Rostropovich.

One photo showed Brahms posing for the camera with the violinist Bram Eldering, who later taught Mr. Drucker's father, Ernst.

To many musicians, the 38-year-old quartet would be a daunting family to

The musicians tend to trade quips as fluidly as they share musical motifs.

marry into. But Mr. Watkins, who joined the Emerson last year, replacing its longstanding cellist, David Finckel, appeared perfectly at ease.

"How long have we been playing, roughly?" he asked during a brief break in the music.

"Oh I have been playing roughly for quite some time," Mr. Drucker replied, deadpan.

In fact, judging from the reactions of audiences and critics alike, the transition has been extraordinarily smooth. On April 23 and May 4, the quartet presents concerts at Alice Tully Hall dedicated to works preoccupied with death, including the last three Shostakovich quartets and Schubert's "Death and the Maiden." It's a paradoxical choice for an ensemble that, after its first personnel change in 34 years, exudes energy and enthusiasm.

Offstage, the players' interaction is a finely tuned blend of professional focus and boyish wisecracks and ribbing. The veteran members tease Mr. Watkins about being Welsh and young (he is 44 with school-age children; the other three are all in or pushing their 60s). Mr. Watkins, meanwhile, coaches them in the use of British slang. "My fingers are getting knackered," Mr. Drucker complained after a taxing pizzicato passage. The word earned him approving murmurs, as if he had just come up with a particularly nifty fingering.

When a chamber group assimilates a new member, it changes the way it communicates, both musically and in conversation. That the two modes are inextricably linked became clear as the four men, gathered around Mr. Drucker's kitchen table for a lunch of salad and sandwiches, traded quips as fluidly as they had shared musical motifs moments earlier.

"Obviously, the canon of great works," Mr. Watkins said in response to a question about the repertory he most wanted to tackle. "I'm already 44 ——"

"That's half a piano," Mr. Dutton interjected, referring to the instrument's 88 keys.

"You mean mezzo-piano?" Mr. Watkins quickly retorted before continuing. "I want to do Beethoven, of course. He towers above everything else. But it's also a question of finding pieces the boys want to do. For example, they've played the Dvorak 'American Quartet' quite a lot recently, so I'm not going to force my hand with that."

Mr. Drucker offered, "We'll be doing the 'English Quartet' instead."

"The 'English Quartet'?" Mr. Watkins said. "I want the 'Welsh Quartet.' "

"When you've lived here long enough, we'll do the 'American Quartet,' " Mr. Dutton said kindly.

Although Mr. Watkins has played quartet for much of his musical life, this is the first time he has joined a fixed ensemble. His reputation is built on a solo career that took off with a first prize in the BBC Young Musician of the Year competition in 1988, leading to recordings and appearances with major orchestras. At 20, he became principal cellist of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, a position he held for seven years. He has conducted the English Chamber Orchestra and the Ulster Orchestra, and he was recently named artistic director of the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival in Detroit.

Mr. Watkins has periodically played chamber music with members of the Emerson at summer festivals since meeting them in 2008. After one such encounter, Mr. Dutton said, "I came home and told my wife that if David were ever to leave the quartet, this is who we'd want to play with." When Mr. Finckel announced that he was resigning

from the ensemble — among other reasons, to focus on his work as an artistic director of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center — things quickly fell into place.

"I don't think there's anyone else on the planet who could do what Paul's doing now: to jump into what's been going on for us for 37 years and absorb all these quartets," Mr. Dutton said. "It's been a wonderful rebirth for us. David was fantastic. But Paul is bringing a whole other perspective. And he has a different sound, so our quartet sound is so different now. And that's exciting."

In its first season with the new makeup, the Emerson has revisited works that have not only been a staple of its concert repertory but in many ways helped build its brand. The quartet's 2000 recording of the complete Shostakovich quartets is responsible for two of the Grammys on Mr. Drucker's shelf; it won in the categories of best chamber and best classical recording.

As Mr. Watkins describes it, stepping into Mr. Finckel's shoes — "a guy who seems to have very few weak points" — required a balance of respectful study of his predecessor's habits and confidence in his own musical personality. When he joined the quartet, Mr. Dutton handed him a suitcase full of Mr. Finckel's cello parts. But few of them had any of his markings, so Mr. Watkins familiarized himself with recordings and videos of the quartet. And during the morning's rehearsal, the three veterans often referred to the way Mr. Finckel had bowed or phrased a particular passage.

"At this stage, I owe it to the quartet to see what they've been doing for the last 30-odd years," Mr. Watkins said. "They've worked intensely on these pieces, so I should have a look. I do have some of the Emerson recordings anyway, and particularly the Bartok was one I grew up with. I've never been the sort of monastic, mustn't listen to other recordings sort of musician. If I'm going to find a good idea, I'm going to steal it."

Yet Mr. Drucker said that "with each of these pieces, something has changed, something's evolving."

"At first, Paul was trying to fit into what we were doing," he said. "That would be a logical thing to do for anybody who's joining a group that's been playing together for however many years. You're not going to come in and say, 'O.K., let's do this whole thing backwards.' Paul is so quick in learning, in having a sense of what the music is all about, and his antennae are finely tuned. We do it once, and he knows exactly what we've got. And then as we do it again, it starts to change slightly. I don't even know if he's conscious of it, or whether that's just the more natural way of doing it for him."

Mr. Watkins recalled an article in a trade magazine surveying string quartets that had swapped in new members. "As you'd expect, there was a whole spread of opinion as to how to go about it, " he said. "There was one cellist saying he felt if he didn't go in with all guns blazing from Rehearsal 1, saying, 'This is how I do it,' he'd never have a chance. And there was another one who said she'd decided not to say anything for a whole season."

His colleagues erupted in laughter. "So where are you in this?"

"I'm not talking," Mr. Watkins said coyly.

"Any minute now!" Mr. Dutton goaded him.

The Emerson is in a minority among quartets in that it does not have a first violinist: Mr. Drucker and Mr. Setzer regularly trade places. "It's always been an equal situation," Mr. Dutton said. "Everybody is involved in decision making. We know of other quartets where they vote — I don't know how they do that with four people — and there are quartets that are dominated by a first violinist."

"That's sort of the way I was educated," Mr. Watkins said. "I do think — without getting too soppy or mutual admiration society about this whole thing — thank God it was the Emerson Quartet that I came into and not A. N. Other Quartet. It's an incredibly democratic quartet

without the need for any artificial democratic structures to make it work. Everybody is confident about their artistic personality and their own importance."

In the immediate future the Emerson plans to revisit and perform the complete Beethoven quartets. Beyond that, Mr. Watkins said, he is game for almost anything, although he conceded, "I haven't got a particular yen to do the complete quartets of Dittersdorf or Boccherini."

"You know what, Paul, that's your loss," Mr. Setzer threw in.

"You know Donizetti wrote 16 quartets," Mr. Drucker began.

"That's it," Mr. Dutton said. "We've scratched the Beethoven cycle. We're actually doing a Donizetti cycle."

Mr. Watkins, grinning, said: "I find myself in the incredibly happy position that if any repertory questions come my way, I say, well, yes, of course I'd like to do that. What wouldn't I like to do?"

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The New York Times

October 18, 2014

Always Room for (Four) More

Calidore String Quartet to Make Stony Brook University Its Home

By Jane Levere

The Emerson String Quartet has been Stony Brook University's quartet-in-residence since 2002.

Not all 20-somethings want to play in rock bands. Some prefer the quartet route. Not that success for young classical musicians comes more easily; it always helps to have a support network.

To this end, Stony Brook University has invited the Calidore String Quartet, a chamber music group that was formed at the Colburn Conservatory of Music in Los Angeles in 2010, to be artists-in-residence and visiting faculty through the end of the 2015-16 academic year, giving the young musicians a home base to hone their craft and teach others to do the same.

The school has a solid track record of supporting chamber music through its residency program. The world-renowned Emerson String Quartet has been the university's quartet-in-residence since 2002.

"It seemed absurd to me since we had the Emerson, who were master teachers at the apex of the quartet world, that we

not have a young group in residence to be mentored by the Emerson," said Gilbert Kalish, a professor of piano and director of performance activities at Stony Brook's department of music, who was instrumental in establishing the Emerson's residency. "It would enhance the school's reputation and enrich the music life of America."

The Emerson will continue to coach and teach mostly graduate students, while also mentoring the Calidore musicians. The younger quartet will in turn coach and teach undergraduates and participate in community outreach programs.

Calidore members seem to be on board. "We're a young string quartet embarking on the beginning of our career," said Jeremy Berry, 28, the violist for the group. "The Emerson String Quartet has had one of the most illustrious careers of any quartet in the history of music. We are very excited to receive guidance from them." He also emphasized the significance of looking forward, saying, "It is very important to us to be encouraging younger people to pick up instruments and play, and to educate the audience of the future."

Mr. Kalish said that he became acquainted with the Calidore at the Banff Center in Alberta, Canada, where they were doing a residency in 2013, finding them to be "a mature young group on the cusp of a real professional career." His Stony Brook colleague, David Finckel, a former Emerson cellist who is also co-artistic director of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, agreed, telling him that he "thought they were first-rate and that it would be great to have them" at the school, Mr. Kalish recalled.

With financial support from the Staller family (who endowed Stony Brook'sStaller Center for the Arts), the four members of the Calidore will have time to do local outreach, something the Emerson, a winner of nine Grammy Awards, is unable to do because of its global travel commitments, said Philip Setzer, a professor of violin at Stony Brook and a founding member of the Emerson. Mr. Setzer said this was a wonderful and very unusual opportunity for young, professional musicians. "The kind of program the Calidore is doing didn't exist for us. From the time we left school to start our career, there was no place to go in the beginning, to work intensively with an established group," he said. "They will come in as a new group to this with a lot of energy and commitment."

As for the Emerson String Quartet, its commitment to local performances in between international engagements is steadfast: It will perform three concerts at the Staller Center during the 2014-15 season, the first on Oct. 24. The program will feature selections from Bach's "Art of Fugue" and Beethoven's String Quartet No. 13 in B-flat Major with Grosse Fuge. The concert is sold out, but last-minute tickets could be available. The quartet will perform again on Feb. 3 and April 14, 2015, while members also will play in and coach student ensembles during the Spring Chamber Music Festival, May 6 to 9.

The Calidore will perform Schumann's Piano Quintet in E-flat Major with Christina Dahl, a faculty pianist, on Nov. 19. Other performances include one by the Stony Brook Symphony Orchestra, whose members are graduate students, on Feb. 21, to be conducted by Paul Watkins (Mr. Finckel's successor with the Emerson), and a concert featuring Mr. Watkins, Mr. Kalish and other faculty playing the Brahms Piano Quintet in F Minor on March 13.

Concertgoers no doubt will agree with Mr. Setzer, who said that people love chamber music because of "the intimacy, that you can identify with the individuals."

Judging from the number of individuals teaching and performing at Stony Brook this year, chamber music enthusiasts should have a rich experience in store.

Perry Goldstein, chairman of the music department, seems to concur: "To have two fine string quartets, young and more established, as examples of the highest form of chamber-music playing is a great boon to our students."

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

August 12, 2013

Courting a Fourth

By Barrymore Laurence Scherer

Among the world's paramount quartets, the Emerson String Quartet, formed in 1976, is a fixture of the international concert circuit. Its success, its many acclaimed recordings and its influence through teaching and master classes helped to foster a favorable climate for string quartets throughout the country. Unlike other longstanding exemplars in the U.S. quartet community, such as the Juilliard String Quartet (formed in 1946) and the Kronos Quartet (formed in 1973), both of which have already undergone multiple personnel changes, ESQ had remained constant since 1979, featuring violinists Eugene Drucker, 61, and Philip Setzer, 62; violist Lawrence Dutton, 59; and cellist David Finckel, 61. The ESQ's development as a musical ensemble, its interpretative style, its very sound, had been based on this unchanging makeup.

Hence it was news of considerable significance when Mr. Finckel announced he would step down this past May to concentrate more fully on his other duties—among them, his joint artistic directorship of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center with his wife, pianist Wu Han, and of their Music@Menlo festival and institute. The news was equally significant that Mr. Finckel would be succeeded by the British cellist and conductor Paul Watkins, 43.

Recruiting a new quartet member is akin to a courtship. Whether touring or rehearsing, a quartet lives in a union as much psychological as aesthetic. As Mr. Setzer observed in an email correspondence, "The quartet and its families actually form one large, very close-knit family." Filling a vacant chair meant seeking not just a harmonious voice, but a harmonious personality.

Adding to the pressure, the string-quartet community is itself close-knit. The recruitment process is exceptionally intimate: quartets audition by playing with a prospective member to determine compatibility. When a player doesn't click, there can be discomfiture all around. Thus Mr. Watkins's fast track to fill the ESQ's vacancy was especially fortuitous, avoiding a protracted recruitment process.

It was Mr. Dutton who first encountered Mr. Watkins professionally in July 2009 while playing in a tour organized by the veteran pianist and a Beaux Arts Trio founder, Menahem Pressler. "Paul was our cellist," Mr. Dutton recalls by email. "We were performing piano quartets by Brahms and Dvořák, which contain long, wonderful cello solos. From the first rehearsal I was amazed by Paul's playing—his overall sound was gorgeous—every note beautiful, every phrase incredibly well-balanced and expressive." He says that "I returned from that tour and told my wife that if David ever decided to leave the quartet, Paul would be the cellist to replace him. Little did I know that two years later we would have to make such a decision."

In the summer of 2011, a few weeks before Mr. Finckel informed his colleagues that he wished to step down, Mr. Setzer performed with Mr. Watkins at Mr. Finckel's Music@Menlo festival and was equally impressed. Meanwhile, Mr. Drucker had heard him in December 2010 at a Carnegie Hall concert with the New York String Orchestra conducted by Jaime Laredo—who is Mr. Watkins's father-in-law.

But there was also a logistical question: The ESQ is New York-based; Mr. Watkins lived in London. "Though he was our first choice, we doubted that he'd be willing to move here and uproot his family," wrote Mr. Drucker. Yet the wheels had begun to turn.

"When the offer to join the Emersons was put to me in January 2012, I already knew that we would 'click,' personally and musically," wrote Mr. Watkins. "As Gene was the only member with whom I had not yet played, it was imperative that we get together as soon as possible to read some quartets. It was at this session in Gene's apartment a few weeks later that we began to play—the first movement of Beethoven's Op.18, No. 1. It felt so natural to make music with these three gents that, before too long, we stopped for some champagne. At that moment, I decided that life in the Emerson Quartet was for me."

The question of uprooting his family was settled by the fact that his wife, Jennifer Laredo Watkins, is not only American, but had actually been discussing with her husband a change of experience for their children on this side of the Atlantic.

The reconstituted Emerson made its formal North American debut at the Caramoor International Music Festival in July, revealing that the transition has been seamless. The program—which with certain variations they are presenting in their current North American tour—featured two of Beethoven's "Razumovsky" quartets,

Op. 59, flanking Benjamin Britten's Third String Quartet, Op. 94.

The opening of the second of the "Razumovsky" quartets is a good test of ensemble playing, demanding an assured light touch to convey Beethoven's sly humor. But the acid test is the slow movement. From the first velvet measures all four voices must meld in a choralelike series of sustained chords. Listening to the ESQ's flawless account of it last month, one could hear how finely attuned the players are to each other. In timbre, color and articulation, all four instruments were beautifully matched.

Addressing Mr. Watkins's influence, Mr. Drucker notes that, "Britten's quartets have not figured as largely in our repertoire as they soon will. And for the first time we will learn some music of Purcell. So it's fair to say that we're exploring more of a British angle for the future."

And what of their new sound? "The cello is the foundation of a string quartet's sound," noted Mr. Drucker, "David's tone is more baritone-tenor, Paul's more bass-baritone, i.e., darker. If pressed, I would guess that our sound is now a bit less streamlined but more expansive and possibly warmer. As far as interpretation is concerned, it's a bit premature to say for sure, but I suspect that you may hear a slightly mellower Emerson in the future."

To Mr. Setzer's ears, "the sound is darker with Paul, but he is also a very intense musician and exciting performer. If we are mellower with Paul it's purely sonic, because none of us is looking to sit back and relax."

Though Mr. Watkins has resigned from the distinguished Nash Ensemble of London, he remains the English Chamber Orchestra's principal conductor. Asked if he has to restrain the urge to lead from the cello when playing in the ESQ, he responds that, "There is no question of anyone taking a conductor's role in the quartet. With so many musical matters to keep me occupied, I have felt no urges whatsoever, other than to keep my place, play beautifully and not let my colleagues down."

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

Weekendlife

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2013 The Washington Times SECTION D

EMERSON'S STRINGS

Quartet opening chamber music series at KenCen

UNBROKEN STRING

LISA-MARIE MAZZUCCO

Cellist Paul Watkins (far right) is the newest member of the Emerson String Quartet, whose lineup had remained the same since 1979.

Emerson Quartet in D.C. with new cellist

By Emily Cary
SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Uncommon artistry is the hallmark of the more than 30 recordings by the acclaimed Emerson String Quartet. The honors heaped upon them include nine Grammy Awards, three Gramophone Awards, the Avery Fisher Prize and Musical America's "Ensemble of the Year."

On Wednesday, when the ESQ opens the Fortas Chamber Music Series at the Kennedy Center, it will mark the first time in more than three decades that the ensemble begins the season with a new member.

Violinists Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer formed the Emerson String Quartet, named for American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, while studying at the Juilliard School in 1976. A year later, Lawrence Dutton replaced the original violist. Prior to their breakthrough 1979 debuts at the Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center and the Smithsonian Institution, cellist David Finckel joined the ensemble. That lineup remained constant until this past spring, when British cellist and conductor Paul Watkins replaced Mr. Finckel, who stepped down to focus on his joint artistic directorship of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and the Music@Menlo festival with his wife, pianist Wu Han.

The distinguished Mr. Watkins brings both dynamic musicianship and a continuation of the mutual respect and congeniality that has earned the ESQ recognition as the world's best string quartet. "The choice was easy for us," said Mr. Drucker in a phone interview Monday, "but Paul lived in London with his wife and two girls. Although we were afraid he would decline the offer, it worked out because his wife is American and wanted to move back."

On Nov. 3, the ESQ begins the 34th season of their five-concert series at the Smithsonian's Baird Auditorium, where Mr. Watkins originally joined them in May. But first, the new configuration appears at the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater with a concert of works by Mendelssohn, Britten and Beethoven

"The Kennedy Center program we chose includes Mendelssohn's Quartet in F minor, Op 80, and Britten's Quartet No. 3. They have in common the fact that each is the composer's last complete quartet," said Mr. Drucker. "Both have a feeling of heaviness, finality and impending death. Mendelssohn's sister Fanny had died earlier that year, and he would die a few months later.

"Britten's Quartet No. 3 has five movements with effective changes of mood. The fourth movement is a burlesque, while the fifth and last movement gradually accumulates the feeling of tragedy, or fatefulness. The material is drawn from his opera 'Death in Venice' and is so meditative and mysterious that audiences have a hushed reaction.

> "BRITTEN'S QUARTET NO. 3 HAS FIVE MOVEMENTS WITH EFFECTIVE CHANGES OF MOOD. THE FOURTH MOVEMENT IS A BURLESQUE, WHILE THE FIFTH AND LAST MOVEMENT GRADUALLY ACCUMULATES THE FEELING OF TRAGEDY, OR FATEFULNESS. THE MATERIAL IS DRAWN FROM HIS OPERA 'DEATH IN VENICE' AND IS SO MEDITATIVE AND MYSTERIOUS THAT AUDIENCES HAVE A HUSHED REACTION."
>
> — Eugene Drucker, violinist

"In contrast, Beethoven's Quartet No. 3, Op. 59 is bright and brilliant. It is the third of three commissioned by Count Razumovsky to incorporate Russian folk songs. He did use folk song themes in the first two quartets, but not in this one. The first movement begins in a mysterious way, then becomes triumphant and assertive in the key of C major. The second movement is melancholy with an exotic flavor. In the third movement, menuetto grazioso, he is pushing the boundaries of neoclassical form even as he harks back to the mellifluous and tender minuet of Mozart and Haydn. He was always doing something different and saved the tour de force passages for the last movement."

Like the other members of ESQ, Mr. Drucker performs as a solo and chamber musician when the opportunity arises. Additionally, he branched out recently as a composer and author. Long a fan of Shakespeare, he was inspired to set four sonnets to music. The work was premiered by baritone Andrew Nolen and the Escher String Quartet at SUNY Stony Brook and in 2010 was part of a two-CD release, "Stony Book Soundings."

Perhaps his most daring accomplishment to date is "The Savior," a novel he wrote based on his own experiences as a young musician entertaining difficult audiences and on those of his father, Ernst Drucker, a violinist in Germany during the 1930s. Although it is a fictional recounting, the author conveys the scenes about a young German violinist ordered to perform for concentration camp inmates with great empathy. As the Holocaust bears down upon them, his characters face traumatic options. The book received excellent reviews and was translated into German.

"I gave a number of readings in this country and also traveled to Germany for some," Mr. Drucker said. "That was one of the highlights in my life as an individual. In looking back at all my experiences as a member of ESQ, I'll never forget the round trip on the Concorde in 1989 to receive the Gramophone Awards for best chamber music recording and record of the year for our Bartok cycle. A year later, we had the excitement of receiving our first Grammy Award. We had no idea we would win because we thought Bartok might seem too esoteric.

"Other memorable thrills were playing the Beethoven cycle in the United States and Europe and the Bartok marathon in chronological order so we could feel everything that has gone before. Most of all, my greatest rewards are the pleasure of a concert that goes very well and making wonderful friends along the way."

WHAT: The Emerson Quartet opens the Fortas Chamber Music Series with works by Mendelssohn, Britten and Beethoven
WHERE: Kennedy Center Terrace Theater, 2700 F ST. NW
WHEN: Wed., Oct. 2 at 7:30 p.m.
TICKETS: $45
PHONE: 202/467-4600; 800/444-1324
WEB: kennedy-center.org

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

OREGON ARTSWATCH
OREGON'S ARTS & CULTURE NEWS
orartswatch.org

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Chamber Music Northwest Interview: Emerson String Quartet cellist Paul Watkins

Venerable ensemble's new member tells how he snagged chamber music's most coveted job opening — and gives the scoop on a fascinating upcoming recording.

By Alice Hardesty

OAW: Welcome to Portland, Paul. Thank you very much for your time. What led you to decide to join a string quartet, and specifically this string quartet, the Emerson?

PW: It had a lot to do with my musical friendship with Larry Dutton. I was lucky enough to be able to play with him at chamber music festivals in ad hoc groups.

OAW: But you had played with the Emerson before, hadn't you?

PW: No, I never had. Once, a number of years ago, David Finckel was temporarily unavailable and they called me looking for a substitute. Unfortunately, I wasn't free at the time. But I was really kicking myself because I wanted to do that very much. Years later I ended up playing some piano quartets with Menahem Pressler and Larry Dutton happened to be the violist.

OAW: That must've been fun!

PW: Yes, we had a great time. And a year or so later I was invited by David and Wu Han to play at their festival, Music@Menlo, and I played some Brahms quintets with Philip Setzer, but I hadn't played with Gene at that time. Anyway, a phone call came from Larry on my birthday, January 4th, 2012. I thought, *Oh finally, they're going to ask*

me to play a Schubert quintet with them! But actually they told me that David was going to leave the quartet, which was top-secret at that time, and asked if I would I like to join.

OAW: Just like that!

PW: Yes, that's was exactly how it was.

OAW: Not, "Would you like to audition"?

PW: No they didn't use the *A-word*, because we were all grown-ups, we knew each other, and we had played together. It was going to be very delicate. Having a new person in a string quartet is tricky anyway, but particularly after these people had played together for 34 years! That kind of longevity is really unique in present-day string quartets.

I was kind of shocked. I put down the phone and talked to my wife. She is Jennifer Laredo, [renowned violinist] Jaime and [pianist] Ruth Laredo's daughter, and an American citizen. I said, "Gosh you'll never guess what happened!" We had been living happily in London for 20 years. We had just spent a substantial amount of money redecorating our house, our two girls were settled in school there, and my gut reaction was, *I don't need to pack up everything and move to New York*.But Jennifer said, "Hang on a minute. Why don't you think about it and at least go and play with them?" So within 24 hours I booked a flight to New York.

It all felt rather cloak-and-dagger. I booked into an anonymous kind of hotel with the idea that we were going to spend a weekend playing quartets just to see he how it felt. It was either going to work or it wouldn't. There was no middle ground. So we started playing, and within ten minutes I felt,*This is absolutely marvelous!* After an hour or so we took a break and talked a little, and Phil said something like, "Well?" And I said, "Yep." Gene happened to have a bottle of champagne in the fridge, and that really was that!

We were going to read some more the following day, but Larry had a minor car accident coming into the city. So we talked through the potential logistics, said goodbye, and I went off to the airport. We kept it very quiet because we wanted to make sure the transition was absolutely seamless.

OAW: Do you remember what quartet they started you with?

PW: I do, actually: we started with the first movement of Beethoven's Opus 18 number 1. They had asked me to send them a list of the quartets I had already played. In the Nash Ensemble, where I'd played for 16 years, we had a very nice solid, unchanging quartet — wonderful musicians who are still in the group — and we had started trying quartets.

The Nash Ensemble actually was the main source of my initial reluctance. I was having such a great time playing with them that I just didn't want to stop. We felt that we had the right kind of chemistry and blend, not just to play their traditional repertoire, but also to play real string quartets like a couple of Beethoven's, the Ravel, and a couple of Shostakovich's. They had also asked me to prepare some pieces that they had recently performed. We worked our way through some of these, including pretty much all of the Ravel. It was a very nice afternoon.

OAW: So now you are the youngest member of this august group. Do you get a lot of ribbing for that?

PW: Well, I get to carry the suitcases sometimes. I know there's an age difference but I've been used to that for much of my working life because I was only 20 years old when I started professionally as first cello of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. When I started with the Nash Ensemble, most of the members were older than I was, but not so much in later years.

OAW: First cellist at age 20! You were very young and you must've been very good.

PW: I was very lucky. It was a good start. But these guys [the Emersons] have extraordinary energy. It's just phenomenal! They're poster boys for the fact that everybody in the U.S. seems to have at least 10 years on their counterparts in Europe.

Most of the ribbing I get is about my English English rather than their American English. We have lots of fun discovering all sorts of slang on both sides.

OAW: About the concert last night, which was just beautiful, why did you all pick such bleak music [Shostakovich's String Quartet #15 and Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" quartet], full of despair and anguish — the death theme?

PW: Well, that's a question we're asked often in this past season because we've been looking intensely at the last five quartets of Shostakovich. Gene gave a talk yesterday evening about all of this and he was brilliant. But the joke is that the easiest series for a quartet to put together would be called "Death." So many great composers turned to the string quartet later in life for practical as well as creative reasons. It's a lot easier to write four staves of music than it is to write 40, as with symphonies, which tend to be the works of composers in their prime. As they aged, they pared down, like Benjamin Britten, who worked in the same time period as Shostakovich. Britten was very ill with heart disease, and his doctor had said, "You can't write an opera in your condition!" But he went ahead and composed *Death in Venice*, which took enormous strength (in fact it eventually killed him). So his friends asked him, "Why not try four staves rather than 40?"

Thinking about last night's program, on the surface it is bleak. I think also, the "Death and the Maiden" nickname has some responsibility for that. If that quartet wasn't called "Death and the Maiden," people might view it in a different way. It's a very dramatic quartet — dramatic in a sort of Beethovenian sense. It's motivic and cogently argued, but it has moments of incredible beauty and joy as well as anger. I don't find it a bleak work.

OAW: No, I agree. I would think of it more as tragic. And maybe those tender moments are indicative of resolution or even a hint of an afterlife.

PW: Oh, definitely. Death comes to us all, after all. It's something we all have in common, and yet people think about it very differently. It's an engaging subject, and music gives us the opportunity to contemplate it without having to think about semantics.

Shostakovich, for example, is more specific in this last quartet. He calls movement #5, *Funeral March*. But after that, the very last movement is really weird. He's quoting music that I think he was going to use in an opera that never came to pass — these kinds of rushing figures, the very fast violin solo and then the cello solo. And then the whole quartet at the very end, this kind of rustling sound — that's music he had in mind for something else. But then there's also incredible moments in a beautiful major key signifying peace and repose. It is demanding and it is bleak, but somehow it's incredibly compelling. I think you can defend any work like this, even in the midst of a beautiful summer festival. That's what music is all about.

OAW: I noticed you had a lot of solo parts in the Shostakovich. Can you comment on the differences and similarities of the cello's part

in those two very different pieces — the role of the cello in each?

PW: I think whatever I would say about the role of the cello in these two pieces is what the other three guys would say about the role of their instruments. Of course Shostakovich does have solo moments for all of the instruments in quartet #15. What he was doing in numbers 11, 12, 13, and 14 was dedicating each quartet to a member of the Beethoven Quartet [which premiered many of Shostakovich's quartets]. For example, #13 features the viola and #14 features the cello. So he sees the quartet not just as a choral entity but for real individuals. Particularly in the 14th quartet, which is heavy in the cello,I can't help thinking about the Shostakovich cello concertos, those old war horses.

OAW: Have you played them?

PW: I've played them, yes. And it feels like you're playing one of those cello concertos when you're playing quartet number 14. Not so much the 15th. That feels much more like you're acting. You have your lines, particularly your solo lines or soliloquies, as if they're characters, portraits of someone. The second movement is particularly weird. It starts with these electric shocks for each instrument [demonstrates vocally], which are horrendous, like they're meant to evoke some kind of treatment he was given.

OAW: Yes, I've seen them described as shrieks.

PW: Right, they are shrieks. I feel like they represent some kind of medical procedure in some horrible Soviet hospital. Then, once that's finished, the cello comes in with a very gruff statement, which according to Phil, who has read very widely on Shostakovich and his time, is meant to be an imitation of the way Stalin spoke [demonstrates vocally with a sort of growl].

OAW: Really?

PW: Yes. He was a fairly unsophisticated man from the countryside with a strong regional accent. And that's something I always have in mind when I play that little bit. So all of these solos have their own characters.

OAW: And how about the role of the cello in the Schubert?

PW: In the Schubert, the cello's role is much more uniting. In that quartet, and this is just my personal experience, I find myself listening to the first violin most of the time. The first violin carries an awful lot of that quartet, so I think my role is to anchor the first violin and then to give warmth and depth and a cushion of sound to the second violin and the viola. Of course the cello has a beautiful variation in the slow movement, and it has some virtuosic stuff in the first movement. It feels like I have to play in a much more symphonic way in the last movement because there's this great storm section in the middle. It is very symphonic that last movement. So that reminds me much more of my days playing in the BBC Symphony. It's not such a soloistic role. That's where I need to create the basis for a really good blended, exciting string quartet sound.

OAW: Looking at some of the short videos that Lincoln Center put together, I heard Larry Dutton say, "Paul Watkins has a different sound, so now the Emerson sounds different." I wonder if you had noticed that, and if so in what way the Emerson might sound different now.

PW: That's an interesting question. I know the sounds of the Emerson Quartet from having heard them in concert in London and a number of their recordings, and it's a wonderful sound. I haven't made any conscious decision to try and change anything — I just know it's going to be different. I have a different cello from the one David used. In fact David used a number of different cellos over the years while he was in the Quartet. He's a great evangelizer for modern instrument making, which I'm 100 percent behind. My dad is an instrument maker in Wales. David is an anti-old-instrument snob, which is wonderful. He's a crusader for so many things. But I am also very lucky to own a

nice Venetian cello that dates from the 1730s. I suppose the easiest way to describe it is to say that David's sound is perhaps like an operatic tenor whereas I'm a little bit more of a bass-baritone. So I think it's a quality of voice that people have.

OAW: Do you have any plans for the future? For instance, do you have any other cycles coming up? I hear a rumor that there might be a Boccherini or Donizetti cycle coming up.

PW: [Laughing.] Oh, God no, I hope not. We are talking about cycles however, which is something the Quartet's always done.

OAW: I hope you know I'm kidding. [Laughter.] I know that Donizetti has written 18 string quartets.

PW: Yes, I know. Gene was talking about Mstislav Weinberg the other day whose opera [*The Passenger*] was recently produced in New York. Weinberg was a friend of Shostakovich and he wrote a good number of string quartets, and he's a very interesting composer, so we may end up looking into some of those.

We're making a two-CD set at the moment. One is a recording of the Alban Berg *Lyric Suite,* an incredible piece, which is one of the great 20th century pieces for string quartet, very virtuosic. It's got everything in it, including the "hidden vocal line" in the last movement, discovered in the late '70s by [American composer] George Perle and others. They found that Berg had embedded a secret vocal line in the score as a kind of love song to his mistress. You can extract the line, which is shared out amongst the players, and we've recorded it with Renée Fleming.

OAW: The line is extracted and she sings that while you play the sixth movement? How cool is that!

PW: Yes. We don't change the way we play at all. There is a pocket score that was discovered with Berg's annotations and the text that he set, which is a German translation of Baudelaire. He's written the text in and you can see how it jumps between the cello, viola, and first and second violins. There is even one note for the soprano which happens during a rest for the quartet at a climactic point in the movement. So you can see that he really did conceive of it as a song.

We're also recording Britten's second and third string quartets with some [Henry] Purcell viol fantasias, which we're playing as a string quartet, plus an edition Britten made of a Purcell chaconne. So that will be a Britton-Purcell CD, which is also coming out next year.

OAW: Well, there's plenty to look forward to. Thank you so much.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The New York Times

February 1, 2013

Finding Drama in Musicians' Discord

By Anthony Tommasini

Music on film: From left, Billy Connolly, Maggie Smith, Tom Courtenay and Pauline Collins of "Quartet."

That a string quartet has one cello and one viola but two violins complicates things. What makes a particular performer more suited to the first violin part? Or the second? Must a first violinist, of necessity, be the more assertive and flashy player?

These questions may seem little more than insider quibbling. Yet Yaron Zilberman's recent film "A Late Quartet" — about multiple crises among members of an esteemed Manhattan-based string quartet as it embarks on its 25th-anniversary season — makes this rarefied subject central to the drama. At least that's true until the movie, which boasts a powerhouse cast, takes a melodramatic turn toward simmering resentments and an inappropriate affair.

As it happens, a poignant aspect of opera is the focus of another film now in

limited release, "Quartet," directed by the actor Dustin Hoffman. With a screenplay by Ronald Harwood, who adapted his own play of the same name, "Quartet" tells of three singers who live in a bucolic English town in what seems, given their modest means, an implausibly elegant retirement home called Beecham House. As they prepare for an annual benefit concert on Verdi's birthday, the famous diva Jean Horton (the indomitable Maggie Smith), arrives. Despite her glorious career Jean appears to have no choice but to live at Beecham House, and she is miserable about it. Further, she had been briefly married to one of the resident singers, Reginald Paget (Tom Courtenay), who still seethes over their breakup.

The story centers on the efforts of Reginald, Cissy Robson (Pauline Collins) and Wilf Bond (Billy Connolly) to talk Jean into singing with them at the benefit. They want to recreate their rendition of the grand quartet from Act III of Verdi's "Rigoletto," an opera the four had performed and recorded to acclaim in the old days.

"Quartet" is a beautifully acted, lightly comic and pretty slender film. Still, its contrived plot touches on a real concern: the limited longevity of opera singers. With good health, conductors, pianists and other instrumentalists can perform well into their late years. Alas, singers' voices age right along with their bodies.

"A Late Quartet" delves into complex issues of musical performance. The cellist of the fictional Fugue Quartet, Peter Mitchell (played with affecting fragility by Christopher Walken), is a good generation older than the other three members: Daniel Lerner, the ensemble's charismatic first violinist (played by Mark Ivanir); Robert Gelbart, its valued second violinist (Philip Seymour Hoffman); and Robert's wife, Juliette Gelbart, the violist (Catherine Keener). Peter was a revered mentor to the others and remains the quartet's patriarch.

But Peter learns he has Parkinson's disease. His stunned colleagues encourage him to continue performing, at least through the 25th-anniversary season. Still, an ensemble that has thrived largely because of its cohesion must now find a new cellist.

Most string quartets go through at least one or two changes in membership over time, though there have been notable exceptions: The great players of the Amadeus String Quartet had nearly 40 years together until the violist Peter Schidlof died in 1987. Sometimes a new member can provide the creative jolt a quartet needs. But no one can know for sure.

In "A Late Quartet" (scheduled for DVD release on Tuesday by 20th Century Fox), the musicians are rehearsing their signature piece: Beethoven's Quartet in C sharp minor (Op. 131), a mystical late work in seven movements played without break, beginning with a slow, somberly beautiful fugue. In these scenes the film realistically depicts the kinds of ego clashes and pent-up frustrations that can break out in even the most committed ensembles. The cellist's illness emboldens Mr. Hoffman's Robert to propose another upheaval. He has been feeling restless and taken for granted, not just as the second violinist but also in his marriage, so he announces that he wants to alternate in the first violin parts. Even his wife thinks him rash.

Today many quartets, especially younger ones, alternate first and second violinists. Yet not that long ago this practice was rare. The Emerson String Quartet, founded in 1976, was one of the first prominent ensembles to alternate. At the time the decision "raised eyebrows," as the violinist Eugene Drucker, a founding member (along with the violinist Philip Setzer), said during a recent telephone interview

while on tour with the quartet in Austria.

"For us it was natural," Mr. Drucker said, "because we started as a student quartet at Juilliard and had turnover for a while with viola and cello." (Lawrence Dutton became the violist in 1977, David Finckel the cellist in 1979.) So alternating at those instruments initially offered educational value, giving Mr. Drucker and Mr. Setzer insight into their art form. It felt right, so they kept it up.

What are the differences between first and second violin?

"Since the first violin is more exposed in most pieces, the first violinist will set the tone in a certain way — if not in the preparation, at least in the way it's presented," Mr. Drucker said, cautioning that he was generalizing. "Therefore you have to have a somewhat extroverted personality and the kind of sound needed to grab the audience's attention and imagination.

"The second violin role is not at all the cliché of second fiddle. There are specific skills needed to project your part, often in a lower register that might compete with the viola, which has a very distinctive timbre."

It turns out the Emerson String Quartet is also about to change cellists. Mr. Finckel will depart in May, and he'll be replaced by Paul Watkins, a Welshman who is also a conductor. But Mr. Finckel, who is a co-director of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center with his wife, the pianist Wu Han, told his Emerson colleagues of his plans to refocus his career in August 2011, giving them time to adjust.

While real musicians have their own challenges, actors playing musicians have theirs: faking the playing of an instrument is always awkward. The cast of "A Late Quartet" clearly trained hard with coaches, and the result is passable enough. But it is strange to see such superb actors looking distracted when they mimic the mechanics of playing instruments.

The excellent Brentano String Quartet performs Beethoven's Opus 131 on the soundtrack. In a nice touch, when the characters start looking for a new cellist, they settle on a member of a fictional trio, Nina Lee, the Brentano's brilliant cellist, who plays herself in a short but crucial scene at the end. (She's identified in the film as the cellist of a fictional trio.)

During an important concert Mr. Walken's character becomes too impaired to finish a piece. The performance stops. Peter stands up, makes a farewell speech to the audience and calls on Ms. Lee, who happens to be backstage, all set to go. In this brief performance scene Ms. Lee, who knows her way around her instrument, comes across for a moment as the strongest actor of all.

In a recent telephone interview Ms. Lee said she was awed to see how intensely these actors were involved in their craft. "We filmed that scene from 10:30 in the evening until about 2 a.m.," she said. "There would be a break, and the actors would collapse in their seats. Makeup people would come. The director would shout. It was amazing."

Not a typical workday for a cellist in a string quartet.

In "Quartet," by contrast, most of the performing is not supposed to be by artists in their prime; it's more in the nature of old folks staying active.

Hoping to persuade Jean to sing the "Rigoletto" quartet with them, for old time's sake and to stoke sales for the benefit, the three of them take her to dinner, where they drop the idea. Ms. Smith's Jean reacts with white-hot outrage. She storms out and appears at breakfast the next morning to curse her former husband and his insensitive cronies.

Her indignation seems a false step. All opera singers understand (unless they

are Plácido Domingo) that the time will come to stop performing. Some, understandably, stop cold. When Beverly Sills retired from singing at 51, she really stopped and seemed content. Others take a more lighthearted approach. Marilyn Horne, 79, will sing a song now and then alongside young, aspiring singers at a gala concert.

That Ms. Smith's character reacts with such vehement fury makes this diva seem unhinged. Then, suddenly, she reconciles with Reginald and decides to sing the quartet after all, though the film provides no explanation for her turnaround.

Still, it is fun to watch these veteran actors throwing themselves into a film about opera. And, wisely Mr. Hoffman never lets us hear Ms. Smith and her colleagues sing. Just as they step onstage to perform the quartet at the benefit, greeted by lusty bravos, the film ends. As the credits roll we hear a fine recording of the Verdi. Cheating, perhaps, but a graceful way out.

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LIFE WITH CLASSICAL MUSIC

Summer 2013

MIXED MEDIA

Musicians of all stripes discuss the inspiration they take from other arts.

By Thomas May

According to the great nineteenth-century art and literature critic Walter Pater, "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." Likewise, musicians often turn to the other arts for inspiration. Immersion in a discipline outside of music can enhance the faculties required to construct meaning out of abstract sounds. Arnold Schoenberg's most active period as a painter, for example, coincided with his most explosive, revolutionary compositions — the works that first broke clear of the moorings of tonality and were admired by Wassily Kandinsky, who at the same time was pioneering abstract painting.

"Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy" is one of the many Pater-esque declarations Beethoven issued throughout his career. But he also liked to refer to himself in later years as a *Tondichter*, a "tone poet," in lieu of the usual *Komponist*. Even Brahms, considered the reigning guru of "absolute music," possessed a fine, often-overlooked literary sensibility.

There's something about the collaborative aspect of performing music that makes its interpreters especially open to cross-pollination across the arts spectrum. In the face of contemporary life's unrelenting pressure to focus on insular pockets of knowledge, the synergy between music and its artistic siblings is a valuable countervailing force. Here we present a cross section of musical personalities sharing their thoughts on how a life devoted to music can be enriched through connections with the other arts.

Eugene Drucker

Painting is a medium that foregrounds questions of form and content — the facets Pater believed were ideally harmonized by the "condition" of music. Theater, for its part, resembles the musical experience in the sense that it unfolds in time. Violinist Eugene Drucker, a founding member of the Emerson String Quartet, describes a fascinating project in which the ensemble's playing was incorporated within a theatrical performance that toured throughout the United States and Europe from 2000 through 2005. *The Noise of Time*, created by British stage director Simon McBurney and his theater company, Complicite, was a multimedia work revolving around Dmitri Shostakovich's life and politically dangerous times.

Based on a concept by Drucker's Emerson colleague Philip Setzer, *The Noise of Time* used found documentation — projected film sequences, still photographs, excerpts from letters and speeches — to trace the composer's life from the 1920s to his death. The show culminated in a live performance by the Emersons of Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 15 (1974), his final essay in the genre. *New York Times* theater critic Ben Brantley lauded the piece's elegiac, "cosmic night" effect as well as its examination of "the essential nature of music and the ways in which we experience it."

"The final thirty-five minutes of the piece had us playing the complete quartet," Drucker explains, "which is an especially enigmatic work consisting of six slow movements. The whole performance leads up to this moment, to be experienced in a quiet, meditative setting." Meanwhile, the staging was developed "to mirror certain qualities in the music. For example, the texture of the quartet is quite spare, so those who weren't playing would maintain a still pose. We tried to learn from how the actors used their bodies like instruments, with exercises based on the Feldenkrais Method and body awareness techniques."

Drucker notes the contrast between Complicite's creative process — in which the collective devises a new stage work from preexisting materials — and his own ensemble's work of interpretation, which is creative but mindful of the needs of a given score. "In a way what they do applies more to a composer creating a piece. It was a great inspiration to us to be able to work with directors and actors and see how they think — which is quite different from how musicians think."

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

90.9 wbur BOSTON'S NPR® NEWS STATION

July 20, 2017

In Concert Together: Shostakovich! Stalin! Chekhov! Oh, And 4 Fine Emersons

By Ed Siegel

The Emerson String Quartet at Tanglewood on Wednesday night. David Strathairn and Jay O. Sanders stand in back at the lectern.

There's always something special about the Emerson String Quartet'sperennial visit to Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood, but they overdid themselves this year in two concerts, joining forces with friends like musician-composer Thomas Adès and actors David Strathairn and Jay O. Sanders, one dead writer (Anton Chekhov), one living playwright (James Glossman), a multimedia artist and scenic designer.

Members of the Emerson String Quartet, Thomas Adès at the piano and BSO principal bassist Edwin Barker perform Schubert's "Trout Quintet" Thursday night.

The subject of the first concert was Dmitri Shostakovich, no stranger to the Emerson String Quartet or to the Emerheads who come to their Ozawa and Jordan Hall concerts every year.

There is long-running commentary about composer Shostakovich's relationship with the Soviet tyrant Josef Stalin. Were the symphonic works too bombastic, too celebratory of the doctrinaire dictator? Or were they, particularly the ending of the Fifth Symphony, ironical digs at the stomp of Stalin?

The Boston Symphony Orchestra's previous artistic director, James Levine, wouldn't play him at all. Current artistic director Andris Nelsons, on the other hand, is recording every one of them for the prestigious Deutsche Grammophon (DG) label, some of them with the subtitle: "Under Stalin's Shadow."

It's generally agreed, though, that it was in the string quartets that Shostakovich could let it all hang out, where he could express his anger and his despair at Stalin, if not at life itself, at the midpoint of the 20th century. His personal life — his marriages and his illnesses — wasn't exactly a walk in Gorky Park, either.

Like Nelsons and the BSO, the Emersons are Shostakovich completists as they've recorded all 15 quartets.

They've also collaborated in two dramatizations matching his music to his life. The second, "Shostakovich and the Black Monk — A Russian Fantasy," came to Ozawa Hall Wednesday night. "The Noise of Time" played at the Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts in Northampton in 2001. This one, co-created by Emerson violinist Philip Setzer and writer-director James Glossman, posits Shostakovich (Strathairn) as a heroic figure standing up to Stalin (Sanders) in word and music, specifically in the great 14th quartet. Of course, by the time it was written it wasn't so hard standing up to the megalomaniac — he was dead.

So as in Tony Palmer's film "Testimony," there's a running dialogue between Stalin and Shostakovich, some in flashback, Stalin urging him to write Beethoven-like symphonies for the people and sneering at what he felt was the mediocrity of the "little quartets." Like Hitler, he was no fan of modernist music.

"Shostakovich and the Black Monk" exists on three levels — there's the intermittent performance of the quartet, the battle between Shostakovich and Stalin, and Shosty's recital of Chekhov's short story, "The Black Monk," which he was interested in turning into an opera. With the Emersons in the foreground, the stories are illustrated by the video design of Jeff Knapp — waving rye fields, historical newspaper excerpts, Stalin's ever-looming presence.

To the extent that the Emersons join in the story-telling, the performance is brilliant. Setzer turns over the first violin to Eugene Drucker (they alternate on first violin), making Drucker the first among totally-committed equals. I hadn't seen cellist Paul Watkins with the group before and there's been some carping that he doesn't fit in as well as David Finckel. Finckel had left to run the Chamber Music Center of Lincoln Center and about 57 other arts organizations, most with his wife, Wu Han.

Could've fooled me about Watkins. If the Emersons gravitate more toward elegance and subtlety than to the gritty playing of other quartets, Watkins is as elegant and soulful as his groupmates. The quartet begins like a jaunt in the country, but one that's fraught with

hidden danger — not unlike Stravinsky's "The Rake's Progress."

But there was plenty of that grit, too, particularly as the mood turns darker and the music more staccato, with the big-brother smile of Papa Joe beaming down on the proceedings, or Sanders bringing Stalin to life with his jovial sneering at Shostakovich's more long-haired compositions. That sneering, obviously, did not have such jovial repercussions. The added dimension of the dramatization makes the quartet's playing all the more riveting, even spine-tingling.

But when the Emersons put their bows down and the dramatization focuses on accusations between the composer and Stalin or the composer and his wives (there are four other actors), the acting becomes shrill and the dual stories get pretty lumpy.

And the Chekhov part of the show — that's literally another story. It is described as a tale about madness and freedom. A young artist woos and marries a country girl while a monk, invisible to everyone but himself, urges him to strive for artistic greatness. The artist is clearly the Shostakovich figure, but is the Stalin figure the young woman's father, who is something of a brute (a la Stalin) and who originally tries to get in the way of the marriage? Or is the monk a Stalin stand-in, leading him down the Faustian path to madness, again as in Stravinsky's opera?

It adds a little subtlety and mystery to the proceedings, but it's really the Emerson String Quartet who bring this marriage of music and biographical story-telling to life in a way that's quite different from their recitals of the music, as superlative as that playing is. This performance lives in an even loftier, more substantial realm.

The Emerson collaboration is part of what makes the Tanglewood Music Festival feel like a festival, though it can often feel like a series of unrelated concerts. But when it can pull together people who wouldn't normally have the ability to tour together, then it can seem like Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk at Newport.

That was kind of the feel when three-quarters of the quartet joined forces with Boston Symphony Orchestra artistic partner Thomas Adès on piano and Edwin Barker on double bass for a performance of Schubert's "Trout Quintet." Adès also accompanied the golden-voiced baritone Andrè Drucker in Schubert lieder. Drucker got the second half of the night off after taking first violin in contemporary composer Mark-Anthony Turnage's piece written for the Emersons last year, "Shroud."

The piece lived up to its name. If Schubert's music was a walk in the Berkshires tinged by melancholy and the beginning of Wednesday night's Shostakovich quartet was a walk in the country tinged by the psychic presence of the big bad wolf (Stalin) then Turnage sounded like sleeping off a bender on Boston Common.

What it was doing in a series of concerts this season titled "Schubert's Summer Journey" is beyond me. But the Trout was as warm as Turnage was cold, filled with high spirits and even a sense of humor. The audience's premature applause at the piece's false ending was met with an uh-uh-uh look from Watkins, who led the ensemble into the real ending, a fitting coda to the two-night residency.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The New York Times

December 5, 2019

Best Classical Music of 2019

Our critics list the best performances, premieres and digital releases of the year from the world of classical music and opera.

Barbara Hannigan

In two programs over three days, in elegantly intimate rooms at the Park Avenue Armory, this soprano, one of the most restlessly adventurous artists of our time, gave a pair of extraordinary performances. The first, devoted to works by John Zorn, featured the composer's wild 25-minute song cycle "Jumalattaret." Ms. Hannigan conquered its fierce challenges in a mesmerizing performance with the stalwart pianist Stephen Gosling. On the second program, joined by members of the Emerson String Quartet, she took an enraptured audience on a journey through landmark 20th-century vocal works by Cage, Berio, Nono and Schoenberg.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

LIMELIGHT

AUSTRALIA'S CLASSICAL MUSIC AND ARTS MAGAZINE

September 9, 2019

EMERSON STRING QUARTET (MUSICA VIVA)

Four master jewellers bring concert gems to life.

By Steve Moffatt

It has been almost 20 years since the Emerson Quartet was in Australia, and Musica Viva audiences have been on tenterhooks for this nine-concert comeback tour by the "finest string quartet to come out of America" with their swag of Grammy and Gramophone Awards.

Judging by the brace of opening Sydney concerts it's safe to assume that all chamber music lovers will agree that it has been well worth the wait.

The New York-based group has attained legendary status over the 43 years it has been going and during that time it has only had one change of personnel, with Welshman Paul Watkins replacing founding cellist David Finckel in 2013. Lead violin duties are shared between Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer with the redoubtable Lawrence Dutton on viola.

"There's a sort of perfection about the four voices of the string quartet," Drucker says. "There's a balance which can be easily stretched to emphasise one instrument, or to have the perfect blend of the four."

The Emersons embody this ideal. And with four decades of performing together there is a rich history. "In our [score] parts we can see almost an archaeological record of the bowings we've done and also the metronome indications we are trying to follow," Drucker says.

For the tour – which takes in Newcastle and all the state capital cities – they are presenting two programs with works by Haydn, Mozart, Dvořák, Bartók and Beethoven.

This concert opened with Mozart's No 21, K575, part of the Prussian set written for Frederick William II, a work that charms rather than scintillates, unlike the more popular Haydn set of four years before.

The Emersons, led by Drucker, set about this light and airy piece like four master jewellers working on a gem, teasing out the filigrees while letting the light shine through.

Their silken-smooth tone captured the nuances gloriously, Drucker and Setzer bespectacled and leaning into the phrases, Watkins and Dutton more animated.

But even for a seasoned team small things can go slightly awry. Dutton came onstage only to realise he hadn't brought his score. Watkins covered the pause and immediately got the audience onside by shouting out: "Congratulations on winning the Ashes!"

If the Mozart was all refinement and elegance, Dvořák's String Quartet No 10, the Slavonic, smacked of folk dances and Czech comfort food with a sizeable dash

of paprika. Here Setzer took over the first violin role.

Dvořák composed the piece off the back of the success of his orchestral *Slavonic Dances* and the second movement features his trademark Dumka passages with a yearning slow section leading into a fast furiant dance tune.

Dutton's strummed viola set up the serenade feel for the red-blooded Romanza movement that followed before the infectious finale with the rhythm of a Czech skipping dance.

When the Emersons was last here, it was embarking on its recorded survey of Shostakovich's 15 string quartets and they chose one of these – the symphonic and harrowing Fifth, to close the concert.

Drucker, back in the lead chair, introduced the work and said it reminded him of Mahler's comment on the opening of his fourth symphony in which "the sky is so blue that you know it cannot last".

The foursome brought out all the anger, stabbing grief and occasional overwhelming melodic beauty of this three-movement masterpiece, played straight through, which Shostakovich withheld from performance until after Stalin's death one year later in 1953.

Drucker said that in the six years since he'd joined the quartet Watkins had had to learn 13 of the 15 quartets. "He deserves your applause – he's a very quick student!"

If you can, go and see the Emerson Quartet. Another chance may not come around for another 20 years.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

July 26, 2019

Previn's Last Work, in Tribute

By Steven Ledbetter

A long-awaited performance, one that almost did not happen owing to the composer's death, took place in Ozawa Hall on Wednesday night in tribute to Andre Previn, who died while still working on *Penelope*, a monodrama planned for Renee Fleming and the Emerson Quartet, but performed in a program largely planned in tribute to Previn, who has appeared at Tanglewood over many years in many guises. Fleming and the Quartet were joined by pianist Simone Dinnerstein, and actress Uma Thurman.

The Previn work, on the second half, was preceded by three pieces for string quartet that could be considered, in some sense, also tributes, or at least music to motivate deep thought.

The Lyric for Strings by George Walker (1922-2008), another composer who died recently at an advanced age, was originally part of his String Quartet No. 1, from 1946. The slow movement, Lament, dedicated to the memory of his grandmother, a darkly intense movement, has come to be one of Walker's most frequently performed works. It comes from the same kind of musical world as the Barber Adagio, heard later in the same program, except that Walker's score is more redolent of African-American spirituals, without actual quotations, richly played by the Emersons.

Next came a new string quartet, the Tenth, by Richard Wernick (b. 1934), written for the Emerson Quartet and premiered in Berlin last March. It was a re-encounter with the ensemble for whom Wernick had written his Fourth Quartet thirty years ago. His style bears traces of some of the complex musical approaches from the second half of the

20th century, though it is vivid and alert, music that an audience can respond to if willing to pay attention and not expect that all dissonances will be avoided. Experienced quartet listeners will surely experience some of the tricks he employs—including a beginning recognizing the fact that the two violinists of the Emerson Quartet regularly change positions, so Wernick offers a fugue subject ("somewhat inebriate," he calls it) that has two first violin parts, in the sense that they both take leadership positions, or the recognizable reference to Beethoven's song of thanks (Heiliger Dankgesang) on recovering from an illness (Wernick's thanks are addressed to a neurosurgeon whose skill "kept me upright").

The first half closed with Samuel Barber's String Quartet—the whole quartet, in two movements, of which the second, often heard by itself, is the famous Adagio. Though Barber never intended it as such, the slowly unfolding Adagio took on a commemorative tinge when it was played after the death of FDR in 1945, and since then an air of memorial tribute has remained connected with it, so it was a suitable piece for a memorial purpose, somber and hushed, except for a single large climax resolving again into silence.

Andre Previn had tried for a number of years to get his good friend Tom Stoppard to come up with a text that would serve as a monodrama for Renee Fleming. For a long time Stoppard felt blocked in finding a subject. The solution, in the end, was to have Renee Fleming represent Penelope, the long-suffering, patient, and chaste wife of Odysseus, while her husband spent a decade fighting the Trojan War and another decade finding his way home, amid dangers and temptations. Renee Fleming was intended to *be* Penelope and to express her wide range of feelings over the long time that she waited and fended off a batch of suitors. When Previn died, on February 28, he left a mass of materials, extensive, but far from finished. His long-time editor David Fetherolf was asked to try to get the score into a performable shape. Consulting with Renee Fleming and Eugene Drucker of the Emerson Quartet, Fetherolf found a way to make the materials work; some of the more exiguous sketches, hardly likely to be final thoughts, were trimmed, but others seemed essentially finished and worked well. The text was divided between two vocal performers, both representing Penelope: Renee sang the lyric passages, and Una Thurman read the most descriptive sections, Though of course Penelope was the principal figure, the story referred to the background: the intensity of their marital experiences before Odysseus left for the war, the long and dreary passages of time waiting for his return, the trickery by which he returned without being recognized by the suitors until it was time to take his revenge, and the test questions about the marital bed by which Penelope was sure that it really was Odysseus who returned—all these elements of the classic story were represented by the singer and the actor, accompanied by the Emerson Quartet and Simone Dinnerstein in about a 40-minute musical narration.

There was passion and wit, musical warmth and spoken sarcasm, as this version of one of the world's most famous stories unfolded. The narrative was rich and very interesting indeed (no surprise given Tom Stoppard's linguistic brilliance), and the instrumental portion—string quartet and piano, separately or together, suggested all kinds of moods and echoes of the adventures, but especially of the emotions of Penelope over so long a period.

The response of the audience was eagerly powerful, for all of the performers and for writer Tom Stoppard, who was also present. I am reasonably sure that this final Previn score will fit onto that shelf containing pieces that many composers almost finished at the ends of their lives—almost, but not quite, which were brought to a performable state by their supportive colleagues who wanted their final musicals thoughts to have a life.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Millbrook Independent
VOICE OF THE MILLBROOK REGION

August 5, 2019

EMERSON STRING QUARTET EXCELS AT MUSIC MOUNTAIN

By Kevin T. McEneaney

From left: Eugene Drucker, Philip Setzer, Paul Watkins, Lawrence Dutton at Gordon Hall

While the nation has applauded the numerous recordings of the Emerson String Quartet with nine Grammy Awards, New Englanders have more of an opportunity to hear their superb performances *live*.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart led such a short life (1756-1791) that it remains astonishing when one considers the depth and intensity of his work. Even when played with mediocrity, Mozart's work can remain interesting, yet when played by the first rank of musicians, Mozart is simply intoxicating, passage by passage, note by note. So it was with the Emerson String Quartet's performance of Mozart's *String Quartet in D major, K. 575*, the first of a series of six quartets which bestows special emphasis on the cello because it was commissioned by King Frederick William II who played the cello. It appears likely that Mozart was never paid for the work, nor did he complete the series, writing only three quartets and not six. Yet those late 1789 compositions are great masterpieces that feature more robust input from the cello than was traditionally current at that time. And yet these three "Prussian" quartets received no recognition during Mozart's life.

When Mozart is played in a peak performance, each note carries one into a portal where time appears elongated into another dimension; this effect was arrestingly noticeably in the opening Allegretto movement by first violinist Philip Setzer and second violinist Eugene Drucker engaged in lyrical duet. Lawrence Dutton's viola was central to the tender plangent quality of the following Andante. In the fourth movement concluding Allegretto, cellist Paul Watkins delivered an amazing low gravity undercurrent of gaiety to swell the finale into gorgeous, unified bloom.

For Antonín Dvořák's *String Quartet in E-flat major, Op., 51* (1879), one hundred years after Mozart's quarter, Eugene Drucker played first violin. Dvořák's string quartets are perhaps his most exciting contribution to music. Written with a decided Slavic slant, Dvořák expanded the sensibility of what could be done in a

quartet. The opening first movement reveled in harmony and rhythm, while the second movement excelled in the contrast between Dumka and Elegy where Dutton's viola excelled. The Romanze was both intensely lyrical as well as edgily pensive, where Watkins on cello coaxed intimate emotion. The delightful Finale with its Czech dance tunes discovered joyful spontaneity where Drucker's violin soared as it intimated that the joy of music was eternally transcendental.

Someone sitting near me said "When you hear the name of the Emerson String Quartet one thinks of Shostakovich, Shostakovich, Shostakovich." And why not? Are not Shostakovich and Stravinsky the two greatest composers of the twentieth century? Who else would one want to play Shostakovich? Last month at Music Mountain the American String Quartet turned in a marvelous performance of Dmitri Shostakovich's String Quartet # 7 in F-sharp minor, Op. 108.

Completed on November 1, 1952, Dmitri Shostakovich's *String Quartet # 5 in B-flat major, Op. 92* was not able to be performed until after the death of Stalin in March 1953. The Beethoven String Quartet premiered the work on November 13th of that year. Written during a time when both Sergei Prokofiev and Shostakovich were under attack for political apathy, the opening Allegro with Watkins' resonant cello achieves a nearly symphonic quality with a tour-de-force conclusion of Setzer's first violin countering with a long-held high F, as if registering an intense lament-tribute for the death of Prokofiev, as the more mellow viola of Dutton persuades the violin to give up lament and go back to work composing music with other instruments in the second movement. The sustained chord in the third-elided Allegretto movement accompanied by Drucker's melancholy second violin recalls the previous lament theme, as a more extroverted waltz galvanizes the quartet into forging a unified determination to move forward, yet the quiet reversal conclusion once more meditates on the precarious state and fate of musicians. This was a sentiment for music lovers to take to heart under an administration that has cut all government funding for musicians; the National Symphony Orchestra at Kennedy Center, founded in 1931, is closing: https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/national-philharmonic-bows-out-abruptly/2019/07/16/8977dcd8-a810-11e9-9214-246e594de5d5_story.html?utm_term=.f4dba1b4f446.

After three enthusiastic bows the quartet played Dvořák's slightly melancholy Cypresses # 7 with the theme "I wander off past yonder house."

How did the Emerson String Quartet come to play at Music Mountain? A patrons Harold and Deko Klebanoff supplied substantial funding to underwrite the cost of their appearance. This was a most special concert: hearing the greatest quartet in this country in action bestowed an elevated *theta* moment on the consciousness of all present. A YouTube video of the Emerson String Quartet playing Shostakovitch's Eighth String Quartet appears below.

Music Mountain continues its Summer Festival with the St. Petersburg String Quartet next Sunday.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

New York CLASSICAL REVIEW

October 22, 2018

Emersons, Wosner make sparkling colleagues for Chamber Music Society

By George Grella

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center played with the possibilities of fours Sunday afternoon in Alice Tully Hall with a concert titled "Quartet Variations." Centered around the Emerson String Quartet, that meant a program that encompassed Mozart's Piano Quartet in E- flat major, K. 493, and Dvorak's String Quartet in G major, Op. 106. And, stretching the quartet idea past the limit, the centerpiece was William Bolcom's Quintet No. 1, for string quartet and piano.

The Mozart and Bolcom works required a keyboard collaborator, and for this concert, it was the excellent Shai Wosner. Violinist Eugene Drucker joined him, along with violist Lawrence Dutton and cellist Paul Watkins, in the Mozart quartet.

The Emersons are known for the excitement and muscular energy of their playing, but the Mozart quartet bought out elegant, jaunty accompaniment to the piano. Wosner's touch led the way, sitting at a precise and ideal spot where his superb articulation met the sonic possibilities of the modern piano, a virtual definition of "sparkling."

As was the performance as a whole, which had such verve and loveliness that one eagerly anticipated the opening repeat once the double bar came into sight. The Larghetto was simply done and effective for that, and Wosner and the string players brought out all the unabashed humor of the final movement.

With violinist Philip Setzer, the quartet was complete for Bolcom's Piano Quintet, written at the end of the last century. The piece consciously follows the great examples of Schumann and Brahms, but with, "important differences,"as Bolcom was quoted in the program.

The main difference is a colored and expressionistic chromaticism carried through extended harmonies. The opening movement—titled Sonata Movement and played with gravity by the musicians—had an intense emotionalism to it, the music saying a great deal of complex things while hinting that there were even denser ideas and experiences farther below the surface.

In terms of duration that opening movement was the most substantial. The following ones were in Bolcom's more familiar idiom which combines complex composition with the winning, and sometimes wry, charm of a popular music/show tunes attitude. The Larghetto had a dreamy, big-band like theme, and the stern Lamentation had a riff ideal for a film noir soundtrack. The Rondo finished it all off with more than a little swing, which Wosner and the quartet played with ease and relish.

Dvorak's G major quartet accounted for the second half of the concert, and gave the Emerson the opportunity to open up. They're like a luxury sports car, going from 0-60 in barely a moment, and the ride is smooth and luxurious all the way.

The performance was much more than that, though. One of the reasons the group is one of the premiere quartets in a field crowded with dozens of excellent ones is their energy and power—the force with which they dig into attacks and accents, and the sense of mass in how they shape dynamics and sculpt phrases is deeply musical and meaningful. Their playing of the Op. 106 Quartet had an almost physical pleasure in the way it carried one along, beguiling with beauty of sound and expressive feeling.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The New York Times

April 30, 2018

Evgeny Kissin and Emerson Quartet Rise to Each Other's Challenges

By James R. Oestreich

The pianist Evgeny Kissin, center, with the Emerson String Quartet at Carnegie Hall on Friday.

The Russian-born pianist Evgeny Kissin makes infrequent public appearances playing chamber music at all (do I recall a Schubert "Trout" Quintet in a small New York hall some years back?), let alone a whole evening of it. So it was not surprising that he took top billing in a collaboration with the Emerson String Quartet at Carnegie Hall on Friday evening.

But those strong, veteran string players — Philip Setzer and Eugene Drucker, violinists; Lawrence Dutton, violist; and Paul Watkins, cellist — seemed ideally matched with the commanding pianist, and they had evidently achieved instant rapport. It was a grand occasion, and a formidably equipped recording team was there to document it.

The program offered a well-varied cross-section of the standard repertory for piano and three or four strings: Mozart's Piano Quartet in G minor (with Mr. Setzer), Fauré's Piano Quartet No. 1 (with Mr. Drucker) and Dvorak's Piano Quintet No. 2.

The Mozart, with an opening string attack that sets up heavy drama in the first movement, is a cornerstone of the piano-quartet repertory. Fauré's quartet is perhaps the strongest of his chamber works, or so these players made it sound. And the Dvorak quintet is deeply memorable, mainly for its long and involved slow movement — a dumka, a form drawn from Ukrainian song favored by Dvorak — with its haunting motto.

Mr. Kissin was a dynamo, spurring the Emerson players to take risks or one-upping the challenges they set. But he was no less impressive in his restraint where called for, spinning out rippling passagework with an unfailingly fine, even touch.

The Emersons, too, were as melting individually, singing limpid, sinuous melodies, as they were powerful in their unified outbursts.

Though Carnegie has long presented small- and medium-scaled chamber groups, their success is not a given in so large a hall. This is not a simple matter. In the end, it comes down to how well the performers project the sound from the stage, an arcane science in itself, and there were no problems here.

One thing is for sure: You wouldn't have wanted to be trapped in a small room with the encore, the Scherzo of Shostakovich's Piano Quintet. With each at his most percussive, the players all but lifted the lid off the hall. It made you want to hear the whole piece.

And yes, why don't these players come together again, repeatedly, to explore the rich piano quintet literature, starting with Brahms, Schumann and Erno Dohnanyi's No. 1?

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

April 23, 2018

Piano + String Quartet: As Good As It Gets

By Leon Golub

Evgeny Kissin returned to Boston in the Celebrity Series, performing with the Emerson String Quartet Sunday afternoon at Symphony Hall. The word "performing" hardly captures the artistry and profound fluency with which the five consummate musicians brought to life works by Mozart, Fauré and Dvořák. The key is that they seemed genuinely to delight in making music together, playing for each other as much as for the loudly appreciative audience.

Mozart's Piano Quartet No. 1 in G Minor K. 478 is one of the earliest and greatest piano quartets. At the time of its publication in 1785, the work cemented Mozart's reputation as a talented composer who wrote very difficult music. Subtly enthused by Kissin's darkly brooding piano, Philip Setzer (violin), Lawrence Dutton (viola) and Paul Watkins (cello) soared, not only in the commingling of the sublime and the beautiful in the opening allegro, but also in the moving, at times even elegiac second movement andante. In the final rondo, Kissin rendered the theme with a magical aura that combined with edgy dissonances in the viola to convey a host of conflicting emotions at the heart of human experience, the episodes by turns noble, dramatic, turbulent. They put all of Mozart into the quartet — lyrical, tragic, ecstatic and wise.

The Fauré Piano Quartet No. 1 Op. 15 in C Minor, rounded out the first half of the program. Written at a time when his beloved Marianne Viardot called off their engagement, it is often said to reflect his state of mind at the time. As performed by Kissin and Emerson Quartet, this time with Eugene Drucker on violin, Fauré's Quartet No. 1 seemed infinitely deep, evoking Rimbaud's *Le Bateau ivre* in the passionately stormy first movement. The second movement scherzo was tinged with a hint of barbarity that gave it an unusual power.

The third movement adagio, was rendered with aching beauty. Against the brooding strings, Kissin's piano felt like tears of grace sublimating into incense before us. The final movement allowed fragile new life to return after devastation, moving slowly upward and forward. The musicians communicated the rich complexity of Fauré's vision directly but effortlessly — or rather they had concentrated massive effort on a shared exegesis that seemed to be discovered as they played.

After a festive intermission during which we were treated to miniatures cupcakes coiffed with lemon crème and chocolate, we heard the Dvořák Piano Quintet No. 2 in A Major, Op. 81. The Quintet was well-received from its première in 1887 on and became one of Dvořák's most frequently performed works, an ideal synthesis of European classical tradition and skillfully framed Slavic folk elements. The five musicians shrewdly interpreted the opening Allegro to be more declarative than expressive – to be, in fact, *performative,* in the sense of bringing about a new reality, here flavored with heroism, adding energy and conviction that hinted at frenzy. The

wild mood swings of the second movement Dumka were as sudden and dramatic as multiple personality shifts, with Kissin's piano verging on Rachmaninoff at moments, suggesting a mysterious connection. The scherzo "furiant" was remarkably convincing, tender and rural, robust and precarious. Most notable in the final allegro was the rendering of the fugue, with a nicely gritty timber in Lawrence Drucker's viola, and a marvelous sense of a sort of star-crossed momentum before the return of the Kissin's pensive piano. The final cadence was rendered with a masterful unity in which all five voices managed to vibrate individually. The massive audience packing Symphony Hall rose to its feet in loud appreciation, acknowledging playing that was as good as it gets. Their long and thunderous applause earned us a delightful encore – the rollicking/frightening scherzo from Shostakovich's Piano Quintet. It was good to see Kissin back, and it was great to see him enjoy playing again.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

July 23, 2017

Emmanuel Ax Programs Schubertian Journeys

By Laura Stanfield Prichard

This summer in Tanglewood's Seiji Ozawa Hall, pianist Emmanuel Ax is curating a six-concert series devoted to Schubert and contemporary composers. Thursday night's summery repertoire (Program 2 of 6) featured the Emerson String Quartet and pianist Thomas Adès in works by Schubert and Mark-Anthony Turnage.

Ozawa Hall was packed and the back lawn fairly full for a cool evening that began with five contrasting Schubert songs, ably sung by baritone André Schuen in his North American debut. Preferring crisp enunciation and rhythmic intensity to sinuous lyricism, Schuen excelled in Schubert's longer songs ("*Auf der Brücke*," D. 853 and "*Wilkommen und Abschied*," D. 767) — the latter recalled Schubert's "*Erlkönig*" and demanded the most expressive contrasts from pianist Thomas Adès.

Originally from the Ladin-speaking area of Italy's South Tyrol, Schuen posseses a ringing baritone well-known on middle-European stages (esp. Salzburg, Vienna, and in Perm under the dynamic Teodor Currentzis). His German was *ausgezeichnet* throughout, albeit with traces of a southern accent (pronouncing "Blick" as "Blieck" and Pferde" as "Pfiede"). While Ozawa Hall can swallow soft singing (I was seated in Row N against the wall), Schuen's intimate and intense rendering of "*Der Wanderer an den Mond*," D. 870 recalled the end of *Winterreise*. His full voice and falsetto were well controlled and perfectly matched Adès lightness of touch at the keyboard. The most forward-thinking accompaniment of the set appeared in the magical "*Nachtstück*," D. 672, with unusual chords in the coda and the only instance of heavy (*pp*) pedaling.

Since graduating from the Salzburg Mozarteum, Shuen has become a specialist in *Lieder* while adding operatic roles to his repertoire; later this summer in Aspen he will sing Mahler's *Songs of a Wayfarer* and a recital of Schubert *Lieder* with pianist Andreas Haefliger. Thomas Adès proved an able and sensitive partner, giving his audience much to look forward to in future BSO and chamber concerts: last year was his first of three seasons as the BSO's Deborah and Philip Edmundson Artistic Partner (as conductor, coach, and pianist), and he will direct Tanglewood's Festival of Contemporary Music in 2018 and 2019.

Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Shroud* for string quartet (2016) demanded a wide range of virtuosic playing from the Emerson String Quartet, who premiered it last September in Akron, Ohio. The darker first and last movements (a largely homophonic, lyrical Threnody and a Lament with long, stepwise, Brucknerian lines) memorialize two friends of the composer's youth, Christopher Mills and Dag Jiggens. The three central movements (an Ivesian *March* framed by two

intermezzi) dedicated specifically to the Emerson Quartet, range from transparently orchestrated scherzos to disjunct melodies soaring over Paul Watkins' pizzicato cello. Threnody borrowed an effective technique from Tchaikovsky, fracturing a single melody into two parts and dramatically alternating its notes between violinists Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer.

After intermission, BSO bassist Edwin Barker and Adès joined three of the Emersons for Schubert's charming Piano Quintet in A Major, D. 667 (The Trout), which was scored for single violin, viola, cello, bass, and piano at the request of Sylvester Paumgartner, a friend of Schubert's close pal Johann Michael Vogl. Violist Lawrence Dutton and pianist Adès were the standouts of this aggressive and dramatic performance, with Edwin Barker's bass providing much appreciated depth and richness to the work.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

ClassicalSource

May 7, 2017

Emerson String Quartet at Carnegie Hall, with Marc-André Hamelin

By David M. Rice

Since its founding forty years ago, the Emerson String Quartet has performed nearly the entire repertory of that genre, as demonstrated by the encyclopedic collection of recordings for Deutsche Grammophon.

This Carnegie Hall recital's first-half juxtaposed two early-twentieth-century String Quartets that are eons apart. Ravel's, completed in 1903, contrasts sunny and lyrical melodies with lively tunes and off-beat rhythms. The Emerson members brought out the sweetness of the opening idea, and were spectacular in the *pizzicatos* of the ensuing Scherzo, and they adeptly brought out the thematic links between movements. Lawrence Dutton and Paul Watkins began the slow one with deeply resonant tones, establishing a dreamy atmosphere, and there was notable interaction between the four musicians. The Finale was given with a degree of agitation to match its *Vif et agité* marking.

Philip Setzer remained in the first-violin chair for Alban Berg's Opus 3 (1910) that reflects the theories of his teacher, Arnold Schoenberg, but it is far from being a student work. Its two movements diverge markedly, the first expressive, the second very intense. Berg poses many challenges, and all were carried off brilliantly, the performance never dry, but stirring in its emotional responses.

Marc-André Hamelin, substituting on short notice for the ailing Yefim Bronfman (originally Maurizio Pollini had been listed), joined the Emerson musicians, Eugene Drucker now leading, for a rousing rendition of Brahms's Piano Quintet. In the opening Allegro, in which textures vary from 'orchestral' to those more typical of chamber music, the ensemble played with a keen affinity for Brahms's inventiveness, making even the familiar seem fresh and even surprising. Hamelin kept the piano in excellent balance, whatever the dynamic, and this teamwork continued into the Andante, while highlights in the Scherzo and Trio included duets between Hamelin and Dutton and then Hamelin and Watkins. Tempo changes in the Finale were skillfully managed, the richly harmonized introduction giving way to Watkins's statement of an idea suggestive of a Gypsy dance. To keep us on our toes, Brahms throws in a false ending, but there is another hundred bars to go to an exhilarating conclusion.

The Scherzo from Shostakovich's Piano Quintet (Opus 57) made for an encore quite different from anything that had gone before it.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

SAN FRANCISCO CLASSICAL VOICE
CONCERTS. ARTISTS. CRITICAL REVIEWS.

March 28, 2017

Emerson Quartet Explores the Cusp of Modernity

By Jessica Balik

While the term "atonal" may be most commonly associated with German expressionism and 12-tone composition, earlier French impressionists also deviated from tonality with techniques including nontraditional chord progressions and an embrace of exotic, non-Western scales. On Friday night at Stanford's Bing Concert Hall, the peerless Emerson String Quartet put these multiple meanings of atonality on display in a program of works by Debussy, Berg, and Ravel.

The evening began with the only quartet that Ravel ever composed. True to the composer's performance indication, the first movement was indeed très doux (very sweet/soft). Emerson exaggerated the pianissimo passages to such an extent that I found myself on the edge of my seat, leaning into the performance.

Emerson is a world-class quartet partly because of the players' fervent attention to detail: the infallible synchrony of their pizzicato plucks, the breathtaking decisiveness of their cohesive cadential gestures. Pizzicato was especially important in Ravel's second movement, which is famous for sounding inspired by pentatonic, Indonesian gamelan.

These enchanting tone colors mesmerized like strange insects delicately dancing on the surface of troubled water — the trouble here being that Ravel likely knew about gamelan because a main attraction of the 1889 world's fair in Paris was a human zoo wherein indigenous people from various French colonies made art. The kaleidoscopic third movement and occasionally violent finale did not wholly wash the work's traces of imperialism into oblivion.

Instead of a traditional four-movement form, Berg's Op. 3 quartet has merely two. But despite both its structure and its atonality — and particularly when paired with the Ravel — the piece hardly sounds like a radical break with the past. Both pieces, for example, are spattered with adamant lyricism, and both incorporate elements of sonata form.

Especially in the hands of Emerson, Berg's Op. 3 explodes from a fierce little nugget: an initially tiny and fast five-note motif. It is cliche to say that Berg was able to create this atonal, large-scale instrumental work because of the organicism of his compositional technique, or the way everything seems to grow intrinsically and logically from earlier music. Friday's performance proved that cliches contain grains of truth, and my favorite moment happened at the end of the second movement, when the quartet recapitulated a theme from the first and somehow made it sound simultaneously both familiar and transformed.

Since Debussy's G-Minor quartet heavily influenced Ravel's, chronologically it would have made sense to pair the two French pieces in the first half. But the

chosen order afforded a cyclic feel to the program. There were many standout moments amid Debussy's four movements, such as the gorgeous viola solos in the third. In the rhythmic pizzicatos of the second movement and the quasi-fugal passage in the finale, the handoffs between players were remarkable. Listening to the timbral consistency across the group's different instruments is a bit like watching myriad colors melt into each other within a single shimmering stream of oil.

Violinist Philip Setzer explained not only why the group was seated (Emerson is known for performing standing up) but also the notable disparity between the ensemble's energetic music and seemingly lethargic stage exits: unfortunately, Setzer was suffering from a sore knee. But this did not prevent them from playing a hotly requested encore. They chose the third movement of Grieg's G-Minor quartet. Setzer also explained that — just as Debussy's piece influenced Ravel's — Grieg's piece influenced Debussy's.

The rich, resonant harmonies in Grieg's movement made Debussy's affinity for it easy to understand. Grieg's focus on sound quality over classical voice-leading antedates Debussy's impressionistic quartet by about 15 years, and Berg's atonal piece by more than 30. Indeed, Emerson's entire program made tonality and atonality seem less like rigid binaries and more like flexible poles delineating a colorful and fluid spectrum. While the evening's four pieces might occupy different points thereupon, all four were radiant stars.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

OPERA NEWS

January 1, 2017

THE BEST OF 2016
10 BEST IN CONCERT

9. Renée Fleming, Sonnets by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Decca)

"Fleming and the [Emerson String Quartet] deserve a great deal of credit for resurrecting this sweeping, turbulent but highly gratifying cycle, and for giving it such a gripping performance."

- Johsua Rosenblum

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

THE ENQUIRER
Cincinnati.Com

December 29, 2016

The best performances I heard in 2016

By Janelle Gelfand

Can you say perfection? The Emerson String Quartet opened Chamber Music Cincinnati's 87th season at the Jarson-Kaplan Theater in September, as part of their 40th anniversary tour. You could only marvel at their unity of ensemble in Mozart's Quartet No. 15, and their emotional range in Shostakovich's Quartet No. 10. But the impression they made in Dvorak's Quartet No. 11 lingered long afterward. Dvorak's Bohemian melodies were tackled with a combination of warmth and uncanny precision.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Boston Globe

November 22, 2016

Emerson String Quartet deliver the ineffable at Jordan Hall

By Zoë Madonna

It takes more than a ringing cellphone to faze the Emerson String Quartet. Now celebrating the ensemble's 40th season, the silver-haired, suit-and-tie-clad veterans were poised to start their performance Sunday afternoon at Jordan Hall when a shrill sound went up from the audience. They smiled wryly, waited for the offending gadget to be silenced, and proceeded to do what they do best: distill music down to its purest essence.

Two of four founding members (violinists Philip Setzer and Eugene Drucker) remain in the group. Both violinists alternate playing first chair, a chair in name only: All but cellist Paul Watkins play standing up. This magnificent performance, presented by Celebrity Series of Boston, manifested the assiduous knowledge they have accumulated over years of practicing and performing each part. The first movement of Mozart's Quartet in D Minor (K. 421) was laced with subtle tension and intrigue, Drucker coloring his first violin with thin, bright, piercing lines that streaked above the others. The

second movement was smooth but not overly silky, and the jumping rhythmic ambiguity of the third movement Menuetto made the old tune sound decidedly contemporary.

Shostakovich's compact String Quartet No. 10 (Op. 118), written two centuries later, provided a striking contrast. The sparse instrumentation of the first movement allowed each player a moment in the front, and Watkins's cello was rich with a decisive bite. The next movement, marked furioso, telegraphed the kind of restrained rage that is always more terrifying to behold than all-out howling. The melody moved around the solo voices in a whirlwind, the other players adding percussive slashes. I didn't realize how much my heart rate had increased until the last note lashed the air. That buzzing, anxious energy lingered in the pensive passacaglia, and the final movement juxtaposed prickly chromaticism in the violins with a sweet major key song from Watkins's cello and Lawrence Dutton's viola.

Ravel's String Quartet in F Major began as lush and cool as a glass flower, light refracting through petal-like phrases from Setzer's first violin. The four instruments' tones melded together to evoke a piquant flamenco guitar in the second movement, and the final movements splashed with quiet but distinct color. The audience demanded an encore, and the quartet delivered Beethoven.

EMERSON 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 Setzer varied 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.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Herald

August 22, 2016

Emerson String Quartet, Queen's Hall, Edinburgh

By Michael Tumelty

No pretence, no showmanship and definitely no playing to the gallery. I could name string quartets that do all of these things; and unlike some listeners I don't resent it: I've never objected to a bit of fun in music-making. But yesterday's ultra-classy set of Queen's Hall performances by the American Emerson String Quartet, with its "new-ish" cellist, the Welsh musician of some two years membership in the group, Paul Watkins, and a man well-known in these parts, was in a league apart.

The sheer quality of ensemble playing from the Emersons, with Watkins seamlessly integrated into the group, while retaining his characterful playing style and profile, was almost miraculous to hear. They have this way of getting right under the skin of a piece without imposing themselves on it: there was never a doubt that what we heard yesterday was Schubert, Haydn and Tchaikovsky, as opposed to the composers' music filtered through the performers' imaginations. It's almost as though the group liberates the truth of the music from the score. Never have I heard such beautiful frailty in Schubert's Rosamunde Quartet. And that one, moreover, was a performance that called out for a broader sweep of outings for Schubert's under-exposed canon of quartets.

Haydn's D major Quartet from the opus 76 set required a boat load of adjectives to capture the wit, grace and sheer humanity the Emersons released from the pages of this characterful music, while adjectives alone could come nowhere near accounting for the stupendously-honest and heart-stirring account of Tchaikovsky's Third String Quartet from this great group in a memorable concert.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

OREGON ARTSWATCH
OREGON'S ARTS & CULTURE NEWS
orartswatch.org

July 19, 2016

The Emerson Quartet honors the Haydn-Beethoven link

Chamber Music Northwest's examination of Beethoven continues with the Emerson Quartet

By Angela Allen

If any group can make us hear how radical and innovative Ludwig van Beethoven's music is, it's the Emerson String Quartet, a regular at Chamber Music Northwest. This year marks their 11th season at the summer festival; they'll be back for more Portland concerts throughout 2016-17.

The group played two of Beethoven's early string quartets: String Quartet in G Major, Op. 18, No. 2 and String Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 18, No. 6. The Beethoven pieces alternated with Joseph Haydn's quartets from his String Quartet in C Major, Op. 76, No. 3 ("Emperor")" and String Quartet in E-Flat Major, Op. 76, No. 6.

The Sunday concert exceeded two hours, not including intermission, at Portland State University's Lincoln Hall in the last of a three-performance program called "Passing the Torch." The Grammy Award-winners are CMNW's Artists-in-Residence for the 2016-17 season. Along with CMNW artistic director David Shifrin, they came up with the idea of the centerpiece three-performance Haydn-Beethoven program. The title speaks to the relationship between the older Haydn and Beethoven, and to the festival's efforts to mentor "protégé" musicians.

Adding fuel to the Emerson program, Beethoven's quartets have been showcased throughout CMNW's five-week run this summer.

Haydn's Opus 76 and Beethoven's Opus 18 were written within four years of each other in the late 1790s and early 1800s. Beethoven was Haydn's pupil for two years when he was in his 20s, and he was 38 years younger than Haydn, who is credited with inventing the string quartet. Beethoven had no intention of becoming a mini-Haydn.

Beethoven messed around with Papa Haydn's conventions and took the string quartet to new place. The pieces on Sunday were his early quartets, keep in mind. His middle and late quartets are more astoundingly innovative.

Emerson Quartet has played Beethoven and Haydn for 40 years. Aside from getting progressively better and more famous since they started in 1976—and turning into mentors instead of mentees of the Julliard and Guarneri quartets, as they were at the beginning of their careers—the only major change in personnel involved cellist Paul Watkins taking over from David Finkel in 2013. Also, the musicians (other than cellist Watkins who sits on a riser) perform standing up rather than sitting down, as

they did their first 25 years. If they were to make it to the next 25 years (after the upright quarter-century), they would play lying down, violist Lawrence Dutton told Oregon Arts Watch writer Alice Hardesty in a July 11 story.

These guys joke around, but not on stage.

The quartet's members looked like buttoned-up IBM managers in their black suits and white shirts—and violinists Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer removed their glasses before they took their bows—but they didn't sound like anyone in the conservative business world. Their instruments blend exquisitely, their bows rise and fall together, they pass around the glory. Drucker and Setzer, who founded the quartet shortly after college, trade off the first-violin position, one of the first groups to do so. (The Orion String Quartet does this, too, with brothers Todd and Daniel Phillips taking turns on the first violin.)

Named for American writer/philosopher/transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, the quartet performed 12 quartets over July 15, 16 and 17—six by Haydn, six by Beethoven. They did a similar gig earlier this year at Lincoln Hall in New York City.

So much material requires immense practice and concentration, and it was clear the Emerson players were relieved to finish the last quartet Sunday: Beethoven's String Quartet in B-flat Major, Op 18, No. 6. Beethoven marked this piece's final movement with the word, "melancholy," and the directive to play it "with greatest delicacy." The movement begins with a slow despondency and ends in a kind of surprise with a dancelike, upbeat and buoyant finale.

There's no anticipating Beethoven.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

San Antonio Express-News

July 7, 2016

Emerson Quartet impresses with polish, precision

By David Hendricks

In a program geared to exhibit its technical talents and thematic strengths, the Emerson String Quartet on Thursday proved why it has long been regarded the nation's best.

From Beethoven and Tchaikovsky to Shostakovich, the ensemble's masterful polish and Olympian precision, combined with its sweeping expression, continuously astonished the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts audience of more than 800 people. The concert was presented by Texas Public Radio.

The Emerson's players are the world's leading interpreters of Shostakovich's 15 quartets. Their choice of the excellent 10th Quartet, rather than the better-known 8th, revealed their deep knowledge of the set of works.

The 10th is an unsparing picture of Soviet life. The first movement remarkably blends a happy-go-lucky theme with an underlying sense of paranoia and dread, violist Lawrence Dutton leading the way. For the frenzied, zigzag second movement, the ensemble played as if they were being chased by the KGB secret police through darkened Moscow streets, one harrowing turn following another.

The third-movement movement, marked adagio, actually is a passacaglia that came across as if aching for a friend lost to a purge. The final section died away peacefully, having come to terms with life's fears, expressed movingly in the hands of the musicians.

The opening Beethoven Quartet No. 1, Op. 18, reveals the composer advancing the quartet genre beyond what he learned from his mentor, Haydn. The crisp, spacious sound from the Emerson players in the opening passage was enough to convince the audience of the New York-based group's talent, their muscular fluidity coming across as themes expanded with counterpoint.

The group, decked out in identical charcoal-black suits, is one of the few that plays standing up, except for cellist Paul Watkins, who sits on a chair atop a short riser. The Beethoven second movement was a love song, the composer purposely portraying Romeo and Juliet. It featured long pauses, the silence adding to the drama. Swirling exchanges of melody marked the final movement after the third's charming, gentle scherzo.

Tchaikovsky's String Quartet No. 3, Op. 30, rounded out the program. The composer dedicated the work in memory of a friend, violinist Ferdinand Laub. Sadness appears throughout the movements, but beauty is Tchaikovsky's emphasis. The Emerson players' performance of the third-movement andante funebre was heartbreakingly emotional.

Violinists Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer were especially expressive in the Tchaikovsky.

Their encore, the last movement of Beethoven's Quartet No. 4, Op. 18,

pleased the audience because the rollicking passages seemed to bring the concert full circle from the opening Beethoven quartet.

Recording label Deutsche Grammophon next week releases its Emerson String Quartet "complete recordings" set, containing no less than 52 CDs. But even that cannot beat seeing the musicians live, in top form, like they were Thursday night in San Antonio.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

South China Morning Post

February 1, 2016

Hong Kong International Chamber Music Festival

Broad range of composers and elegant and balanced playing made for a perfect week of music that ended with an explosive finale

Fine artistry, effective programming and a touch of casual, impromptu music making made this year's Hong Kong International Chamber Music Festival a perfect week of music.

The opening night concert presented a broad palette of composers from Bartók to Brahms. Dohnányi's Serenade for string trio brought out the best in the strings, with a beautiful Romanza movement plus some gypsy flavour with a little Hungarian paprika, elegantly played by violinist Martin Beaver, violist Paul Neubauer and cellist Gary Hoffman.

The Brahms Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor brought out a new level of radiant beauty and a language pregnant with meaning. One had to wonder what happened between Bartók and Brahms to lose the sense of enchantment – were people really happier in the days before

jet planes and penicillin? Pianist Parker played with velvet fingers and the autumnal mood was sustained through dance-like, graceful and effervescent passages.

On the second day, in a new venue for the Festival, the Hong Kong Maritime Museum hall had a surprisingly big, rich sound. The only piece that suffered from the bright acoustics was Dvorák's String Quintet, which sounded somewhat strident despite the Czech genius for string-writing and expert playing of the two violins, two violas and cello.

However, the Sonata a Quattro No. 3 by the 12-year-old Rossini had a mellifluous balance with bass substituting for cello. Mozart's Duo for Violin and Viola was played with clarity and warmth by Clara-Jumi Kang on violin and Paul Neubauer on viola.

The Emerson Quartet, formed in 1976 and based in New York City, is the epitome of an established chamber ensemble. The instrument tones are seamlessly matched and it was a joy to hear their craft in deft articulation and phrasing on the fourth day of the festival. In Schubert's Rosamunde quartet, the immortal melodies were played with a delicate touch. Shostakovich's Quartet No.10 revealed a more brutal sound with slashing down bows, working its way to more lyrical and playful music. Mendelssohn's String Quintet No. 2 with Toby Hoffman on viola had a sense of urgency that built to an avalanche of notes at the showy ending.

The finale of the festival was the finest among a set of fine concerts. Zhang played superbly and imaginatively in Anton Arensky's Piano Trio No. 1, blending with the magnificent violin and cello in the Elegia (Adagio). Festival artistic director Cho-Liang Lin has a romantic soul and was at his best leading the group through the piece's arching melodies, although in his dual role as music director and performer he occasionally strained a bit in virtuoso passages. The Emerson Quartet played Dvorák's String Quartet No. 12, *American*. The Lento movement couldn't have been more exquisite and the Native American (filtered through Czech sensibilities) rhythms and melodies were irresistible.

Schumann's Piano Quintet in E-Flat Major, a mainstay of the repertoire, was like plunging into deep water. Parker played the piano with a warm sound, always in ideal balance with the strings, and rose to fierce brilliance in the Scherzo and the final Allegro movement. The endings of all the movements were played with such precision and conviction they earned stars and "wows!!" in my notebook, and the final ending landed with explosive effect.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

theStrad
VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

December 2015

CONCERTS

New York

EMERSON QUARTET, RENÉE FLEMING (SOPRANO)
SUBCULTURE 16 SEPTEMBER 2015

Shorter concert lengths, programmes performed without an interval and repertoire that includes only selections from longer works – these are all becoming increasingly common on the New York scene. The Greenwich Village venue SubCulture celebrated its second anniversary in conjunction with a CD release concert in this fashion, featuring the Emerson Quartet and soprano Renée Fleming in a short selection of music drawn from their new album. The evening began with the quartet's violinist Eugene Drucker introducing the CD project. It continued with a short clip from a new film about Berg's *Lyric Suite* featuring the Emersons, and concluded with an open Q&A session – leaving what seemed a small window for actual musical performance.

The Emersons performed the first two movements of the *Lyric Suite* with characteristic precision and rhythmic accuracy. Perfect ensemble in spiccato passages allowed the Allegretto to sparkle, and impeccable bow control and evenness of sound created a tender, loving mood in the Andante amoroso. The final movement, with Fleming singing the 'hidden' Baudelaire setting that the composer suppressed, was played with tremendous sensitivity. Egon Wellesz's settings of sonnets by Elizabeth Barrett Browning closed the performance, with Fleming's lush voice floating above beautiful string sonorities.

LEAH HOLLINGSWORTH

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

Chicago Tribune

May 22, 2015

'New' Emerson Quartet shines

By John von Rhein

Although the Emerson String Quartet pays regular visits to Ravinia, it has been a stranger to downtown Chicago's concert life since 2009. No wonder the performance by the esteemed American ensemble at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance on Wednesday night – when it concluded the season's Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center series – attracted a large, vociferous audience.

This was the first Chicago appearance of the quartet in its latest guise, with British cellist Paul Watkins occupying the position long held by Chamber Music Society co-director David Finckel. Watkins' warm, smooth tone and vigilant interaction with Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer, violins, and Lawrence Dutton, viola, suggest he's adapted well to the Emerson persona since his arrival in 2013.

Wednesday's program worked additively. The Chicago debut of Lowell Liebermann's String Quartet No. 5 (2014) gave way to Mozart's String Quintet in E flat (K.614), with Paul Neubauer taking the second viola part in the latter work. Following intermission, cellist Colin Carr made it a string sextet for Tchaikovsky's "Souvenir de Florence."

With its symmetrical construction (a palindromic fast section is enclosed by two slower sections to form an arching continuity), the Liebermann alternates pages of mournful lyricism with sections of scurrying intensity, the whole perhaps too reminiscent of Shostakovich at times to reveal a strong profile of its own.

Mozart's transparent textures exposed passing discolorations of tone quality and intonation, making for a less satisfying reading overall than that given the Tchaikovsky, which found the six colleagues digging into the lush lyricism with red-blooded, if perfectly controlled and deftly balanced, abandon.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

Palm Beach Daily News

April 3, 2015

Emerson quartet performance superb

Ensemble excels in subtle, complex pieces at Chamber Music Society season finale.

By Ken Keaton

Beach concluded Thursday night with a glorious performance by perhaps the world's greatest string quartet at The Mar-a-Lago Club.

The Emerson String Quartet, composed of violinists Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer, violist Lawrence Dutton and 'cellist Paul Watkins, served up a program of Purcell, Beethoven and Ravel.

What makes a string quartet great? Perfection of ensemble and intonation is a must — and the Emerson unquestionably has both — but it can't end there. There has to be a union with the music itself, whether from the distant past or composed this year. There must be an understanding of structure, style and taste. There must be warmth, mystery, sensuality, devotion, conflict and triumph, plus any other emotion that is required. Above all, every note must count, all blended with the appropriate sonority so four musicians speak as one, and all the subtle secrets of the masterworks of the repertory are revealed.

That's what it takes, and the Emerson delivers.

The opening piece was an unusual choice — Henry Purcell's *Chaconne*, arranged by Benjamin Britten. This was no *tour de force*, just a lovely conversation with an archaic accent.

Next was Beethoven's *String Quartet No. 12 in E-flat, Opus 127*. It is the first of the five monumental late quartets, and the most conventional. Yet no part of this amazing work is truly conventional. There are surprises at every turn. The slow introduction of the first movement is integrated into the entire structure, returning at just the right moments.

The second movement, a theme and variations, is filled with unexpected turns of phrasing, harmony and counterpoint. The scherzo is a study in rhythmic subtlety, with a trio that manages to have dramatic intensity and elfin lightness. And the finale plays with sonorities and accents that are unlike anything composed before.

The Emerson's performance was masterly, with a command of some of the most subtle and complex music ever composed.

The final work was Ravel's *Quartet in F*, which was composed in 1903 when he was a student. His teacher, Faure, failed the composition. But his friend and colleague Debussy urged him not to change a note of it. Faure was wrong. Debussy was right.

The work is as much a journey as a composition. The opening movement is in the expected sonata form, but it is like passing through a cloud of endless pastel colors. The scherzo is a wild dance of pizzicato and trills, the slow movement like a conversation among four surrealists. And the finale sweeps the listener along like a whirlwind.

Few ensembles are as adept at Beethoven as they are at Ravel, but the Emerson is the master of both. This was a truly memorable concert.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Washington Post

December 8, 2014

Emerson String Quartet at Baird Auditorium masters the 'Art of Fugue'

By Simon Chin

The fugue is an archaic musical form. The Emerson String Quartet, throughout its nearly four-decade history, has been the epitome of the modern American chamber ensemble. On Sunday evening, the two musical worlds happily collided, as the Emerson players offered a magisterial traversal of the two greatest fugal works in the chamber repertory: Bach's "Art of Fugue" and Beethoven's "Grosse Fuge."

The recital, presented by the Smithsonian Associates at Baird Auditorium, opened with 11 selections from Bach's formidable and highly intellectual collection of fugues and canons. The Emerson brought its exacting technique to bear on these works all in the service of contrapuntal clarity. The ensemble's sound was wholly modern, reflecting neither period authenticity nor romantic exaggerations. Each note was attacked decisively, with detached articulation, no tapering, limited vibrato and clear rhythmic impetus. Yet this was no dry, academic affair, as the Emerson's investigation of the art of counterpoint took on a sense of austere beauty and sober drama, particularly in the wonders of Bach's final, unfinished fugue, which poignantly breaks off in mid-phrase.

Beethoven's "Grosse Fuge" needs no help sounding modern. It is the composer's most radical and audacious work, and the Emerson performed it in its original place as the finale to his String Quartet No. 13, Op. 130. The Emerson's intensely dramatic approach yielded mixed results in the quartet's opening movements, which could have seen more charm, subtlety and expressive variety.

Yet the Emerson's performance of the "Grosse Fuge" itself was simply staggering, a marvel of sustained concentration, technical brilliance, structural insight and musical ferocity. Despite the Emerson's blistering pace, rhythmic drive and relentless aggression, the contrapuntal lines never devolved into chaos. The quartet offered a coherent vision of the work's large-scale architecture, violent emotional arcs and cosmic sense of struggle. It was a terrifying, apocalyptic display of musical power, one that could only inspire reverence and awe.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

theguardian

NOVEMBER 22, 2014

Emerson String Quartet *****

By Stephen Pritchard

From irrepressible youth to the wisdom of age. After three decades of music-making, concerts by the venerable Emerson String Quartet have taken on an almost religious significance, pilgrims travelling far to worship at the feet of these masters. They won't have been disappointed at the Queen Elizabeth Hall last week, when they heard Beethoven's wildly radical Grosse Fugue laid bare so brilliantly, but for me the jewel was their exquisite reading of Ravel's quartet in F, the inner movements as stirring to the soul as the promise of spring.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

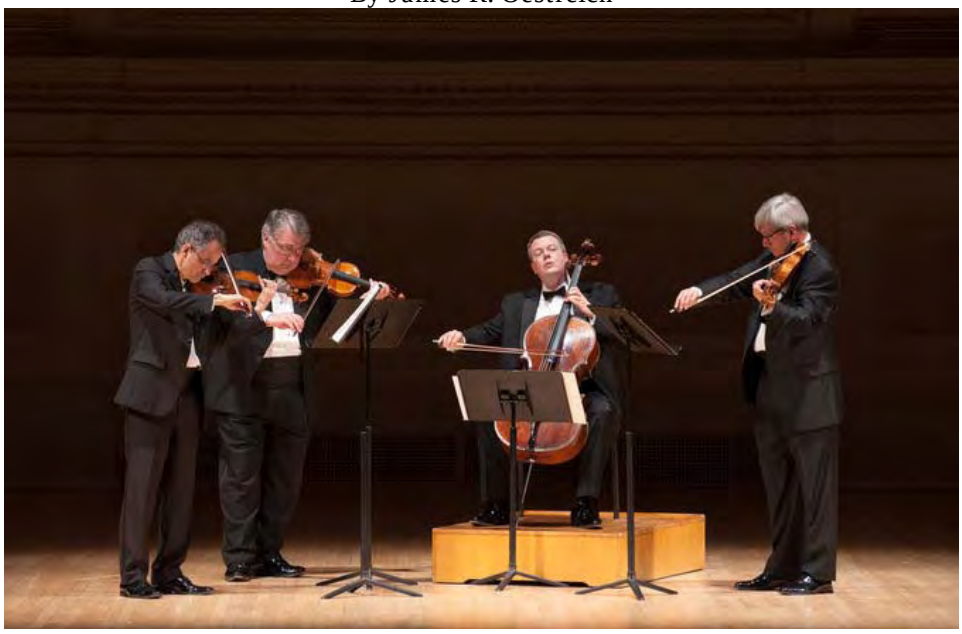
The New York Times

October 21, 2014

At Relative Ease, While Taking Command

Emerson Players and Yefim Bronfman Play Carnegie Hall

By James R. Oestreich



The Emerson String Quartet performing at Carnegie Hall on Tuesday.

You tend to think of Emerson String Quartet concerts as big events. There have been so many: all six Bartok quartets in a single evening multiple times; various other composer cycles; thematically based series. The most recent triumph was a magnificent traversal of the last five Shostakovich quartets in a concert at Tanglewood in July.

So it was pleasant, for a change, to encounter the players at Carnegie Hall on Tuesday evening at relative ease, with nothing weighty on their collective mind. Oh, there was seriousness, if Beethoven's "Serioso" Quartet (Op. 95) really qualifies as such. (Doubtful.) And there was a nod to thematic programming, with Purcell's Chacony in G minor, edited by Benjamin Britten, followed by Britten's String Quartet No. 2, with its (unPurcellian) finale called Chacony.

But throw in Schumann's towering Piano Quintet in E flat, and what do you have? Just a handful of great works, performed with the group's typical aplomb.

Britten, picking up the frayed tradition of British composition after a lull of

more than two centuries, made a cottage industry of Purcell. His “Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra” (a.k.a. Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell) is only the most obvious example.

As with the Chacony (variations of a type now better known by the French term chaconne), Britten made many editions of Purcell’s music for modern performers. He also modeled some of his own music after the early master’s.

That said, traces of Purcell are hard to find in Britten’s Chacony, a set of variations on a much larger and more complex scale. The movement is punctuated by brilliant cadenzas for cello (played here by Paul Watkins, a relative newcomer to the quartet), viola (Lawrence Dutton) and first violin (Eugene Drucker).

The group’s other fiddler, Philip Setzer, alternates with Mr. Drucker on first violin, which he played in the wonderfully strong and gritty performance of the Beethoven “Serioso.”

Yefim Bronfman, a bear of a man and a pianist, joined in the Schumann quintet and looked like a dominant presence. He contributed fluently to the performance, though this was not the powerhouse account you might have expected. Still, the audience evidently loved it, and its loud acclamation was rewarded with a generous encore, the Andante of Brahms’s Piano Quintet.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The New York Times

July 11, 2014

Russian Farewells, Quartet by Quartet

The Emerson Plays Shostakovich at Tanglewood

By James R. Oestreich

The Emerson String Quartet performed in Seiji Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood on Thursday evening.

Far from shirking challenges, the Emerson String Quartet has, in its 37 seasons, tended to seek them out. It is not enough, for example, merely to scatter the six Bartok quartets (which the group recorded for Deutsche Grammophon, winning a Grammy Award in 1990) among mixed programs; the Emerson has repeatedly performed all six works in a single long evening.

And evidently such adventuring will continue now that the group has undergone its first personnel change in more than three decades, with Paul Watkins having replaced David Finckel as cellist last year. The Emerson has long played the 15 Shostakovich string quartets (which it also recorded for Deutsche Grammophon, winning another Grammy in 2000); now it is beginning to perform a significant handful of those works at a shot.

On Thursday evening, for the first time, the Emerson played the last five of

Shostakovich's 15 string quartets in a single concert, in Seiji Ozawa Hall here at Tanglewood. This program, with the works presented in chronological order and with two intermissions, is more than a test of the players' endurance and stamina, although it is surely that. It also contains several strands of internal logic.

"There is a pervasive and deepening sense of sorrow throughout this final period," Wendy Lesser writes in her stimulating biography "Music for Silenced Voices: Shostakovich and His 15 Quartets" (Yale University Press).

Not that the progression is entirely straightforward or uneventful. Shostakovich, having weathered decades of political persecution, was a past master at depicting emotion in quirky and sardonic ways as well as at hiding it, though he seldom did that in these deeply revealing works.

The decade before Shostakovich's death in 1975 was one of serious physical decline and devastating personal and professional loss. Among the losses was the disintegration of the Beethoven Quartet, which gave the premieres of his Quartets Nos. 2 through 14.

The death of the second violinist, Vasily Shirinsky, moved Shostakovich to write the 11th Quartet in 1966. He dedicated the 12th to Dmitri Tsyganov, the Beethoven's first violinist, for his 65th birthday in 1968; and the 13th to Vadim Borisovsky, its former violist, who had had to retire years earlier for health reasons, for his 70th in 1970.

Ms. Lesser details aspects of these pieces — and of the 14th Quartet, which Shostakovich dedicated to Sergei Shirinsky, the Beethoven Quartet's cellist, in 1973 to complete the pattern — that may relate to the personalities or biographies of their dedicatees. The 15th Quartet of 1974 is simply Shostakovich's own leave-taking, whether intended as such or not.

These are demanding works technically, with Shostakovich constantly experimenting not only with formal design (works in one or two movements and in six or seven), but also with modes of expression (tappings of wood on wood as well as all manner of bowing and articulation). And the Emerson — in addition to Mr. Watkins, Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer, violinists, and Lawrence Dutton, violist — brought the requisite virtuosity to every phrase.

But this music is equally demanding emotionally and intellectually, and the group's powers of concentration and sustained intensity were at least as impressive. (The audience fared less well with those demands, shrinking by perhaps half before the third segment.)

In my first encounter with the Emerson since the changeover, Mr. Watkins seemed a less demonstrative cellist than Mr. Finckel, with perhaps a smaller tone. But he played beautifully, growing stronger and seeming more at home in the rough and tumble as the evening wore on, and blending into an overall sound more supple and colorful than that remembered from the former lineup.

It should be a pleasure to observe and analyze this new chemistry in other, more varied programs and projects. Then again, are there any other particularly meaningful handfuls of Shostakovich lying around?

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Oregonian

July 14, 2014

Chamber Music Northwest 2014: the newly configured Emerson String Quartet makes its Portland debut

By James McQuillen

The Emerson String Quartet digs into Shostakovich. From left, Phillip Setzer, Eugene Drucker, Paul Watkins and Lawrence Dutton

Founded in the year of the United States' bicentennial and named for one of the young nation's greatest writers, the Emerson String Quartet has been the standard bearer of American quartet playing for a quarter-century. The ensemble sent a tremor through the chamber music world two years ago when it announced the departure of cellist David Finckel, and then an aftershock when Briton Paul Watkins was named as his replacement. Last weekend's Chamber Music Northwest Concerts were the Emerson's first in Portland since Watkins joined, and longtime listeners packed Kaul Auditorium and PSU's Lincoln Hall to hear the new version of the venerable ensemble.

On the evidence of two programs of late

works by four composers, the Emersons—the other players are violinists Eugene Drucker and Phillip Setzer and violist Lawrence Dutton—have indeed changed. But change is inevitable, and personnel change can account for only part of it. The quartet's muscularity and technical brilliance have given way to a mellower sound, slower tempos and even occasional imperfections, but the musicality is intact if not even deeper than before.

Highlights: An abundance. The first program began with a devastating account of Dmitri Shostakovich's final quartet, a soul-emptying succession of a half-dozen slow movements; it says something when Schubert's heavy "Death and the Maiden" quartet is the jollier counterpoint. Their revelatory account of Beethoven's Op. 131 at Lincoln Hall embraced the music's strangeness with warmth and humanity.

Low notes: Before Sunday's concert, I'd have been prepared to complain about yet another performance of Mozart's rightly beloved but well-worn clarinet quintet. After, no. Clarinetist David Shifrin (who is also CMNW's artistic director) seems to mellow with every performance, and the Larghetto second movement was achingly beautiful, with attenuated tempos and searching frailness. I suppose I could complain that they didn't play the tantalizing fragment of another Mozart clarinet quintet they offered four years ago, but that would be reaching.

Most valuable performer: Watkins, naturally. He has been under a spotlight this season, and he demonstrated a seamless transition to his new role. His sound was rich, if occasionally too subdued, on Saturday, and he rang out incisively in the Beethoven.

Biggest surprise: It should be no surprise that an esteemed quartet can survive a personnel change—the Takács and Kronos come to mind—but the transition is always fascinating to hear.

Take away: America's leading quartet is aging, changing and still vital.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The New York Times

March 25, 2014

A Live String Ensemble, With Death on Its Program

Emerson String Quartet Plays Shostakovich at Tully Hall

By Steve Smith

Death sells, the cliché about media hype goes. But was a program devoted to works on that theme what a substantial audience at Alice Tully Hall was buying on Sunday afternoon? Far more likely, it was life that folks were looking for: meaning the continued hale, hearty existence of the Emerson String Quartet, one of the world's most respected, appreciated and popular chamber music institutions.

Chemistry is a complex matter, in chamber music as much as in nature. No surprise, then, that the Emerson's many admirers might show concern about how the group sounds now with its still relatively new cellist, Paul Watkins, who took over for David Finckel last summer. Sunday's event, the first installment in a three-concert Lincoln Center series surrounding the last five Shostakovich quartets with other presumably death-besotted pieces, provided the chance to find out.

Let's make one thing perfectly clear: The "old" Emerson String Quartet never phoned one in. But this new group — Mr. Watkins alongside the violinists Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer, and the violist Lawrence Dutton — complemented their customary power, finesse and unanimity with a fresh, palpable vigor at Tully, and it was electrifying.

Mr. Drucker was an assertive leader in the Shostakovich quartets that framed the program, No. 11 (1966) and No. 12 (1968), his sinuous playing establishing tones of haunted melancholy, agitation and dread in both works. The No. 11, cast in a continuous span, surveys and juxtaposes a broad range of moods: a test of any ensemble's capacity for unified expression, and one the Emerson passed with undimmed sensitivity and bravado.

Likewise, the agonized introduction and martial tattoo of the Quartet No. 12 could scarcely have been more vividly conveyed. Mr. Dutton's assertive, even aggressive playing commanded attention; so did Mr. Watkins's expressive manner in molding sustained lines.

Phrasing and intonation were a hair less secure in Mendelssohn's String Quartet No. 6 in F minor (1847), nestled between the Shostakovich works, but in the face of playing so exuberant and bold, it hardly mattered. Led by Mr. Setzer, the rendition brimmed with buoyant energy.

Here, too, was the only mote of genuine ease in the program: an Adagio of untrammeled sweetness, with Mr. Watkins as its calm, rooted anchor. That gracious mode recurred in an eagerly demanded encore, the Adagio from Haydn's Quartet in G minor (Op. 20, No. 3).

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Guardian

January 28, 2014

Emerson Quartet – review

Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, Cardiff

The Emerson found fine form in Mozart and Beethoven, and delivered a powerful rendition of Shostakovich's Quartet No 15

By Rian Evans

★★★★☆

The Emerson Quartet's huge reputation is one of three decades standing, but, with their first UK concerts since the Welsh cellist Paul Watkins joined them nine months ago, comes the sense of a new burst of energy. This recital in the Stoutzker Hall was not one they'll forget: in the fine acoustic, where every detail is exposed, the audience was rapt, their applause thunderous.

In the Quartet in E flat, K428, Mozart, himself a viola player, indulges that instrument: here, you could hear empathy between the Emerson's violist Lawrence Dutton and Watkins, and their match of sonorities brought a glowing resonance to the inner workings of the piece. It suggested that Watkins was already at home. An intriguing aspect of the Emerson's democratic setup is the way their violinists alternate as leader. In the Mozart and Beethoven's Quartet, Op 59 No 3, the leader Eugene Drucker's tone sounded understated, but, in both finales, the tempo was upped to a dangerous speed, making the adrenaline flow and the music wing along.

The core of this programme was Shostakovich's Quartet No 15, Op 144, his final utterance in the form. In this intimate setting, the elegiac and anguished music was made to feel like Greek tragedy. Each instrument articulated a voice that seemed to come from the depths of its soul, with only occasional glimpses of light or consolation, but combining to create a depth of tone that was powerful and all-enveloping. With Philip Setzer taking the lead in the encore, the warmth of Mendelssohn's Adagio from his Op 80 Quartet made for a lyrical and heartfelt finale.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

VIOLIN VIOLA CELLO BASS FIDDLE

STRINGS

January 13, 2014

The Emersons: A Crucible of String Quartets

On Stage: Seasoned ensemble delivers Beethoven's Opus 59 quartets in all their riveting, dramatic glory

By Laurence Vittes

If you want to know what the future of the Emerson String Quartet will be with new cellist Paul Watkins, they laid it on the line in their Southland debut on January 10 for an enthusiastic, sold out Samueli Theater crowd at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts in Costa Mesa, California.

Cheered on by an audience of all ages who wanted to whistle and shout after every movement, rotating first and second chair violinists Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer, violist Lawrence Dutton, and Watkins took on Beethoven's three Opus 59 quartets as if they were using the crucible of live performance to fuse their artistry together.

What this meant for Beethoven was riveting, dramatic stuff, serious and

gruff like Rodin saw him, with occasional strikes of lightning illuminating the music's molten flow. The pieces didn't always fit perfectly together, but intensity alternating with introspection carried them forward until the famously enigmatic second movement of No. 3, ambiguously marked "Andante con moto quasi Allegretto," when each of the four found something in their succession of fragments and riffs that allowed them to relax.

When they emerged in the third movement, "Menuetto Grazioso," it was with suddenly seamless ensemble that moved like a cat into the "Allegro molto" last movement's fugue. With exhilarating energy, Dutton threw down the gauntlet at an impossible speed. When it reached Watkins 20 bars later, after brilliant virtuosic turns by Setzer and Drucker in turn, beads of sweat were showing on the newcomer's knotted brow.

No matter.

The cellist, with a resume of important recordings as a soloist, and the only one seated (second from the right), moved around on his instrument with incredible ease, produced a wonderful variety and subtlety of shifts, and only matched Dutton's insane speed (per Beethoven's sense of humor) but ratcheted up the volume "poco a poco," as the composer directed in the score, for another ten bars.

When it was all over, the Emerson Quartet with new cellist Watkins had taken no prisoners.

Once the Emersons complete their initial shakedown cruises, they may record Britten for the first time in their history, and there must be a new Beethoven cycle in their future. Sooner better than later, I would think, before they get too completely in control of the thing.

One piece of incidental trivia for chamber music parties: For no particular reason, it seems, the Emersons have never played Beethoven’s Quintet with two violas Op. 29.

Go figure.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

Los Angeles Times

January 12, 2014

Emerson String Quartet shows off new face with Beethoven

The 'new' Emerson String Quartet, with Briton Paul Watkins on cello, introduces itself at the Samueli Theater with a hearty and exuberant performance of Beethoven's 'Razumovsky' quartet.

By Mark Swed

New cellist Paul Watkins, center, performs for the first time with the Emerson String Quartet.

"Tomorrow they will wear another face," is how Ralph Waldo Emerson began the closing couplet of his poem "Experience."

And now, the Emerson String Quartet wears, for the first time in 34 years, another face. Founded in 1976, the year of America's bicentennial, this commandingly all-American string quartet, a national symbol of sorts, welcomes a new nationality. British cellist Paul Watkins recently replaced David Finckel.

"Succession swift," the Transcendentalist poet and essayist also wrote in "Experience." So too was that the case Friday night in the Samueli

Theater of the Segerstrom Center for the Arts in Costa Mesa, where the new Emerson String Quartet introduced itself to Southern California with a performance of Beethoven's three middle-period Opus 59 ("Razumovsky") quartet. A robust cello melody, a song of inspiring affirmation, begins the first of these grand, epic string quartets. Watkins played it with a hearty tone and exuberant expression, like an adventurer on a new journey.

The ensemble couldn't have found a more suitable cellist for its lush, silky and, when the foursome digs down, full-throttled symphonic sound. There was clearly meaning in choosing these three very big "Razumovsky" quartets — nearly two hours' worth of music — for a single concert. In the last dozen years, the Emerson has been looking at late style (as it did at the Ojai Festival with late Beethoven and with Shostakovich at the Ojai Music Festival in 2002) and bringing important new works our way (as it has with major commissions from Kaija Saariaho and Thomas Adès).

But obviously right now it wants to show it remains *in medias res*. This is Beethoven showing how he can magnificently overcome life's obstacles and carry on with a triumphant spirit for which there is no equal in all the string quartet literature. He hasn't moved on, yet, to higher realms. The "Razumovsky" quartets are the glory of the Emerson's Beethoven recordings of the 1990. Plus, this has always been a macho ensemble with a taste for marathons, such as performing the six Bartók string quartets in a single evening.

The other, and inescapable, message Friday was that the Emerson is not a young, or for that matter, middle-aged string quartet. Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer, who alternate between first and second violins, are founding members, and violist Lawrence Dutton has been on hand nearly from the beginning. Age shows as experience, but as Ralph Waldo further noted in an essay on experience, "Spirit is matter reduced to an extreme thinness."

Watkins, a generation younger than the other members, is the thicker player. He is more overtly expressive. He is in his full powers. The others are cooler. The violin sound has thinned over the years and intonation isn't as lock-box secure as it once was. But these are gradual changes. What the ensemble has not lost is its power punches.

More Ralph Waldo: "Nature hates peeping." The Emerson doesn't peep, and when Beethoven comes crashing down, say at the beginning of Opus 59, No. 2, the ensemble still lays a listener low. The ethereal Beethoven to come is hinted at in the "Razumovsky" quartets, and the Emerson is now better than it once was at hinting without making an unnecessary splash. That's experience.

The quartet once made the slow movements glow through a sheer beauty of sound. Much of that beauty remains, and Watkins contributes a resplendent rich bass pedestal on which beauty can stand in display. But restraint of expression, four men speaking as one voice, is where the profundity was mainly found Friday.

The macho side to the Emerson is still there too, although the quartet doesn't make its virtuosity seem quite so effortless. On the 1994 recording of the Opus 59, No. 3, the quartet took the last movement, a dazzling fugue, at a flabbergasting speed. The showiest groups race through it typically in a little under six minutes.

The timing on the Emerson's recording is a mind-blowing 5:17. At Samueli, the movement was a different sort of knockout at 5:50.

"Up again, old heart!" Ralph Waldo exhorted, and his namesake string quartet continues in its new guise to demonstrate, for the world's true romance is "the transformation of genius into practical power."

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Philadelphia Inquirer

October 22, 2013

New cellist enlivens Emerson Quartet

By David Patrick Sterns

Few musical ecosystems are as reactive as a string quartet's. So the Emerson Quartet was guaranteed to be a quite different ensemble from even a few months ago, since the departure of cellist David Finckel and the arrival of cellist Paul Watkins at the season-opening concert of the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society season on Friday at the Kimmel Center.

The quartet was due for some sort of change. Performances sometimes lacked a sense of discovery. Less care was given to the overall sonority. Concerts took a while to wake up. But not on Friday. Watkins, who has a superb reputation in his native Great Britain, often felt like the unofficial leader of the group, partly because the concert's repertoire just happened to favor his instrument, partly because his magnetism drew in other players, changing the overall complexion of the group.

His small but incandescent sound was intensely present, but not in a way that prompted other group members to play harder in order to match him. Thus, the Emerson tint feels less forced now, less competitive. Entrances didn't announce themselves but simply came into being. Sharper edges were rounded off.

That doesn't mean performances lacked an edge. Mendelssohn's *String Quartet in F Minor* was tight and to the point. But in contrast to the days when the Emerson tried to heed Beethoven's ultra-fast metronome markings, the Friday performance of *String Quartet Op. 59 No. 1* ran at a speed allowing the players to speak comfortably, not driven by any exterior idea but by an interior balance of rhythmic propulsion and lyrical flow.

The concert's centerpiece was Shostakovich's *String Quartet No. 14* - a seldom-played late work from 1973 that echoes decades of life-and-death paranoia under Stalin. Though it has familiar Shostakovich tropes - ominous knocks at the door and long passages of soliloquy - it requires a highly personal relationship with its interpreters if it's to seem anything but remote. And this performance was indeed fully investigated.

The opening movement in which a folksy fiddle theme is splintered, with the different pieces played simultaneously, had a wonderful balance of chaos and order, and in later movements, a strong sense of subtext in the brooding incidental solos as well as a sure sense of the piece's tricky resolution: The wars are over but everybody lost.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

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

October 13, 2013

A Musical Memorial From Emerson String Quartet

By Be'eri Moalem

The Emerson Quartet is one of the last standing of the old-school American string quartets. They were around before period performance practice became mainstream — meaning they phrase and articulate Haydn quartets with almost the same intensity that they use in Shostakovich. The Emerson's opened the Music@Menlo winter series at the Performing Arts Center, Menlo-Atherton, with strong playing, especially in a Mendelssohn quartet, in which nobody can compete with the group's deep understanding of the music.

The program opened with Haydn's Quartet Op. 20, No. 3 in G Minor. For much of it, Philip Setzer was pecking the *spiccato* (bouncing bow strokes) so harshly that much of Haydn's elegance and humor was lost and the piece sounded grumpy. The intonation, however, was impeccable and the clarity of the articulation in all instruments was admirable, especially in a tricky figure for viola and second violin, which propels the first movement. The sheet music for this passage was printed in the program, which can be appreciated by different members of the audience on different levels — to see the actual notes that the musicians are looking at helps to connect listener with performer. Music@Menlo's commitment to top notch program notes and education is exemplary.

Shostakovich's late Quartet No. 14 in F-Sharp Major (Op. 142, 1973) was also tough and prickly but here appropriately so. The piece is practically a cello concerto, and served as a great introduction for the group's new cellist, Paul Watkins, who took over from David Finckel (who is also the co-founder of Music@Menlo). Watkins was only six years old when the quartet was founded and must have grown up listening to the Emerson's prolific recording output because he fits in seamlessly, while also injecting a fresh new energy. The slow movement duet between Watkins and

Eugene Drucker on first violin was performed with resigned emotion — helpless and but still yearning.

A Friend Remembered in Music

Between the Haydn and Shostakovitch, Setzer talked about the darkness of the program — three heavy and serious minor-key pieces with moments of "glow" tucked into the slow movements. These special moments are most powerful in the context of the darkness. Sometimes it feels like the composers set up the stormy angry music specifically for this contrast, a descent in order to make an ascent possible. Setzer tied Mendelssohn's F Minor Quartet, Op. 80, specifically the Adagio elegy to his sister Fanny Mendelssohn to the concert's dedicatee, Boris Wolper, a close friend of the Emerson Quartet. He choked up and nearly cried talking about Wolper, who passed away this past July.

The short and heartfelt talk put Setzer in a vulnerable emotional space rarely shared on a classical concert stage and it brought out the best violin playing I have heard in years. He played so hard that he broke a string in the Shostakovich. In the Mendelssohn Adagio — especially the big crescendo that reaches a climax on a fortissimo chord, which dips in volume as if to take a breath only to strive for another climax in a heartbeat rhythm — that phrase elicited a total emotional breakdown. I was sobbing and I wasn't the only one. If you give in, it is uncontrollable. I hadn't felt that in a long time. This is the power of music.

Sharing a piece of great news, Music@Menlo's executive director, Edward P. Sweeney, reported that the organization was firmly "in the black". Not surprising in the country's wealthiest zip code, yet still worth commending.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

October 2, 2013

New cellist enlivens Emerson String Quartet

By Matt Kanney

Many a venerable string quartet has found changing personnel can be fraught with peril. But the return of the Emerson String Quartet with a new cellist produced a wonderful concert on Tuesday night to open the Pittsburgh Chamber Music Society season at Carnegie Music Hall in Oakland.

The American ensemble was formed in 1976 and was quickly recognized as one of the world's great quartets. It maintained its original membership until May, when English cellist Paul Watkins began rehearsing with his new colleagues. He brings unusually varied experience to his new position, having been principal cellist of the BBC Symphony, cellist of the larger chamber group the Nash Ensemble, solo cellist in concerti, and conductor of the English Chamber Orchestra – all based in London.

The concert began with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Quartet in E flat major, K. 428, one of the set of six quartets Mozart dedicated to Franz Josef Haydn, the father of both the string quartet and the symphony. Mozart grew from writing his Haydn Quartets, which have uncommonly rich textures and are his best works in the medium.

Watkins' presence was most immediately and obviously noticeable in his more assertive presentation of the cello part. He has beautiful tone and plays more strongly in the lower register than his predecessor did.

The ripples of Watkin's musical personality encouraged the always admirable violist Lawrence Dutton. They played together extremely. The personalities of violinists Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer flourished.

But the whole musical spirit of the performance felt different. Quick tempi felt less pressured and the musicians played more into the phrases.

Not surprisingly given this group of musicians has been playing together for only five months, there is also obvious room for growth. The first movement really hit its stride in the recapitulation. Similarly, the Menuetto's opening idea was most successful when it returned after the Trio. There were also some pitch issues.

Benjamin Britten's String Quartet No. 3 completed the first half. It was written at the very end of his life, after completing the opera “Death in Venice,” when he was growing progressively weaker from heart disease.

Violinist Philip Setzer, who played second violin in the Mozart, took first chair for the Britten. He played exquisitely in the third movement, a

solo, and led strongly in the deeply moving Recitative and Passacaglia that ends the work. Altogether, the performance of the Britten was a knowing and communicative performance of a great composer's final masterpiece.

Violinist Eugene Drucker was back on first chair for Ludwig van Beethoven's String Quartet No. 9 in C major, Op. 59, No. 3, after intermission. There was more tempo flexibility than I remember from Emerson Beethoven performances, and it was all for the sake of characterization – more space for lyrical nuace but also speeding up at places where the music's excitement suggests it.

The finale was not merely fast. It also had visceral excitement. And crucially, Setzer had just the right touch for the one passage near the end where the second violin has a more slowly moving and lyrical line.

The encore, with Setzer playing first, was the slow movement of Felix Mendelssohn's last string quartet, a memorial to his sister who had died a few monthly earlier. He would die only a few months after completing the piece, like his sister from a stroke. It received a beautiful performance, with poised and affectionate expression.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Republican.

August 16, 2013

Emerson String Quartet remains pitch perfect

By Ken Ross

String quartets have to be spot on with every note. There's no room for error. If someone makes a mistake, there aren't 20 other violins in an orchestra to gloss over the wrong note.

That might explain why some quartets have played together for so long. Once you have the timing down right, after years of practice and performing, you probably don't want to tinker too much with the lineup.

But practice doesn't always make perfect. Some string quartets are simply better than others. They have an indescribable, magical quality that makes them sound slightly better than other quartets.

And among the best of the best is the Emerson String Quartet.

For more than 34 years, the New York-based Emerson String Quartet had the same starting lineup: violinist Eugene Drucker, violinist Philip Setzer, violist Lawrence Dutton and cellist David Finckel. And like the New York Yankees in the 1930s, this New York-based group of musicians was on a roll for decades, racking up Grammys (nine of them) and

other accolades across the world.

That’s why there was such a buzz Wednesday night at Ozawa Hall on the grounds ofTanglewood. Earlier this year, Finckel announced he was leaving the quartet. In his place is the group's new cellist, Paul Watkins.

Judging by Wednesday night's performance, the new Emerson String Quartet sounded like they had all been playing together for decades.

There's something very intimate about watching a quartet perform live and up close. That might explain why several fictional movies focusing on classical quartets and trios have been made over the years, including "A Late Quartet" last year starring Christopher Walken and Philip Seymour Hoffman.

But there's no need for Hollywood theatrics to make the music exciting, as the Emerson String Quartet demonstrated in three very different, distinct pieces Wednesday.

The program began with Haydn's Quartet No. 26 in G Minor, Opus 20, No. 3. A civilized, crisp sounding work, the Haydn quartet showed off the Emerson quartet's exacting technique. There's also a leisurely quality to the piece which seemed right at home on the tranquil grounds of Tanglewood.

The next work on the program - Benjamin Britten's Quartet No. 3 - had a slightly darker quality. Written near the end of Britten's life in 1975, the quartet sometimes features only a few notes on each instrument at one time. It's a complex, slightly experimental work. But the piece didn't seem out of place in the middle of the program. You could also see and hear clearly just how in synch the four musicians were throughout this challenging piece.

But personally, the highlight of the evening was the final piece: Beethoven's Quartet No. 7 in F, Opus 59, No. 1, "Razumovsky." Everything everyone loves about Beethoven - the intricate melodies, the haunting refrains, the flashes of genius - is on display in the first Razumovsky string quartet. Not surprisingly, the Emerson quartet hit all the right notes to absolute perfection. No wonder the crowd was on its feet by the end of the program.

And best of all, the show wasn't over just yet. That's because the four musicians wearing matching white tuxedo jackets came back out to play an encore: the final movement of third Razumovsky string quartet. This fast, challenging piece of music was the perfect ending to a delightful concert by a beloved quartet that will hopefully be around for many more decades to come.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Boston Globe

August 16, 2013

Emerson's new lineup off to an impressive start

By David Weininger

Earlier this year, the durable Emerson String Quartet underwent its first personnel change in 34 years when cellist David Finckel left the group. His replacement is the British cellist Paul Watkins, and at Tanglewood on Wednesday, the quartet gave its first Massachusetts performance in its new configuration. No doubt the question on the minds of many listeners at Ozawa Hall was how different this Emerson would be from its former incarnation. The answer — a provisional one, to be sure — emerged over the course of Wednesday's concert, piece by piece.

They opened with Haydn's Quartet in G minor, Op. 20, No. 3. It quickly became apparent that while Watkins doesn't play with the forthright projection with which Finckel anchored the Emerson, his sound is warmer and more rounded. He seemed intent on blending into the ensemble, though he could stand out when needed, as was clear from his lovely if brief solos during the slow movement. As a whole, the quartet's playing seemed lighter and less edgy than it has in the past, though there was something unsettled about the performance.

They followed with the Third Quartet of Britten, a composer whom the Emerson

has rarely, if ever, played in the past. Shadowy and haunted, the quartet was written as Britten was dying and contains resonances of his last opera, “Death in Venice.” The group handled Britten’s ephemeral textures and furious outbursts with equal assurance, and violinist Philip Setzer negotiated the stratospheric solos of the third movement gracefully and with just a couple of intonational slips. The final movement — a lament over a recurring bass line — was devastating.

But the differences between the old and new Emersons was clearest in Beethoven’s Quartet in F major, Op. 59, No. 1. It begins with a rising cello line, which in the Finckel days would emerge boldly and usually set the stage for an assertive, almost swaggering performance. As Watkins played it, though, it was mellower and more lyrical, a question rather than an avowal. And that was true for the rest of the performance, which seemed more deliberate and considered than past performances. But there was also plenty of drama when needed, especially in the inner movements. The piece is packed with cello solos, and each one had a beautiful, almost vocal quality to it. It was a different approach but no less winning, and showed that the group already has impressive cohesion.

Emerson String Quartet

For an encore, the Emerson brought out the finale of the C major Quartet, Op. 59, No. 3, a contrapuntal frenzy that the Emerson could bring off like no other group. This time it didn’t quite have the sizzle (or the polished ensemble) that four people with decades of experience playing together can marshal. Nevertheless, the Emerson Mark II is off to a very promising start. It will be fascinating to see how it evolves.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

Chicago CLASSICAL REVIEW

August 15, 2013

New cellist makes a natural fit with Emerson Quartet

By Dennis Polkow

String quartets come and go, but some have made a major cultural impact by their sheer longevity. Fewer still have made such an impact with their membership intact.

The Emerson Quartet began decades ago when its members were still students at Juilliard. Becoming professional in the bicentennial year of 1976, the group named itself after Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson personnel has been the same since 1979, and the feeling had long been that if one member were to leave, the others would call it a day. Still, when cellist David Finckel announced two years ago that he would be leaving the ensemble to concentrate on other projects, a reprieve might be possible, if the right cellist could be found.

Enter British cellist Paul Watkins, who formally joined up with violinists Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer and violist Lawrence Dutton in May, their

initial concerts together having taken place abroad. The group's first American concerts are occurring at summer music festivals, including a stop at the Ravinia Festival Tuesday night.

Starting the concert with the Beethoven *Razumovsky* Quartet No. 7 in F Major Op. 59, No. 1 was a nice gesture of welcome, the cello launching the work. Watkins played confidently and cherubically smiled and studiously eyeballed his colleagues at their respective entrances.

As the piece unfolded, it was clear that while Watkins' ensemble ability within the group was extraordinary for having been publicly performing with it less than three months, he was still working his way up to the proper dynamic level needed for an ideal balance. The bottom end was not as defined when the quartet was playing together as it had been with Finckel, which no doubt will come in time.

The thought that the veteran Emerson members might play with a more subdued approach by bringing in a younger player with a more refined sound, was palpable and there were certainly moments like that throughout the evening. But by and large, the other three continued to play with the same level of gusto and volume as has long been the Emerson signature sound. What Watkins did bring to Op. 59, No. 1 was a wonderful playfulness and charm which often became contagious with his colleagues.

The *Razumovsky* Quartet No. 8 in f minor, Op. 59, No. 2 formed a fitting contrast, being a much more intense and serious piece than No. 1. The highlight was the Molto adagio movement, which was played poignantly by all, with considerable attention to fanning out dynamically and dramatically.

The real curiosity of the evening was the Britten Quartet No. 3, Op. 94, one of the last works Britten wrote and being performed Tuesday for the Britten Centennial.

More than thirty years had passed since Britten had written string quartets back in the 1940s, but like so many composers on the verge of mortality, he turned to the intimate form to make one of his last musical statements, albeit on commission from the Amadeus Quartet.

The five-movement piece traverses a range of styles and tonalities, as if to serve as a flashback of the various movements that surrounded, influenced and sometimes evaded Britten throughout his lifetime. There are shades of Bartók, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, jazz, atonality, et al, no direct quotes, all wrapped up in a kind of Mahler-like collage technique.

What was on Britten's mind in composing such a piece at the end of his life is anyone's guess, but it does come across as a Aristotelian examination of conscience of sorts, as if to say, I could have gone this way or that way, but I went my own way. That individuality is reflected in the final section of the piece, a mesmerizing passacaglia which contains a paraphrase from his last opera,*Death in Venice.*

There is also the possibility that the whole thing is a practical joke of some sort, as much within this score, despite some surface seriousness, is actually quite whimsical.

The Britten quartet received the most polished performance of the evening and called upon all four players to be at the top of their game to make it work. Unlike the Beethoven, where it seemed that Watkins was still filling another's shoes, every aspect of this performance was more unified and organic.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

BBC music MAGAZINE

January 21, 2021

R Schumann: String Quartets Nos 1-3

By Stephen Johnson

It seems that at last people are really starting to get Schumann's chamber music. The Piano Quintet has always been popular, but the three string quartets he wrote the same year are marvels too. It's just that they're subtler, less extrovert, at times more enigmatic. Here's playing that penetrates this music to a degree that surprised even a fully paid-up fan like me. The Emerson are such a fine ensemble, but they're also four strongly individual personalities. The element of dialogue in Schumann's quartet-writing is forefronted beautifully. At times it's tender and intimate, like a conversation by the fireside in Schumann's Leipzig home; at others it's more troubled and inward – as though this time the voices are contending within Schumann's own head.

A potential problem with this music is the amount of rhythmic repetition, especially of oddly off-beat figures, but the Emersons have such a natural, vital feel for this that it leaves one wondering why people ever had a problem with it. As for structure, the lines are persuasively shaped, and structurally all the quirks and lateral side-steps make perfect sense.

This is also, hand on heart, the first time that I've really grasped these three works as a cycle. Listen to them in one sitting if you can: it's wonderfully illuminating and moving. Far more than his protégé Brahms, and in a very different way from Beethoven, Schumann had a truly Classical, Haydnesque feel for what made the string quartet genre unique.

The recordings serve the performances admirably. Recommended to believers and agnostics alike.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

the Strad

November 26, 2020

Emerson Quartet: Schumann

By Julian Haylock

Schumann's three string quartets are like no other. Without the piano as an expressive-textural focal point there is a strange sense of 'something missing' on occasion, they are not traditionally idiomatic in their scoring or part-writing, and overall they lack the striking memorability of, say, the Piano Quintet or op.88 Fantasiestücke for piano trio. And yet there is a late-Fauré-like purity about these three masterworks that is uniquely special – there is not one superfluous note along the way, nor the slightest hint of self-conscious display (although they are by no means easy to play).

The Emerson Quartet, on its debut recording for Pentatone, benefits from detailed yet gently cushioned sound, ideal for Schumann's autumnal inspiration. Compared to the startling, revisionist readings of nos.1 & 3 from the Zehetmair Quartet (ECM), the Emerson is much closer to the Romantic interpretative mainstream of, say, the Italian Quartet (Philips/Decca). Indeed, the predominance of cantabile-style, medium-paced vibrato and portamentoed espressivo intensity sound remarkably like early-1960s vintage Amadeus Quartet. Most importantly, the Emerson plays these elusive pieces with an infectious warmth, gentle, unhurried poise and captivating insight that feel wholly at one with the music's unflashy inspiration. When even the blatantly pianistic syncopations of the Third Quartet's opening movement emerge sounding completely natural, one is clearly in the safest of hands.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

LIMELIGHT
Music, Arts & Culture

December 4, 2020

Schumann: String Quartets

The Emersons transform Schumann's emotional volatility into pure gold.

By Greg Keane

Eugene Drucker, First Violin of the Emersons, writes that "rarely has mental instability created such a rich aesthetic harvest" as in the music of Robert Schumann, especially in the three string quartets, composed in a matter of weeks during 1842. While I agree with this observation, I've always suspected that the conjecture that these works convey incipient symptoms of bi-polarity is more an example of what psychiatrists term "narcissistic projection" – people foisting or "reading" their own neuroses onto others – than genuine analysis or insight.

That said, they are suffused with emotional volatility and undeniably intermittently febrile passages. Furthermore, Jed Distler, a reviewer whom I always admire, especially for his acerbic wit, wrote that the First Quartet (A Minor) is at times "sprawling". I find it hard to describe something which generally lasts less than 25' as "sprawling." I've always thought Schumann's first two quartets were models of concision.

The Emersons effectively emphasise the inherent polarity between the austere solemn 33-bar A Minor introduction and the relatively genial F Major which begins with the introduction and permeates most of the work between. Just as they perfectly emphasise the recurring syncopations in the rather darkly determined, uncannily Brahmsian *Scherzo* (Brahms was eight at the time) and the middle movements of the generally sunnier F Major second quartet, whose finale they make sound like Haydn, and the finale of the Third.

The real masterpiece, for me, has always been the A Major No 3. I loved their handling of the waltz-like first movement, although I fished out an old English Columbia LP of the Quartetto Italiano from the late fifties and, sure enough, the phrasing was even more affectionate. The Emersons' gavotte-like passage before the coda is also very witty, as is the rather subversive sleeve note analysis.

Gorgeous playing and sound!

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

wrti 90.1

July 29, 2019

Classical Album of the Week: Evgeny Kissin and Emerson Quartet's Memorable Carnegie Hall Performance

By Debra Lew Harder

July 29, 2019. When Evgeny Kissin made a rare chamber music appearance with the Emerson Quartet in April 2017, Carnegie Hall quickly sold out. The veteran artists chose to collaborate in three masterworks from the piano/strings chamber reperotire, and the resulting concert and encore nearly "lifted the lid off the hall," said *The New York Times*.

Deutsche Grammophon captured the performance, and we've made it our Classical Album of the Week.

Mozart created the first masterwork for the piano quartet form (piano, violin, viola and cello) and his understanding of what each instrument can do, and can do together, is astonishingly revealed in the ensemble's performance of his G minor Quartet, K. 478, which opens the album.

Less successful is the ensemble's rendition of the later, Romantic works on the album, Gabriel Fauré's Piano Quartet in C minor, Op. 15, and Antonin Dvorak's Piano Quintet No. 2 in A major, Op. 81.

Both are great works, powerful and lyrical in their distinctive ways. In both, the string writing is more exposed, and as a result, less-than-ideal intonation, passagework, and tone production at times from the upper strings is evident. However, Kissin's playing remains majestic and brilliant throughout, and drives the performance.

Departing from the Classical/Romantic vein for their encore, the Scherzo from Shostakovich's Piano Quintet, Op. 57, displays an earthy, propulsive, percussive quality that suits the ensemble exceptionally well. How would the group interpret the entire quintet? It's an intriguing question.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

BBC MUSIC

September 2017

BRITTEN

String Quartets Nos 2 and 3

PURCELL

Chacony in G minor; Fantasias Nos 6, 8, 10 and 11

Emerson Quartet

Decca 481 5204 71:02 mins

Britten composed his String Quartet No. 2 in 1945 for the 250th anniversary of the death of Henry Purcell, and its earliest recording, by the Zorian String Quartet, included Purcell's *Fantasia Upon One Note* as a fill-up, with Britten himself playing the Note on his viola.

Now, in this well thought-out programme, the Emerson String Quartet preface Britten's last two quartets with four of Purcell's four-part Fantasias, and begin with Britten's arrangement of Purcell's Chacony in G minor – the precedent for the sets of variations on a ground bass that conclude both of the Britten quartets. The Emersons further bridge the gap of centuries by delivering the Chacony and Fantasia No. 10 with plenty of vibrato, but adopting a more 'authentic' viol-like timbre for the other fantasias – setting up a link with the glassy sonorities Britten asks for in the introduction to the finale of his Third Quartet.

The readings, as one might expect, are full of insightful nuances, but the outstanding feature is their structural cogency. Where the outer movement of Britten's Second can sound sectional in looser-limbed performances, here they are held together in single sweeps. The Emersons also bring out how the apparently sudden burst of fast music in the opening movement of the Third actually derives from a tiny cross-rhythm in its exposition. Only in its unearthly slow movement does leader Philip Setzer fail quite to attain the transfixing sweetness one recalls of Norbert Brainin when the Amadeus Quartet gave the premiere to a subdued Snape Maltings audience in December 1976, just a fortnight after Britten died. *Bayan Northcott*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★

RECORDING ★★★★

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

theStrad
VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

October 2017

CHACONNES AND FANTASIAS
BRITTEN String Quartets no.2 in C major op.36 & no.3 in G major op.94
PURCELL Chacony in G minor (arr. Britten), Fantazias nos 6, 8, 10 & 11
Emerson Quartet
DECCA GOLD 4815204

The musical relationships between Britten and his illustrious forebear Purcell are explored on this neatly conceived programme, which intermingles two of the later composer's three numbered quartets with some of the earlier's fantasias originally written for viols.

First, though, comes Britten's arrangement (more interventionist and Romanticised than today's historically informed performance police would surely allow) of Purcell's G minor Chacony, to which the Emerson players bring warmth of tone and lucidity of line, as well as a strong emotional shape. The four fantazias are given in a more tonally restrained style, sounding appropriately viol-like with often a quite sparing vibrato.

The form of the chaconne became one of Britten's own favourites, furnishing the finale of his Second Quartet, composed in 1945 to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Purcell's death and, in its related form of the passacaglia, that of his valedictory Third (1975). Both quartets are played with intensity and insight, and here the fantasy of the disc's title is as much at play as in the Purcell, with a freshness to the solo playing and a transcendence to the ensemble work. If the players' performance of no.2 conveys the still-youthful composer experimenting with textures and form, that of no.3 gets to the confessional heart of the music, with a last chord that has rarely sounded so troublingly inconclusive.

MATTHEW RYE

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Sydney Morning Herald

May 10, 2017

Emerson Quartet – Complete DG Recordings (DG)

By Barney Zwartz

★★★★

Great quartets seem not only to play with perfect understanding, but even to breathe together. Yet at the same time each musician – responsible for a quarter of the sound – must play with individual colour and shading. Few modern quartets can meet this complex challenge so beautifully as the Emersons, with their trademark clarity and technique. Playing together for more than four decades, they have won nine Grammys and three Gramophone awards, with only one change in personnel, cellist Paul Watkins replacing David Finckel in 2013. The *Times* went so far as to opine "with musicians like this there must be some hope for humanity". Hyperbole, but not without merit. This 52-CD collection, all their recordings for DG, marvellously encapsulates the art of the string quartet. It includes the complete quartets of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Bartok and Shostakovich, plus works by Haydn, Schubert and Tchaikovsky through to a rich array of 20th century composers (Janacek, Berg, Webern, Zeisl, Rorem, Nielsen and more). Violinists Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer democratically switch roles, but I can seldom pick them.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

MUSICAL TORONTO

May 16, 2017

The Emerson String Quartet Go All English For Anniversary Release

By Paul E. Robinson

Looking back now, more than 40 years after the death of Benjamin Britten (1913-1976), it seems more certain than ever that this great musician was one of the leading composers, not only of his own time, but of any time. The message of Britten's *War Requiem,* one of his most frequently performed works, will surely resonate down the years with audiences saddened by the last war and fearful of a next. *Peter Grimes, Billy Budd*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are staples of opera houses everywhere around the world. Among all the great composers, Britten was second to none in being able to perfectly marry words to music.

This new recording by the Emerson explores a side of Britten that is often overlooked: his admiration for Henry Purcell (1659-1695) and how that admiration was expressed in his music. Britten made 'realizations' or modern performing editions of numerous Purcell works, including *Dido and Aeneas*, *The Fairy Queen*, and the *Chacony* for strings included on this new CD. He also composed his own *Chacony* as the last movement of his String Quartet No. 2, a *Chacony* that also turns up in his Suite No. 2 for cello, as well as in several of his other compositions. A chacony or chaconne is a set of variations, repeated over and over, on a ground bass. A close relative of the chacony is the passacaglia in which the variations are based on a chord sequence rather than on a repeated bass line. Britten was also fond of the passacaglia as evidenced by his String Quartet No. 3, *Peter Grimes*, the Suite No. 3 for cello and a number of other works.

The Emerson String Quartet plays the Purcell pieces on this CD with at least a nod to period performance practice; yes, vibrato is used sparingly, but one misses the sound of the period instruments. Furthermore, these are not really string quartet pieces — Haydn created the genre about 40 years after the death of Purcell – but they are thoughtful and appropriate companion pieces for the Britten quartets.

The String Quartet No. 2 (1945) demonstrates that at 32, Britten had already mastered the art of writing for strings. Not nearly as radical as his Hungarian contemporary Béla Bartók, his String Quartet No. 2 nevertheless has a striking originality. Much of his music is lyrical and accessible but beneath that approachable exterior lies music of remarkable complexity. That is certainly the case with Quartet No. 2. A distinctive feature of the last movement is a sequence of cadenzas for cello, viola, and violin. The Emerson musicians play with their usual impeccable intonation and beauty of sound and bring special artistry to the cadenzas.

String Quartet No. 3 was composed in 1975 when Britten was in the throes of

the heart illness that ultimately ended his life. It is autumnal music in some ways, particularly in its borrowings from the composer's last opera, *Death in Venice*, which is based on a Thomas Mann novella of the same title, and concerns a dying man's infatuation with a beautiful young boy he sees on the beach in Venice. Britten himself was gay; in the opera and in the quartet he found ways to express some of his most personal feelings. In his later years, Britten came to know some of the greatest Russian artists, among them Rostropovich and Richter. He also met and admired Shostakovich, and the feeling was mutual. In this last quartet, there are strong echoes of the Shostakovich string quartets, surely a gesture of homage to his friend who died August 9, 1975, while Britten was working on this piece. Once again, the Emerson String Quartet gives a performance superb in every respect.

The Emerson String Quartet was founded in 1976 and even with personnel changes – most recently (2013) cellist Paul Watkins replaced David Finckel — it remains the gold standard for string quartets. The quartet has recorded for Deutsche Grammophon for many years, but this new release appears on one of Universal Music Classics other house labels, appropriately, Decca Gold.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

THE LISTENERS' CLUB

May 1, 2017

New Release: The Emerson's "Chaconnes and Fantasias: Music of Britten and Purcell"

By Timothy Judd

The Emerson String Quartet's newest album spans three hundred years of English music. *Chaconnes and Fantasias: Music of Britten and Purcell* balances twentieth century composer Benjamin Britten's Second and Third String Quartets with Chaconnes and Fantasias by baroque composer Henry Purcell (1659-1695). This year marks the Emerson Quartet's 40th anniversary. This latest recording is the first to included British cellist Paul Watkins, who joined the group in 2013.

The Emerson Quartet approaches Purcell's *Fantasias* (probably all written during the summer of 1680) through the lens of baroque performance practice. (In *Fantasia No. 6 in F Major,* a vibrant musical conversation unfolds through a rich tapestry of imitative counterpoint). By contrast, they offer a more modern interpretation of the *Chacony in G Minor,* using Benjamin Britten's performance edition. Listen to the array of adventures which unfold over this single repeating passacaglia bass line, ultimately fading into quiet melancholy in the final bars.

The final movement of Britten's *String Quartet No. 2,* written in 1945, pays homage to Purcell's Chaconne. You'll hear echoes of the stately baroque dotted rhythm and passacaglia bass line from the excerpt above. But here, the ghosts of past composers emerge in a distinctly twentieth century sound world. The movement, which is longer than the preceding two movements combined, opens with an expansive unison statement of the theme, followed by 21 variations. Solo cadenzas bring sometimes raucous interjections between variations.

There's something about Britten's music which often gives me a visceral sense of infinite space and timelessness. This quality is present in the shimmering *Four Sea Interludes* from Britten's opera, *Peter Grimes*, completed the same year as the Second String Quartet. It occurs at strange moments throughout this final movement- in the surreal unison opening, in this passage where, for a brief moment, you can almost hear the Sunday morning bells of *Peter Grimes,* and in the repeated C major chords of the final bars which provide a defiant resolution while seeming to extend into the silence beyond.

The Zorian Quartet's November 21, 1945 premiere of Britten's Second String Quartet at Wigmore Hall marked the 250th anniversary of Purcell's death. The Emerson String Quartet's recent album highlights the kindred bond which seems to exist between Britten and Purcell.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

ET EPOCH TIMES

April 23, 2017

‘Music of Britten and Purcell’

The Emerson String Quartet, still going strong after 40 years

By Barry Bassis

The Emerson String Quartet is in the midst of its 40th anniversary season, and the group is marking the occasion with, among other events, a new CD and an upcoming concert at Carnegie Hall.

The group’s members are Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer on violins, Lawrence Dutton on viola and Paul Watkins on cello. Watkins, a well-known soloist, conductor and chamber musician, joined in 2013, when he replaced cellist David Finckel.

The Quartet has received numerous awards over the years, including nine Grammy Awards, the Avery Fisher Prize and has been named Musical America’s “Ensemble of the Year.”

The new CD may be considered a tip of the hat to Watkins, who comes from the British Isles. The CD is titled “Music of Britten and Purcell” (on Decca Gold).

The two leading British composers of their respective times lived three centuries apart—Henry Purcell from 1659 to 1695 and Britten from 1913 to 1976. The 20th century composer was an avowed admirer of Purcell and famously incorporated his music into his popular work, “The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra,” Opus 34 (1946).

The album begins with Purcell’s “Chacony in G Minor, Z 730” in an arrangement by Britten (who also wrote an arrangement of the piece for string orchestra). The genesis of the work is unknown and even the title is mysterious. Why, for example, did Purcell call it a “chacony” and not a chaconne? The 18 variations on an 8-bar theme are stately, with a hint of melancholy.

The Quartet performs Purcell’s Fantasias numbered 6, 8, 10 and 11. These are believed to have been written when the composer was about 21 years old and were intended as musical exercises in counterpoint. Like Bach’s “Art of the Fugue,” to which these works have been compared, the beauty of the music surpasses the technical nature of the work.

Britten’s String Quartet No. 2 (1945) is certainly a fitting piece for the album since it was created to

commemorate the 250th anniversary of Purcell's death. The last section is titled a "Chacony," an explicit reference to the word Purcell used and may have coined. The work skillfully combines influences from Purcell as well as the 20th century Russian composer Shostakovich.

Britten's String Quartet No. 3 was composed in 1973, near the end of the composer's life. The piece goes through various changes, from a duet that turns adversarial to a burlesque and ending with a recitative and passacaglia entitled "La Serenissima." This is a reference to Britten's final opera, "Death in Venice," and, as one might expect, the music, some of which is taken from the opera, is haunting.

The Emerson Quartet moves effortlessly across the centuries to achieve a unity in the related if stylistically different works by two great English composers. The album, the group's first, with Watkins, is consistent with their high standards.

The group will appear at 3 p.m. on May 7 in Carnegie Hall's Stern Auditorium, in a concert featuring the Ravel and Berg Quartets and the Brahms Quintet with pianist Yefim Bronfman. Lovers of chamber music will not want to miss this concert.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

classicalMPR

August 31, 2016

New Classical Tracks: Emerson String Quartet, Complete Recordings

By Julie Amacher

LISTEN **New Classical Tracks: Emerson String Quartet - Complete Recordings (DG)**
4min 59sec

Click to listen or visit http://bit.ly/2c0xzjm

Time flies when you're having fun — just ask violinist Eugene Drucker, one of the founding members of the Emerson String Quartet. Forty years later, the quartet is still going strong — so you might be wondering: what is the secret to maintaining a long working relationship? "I think mutual respect is very important," Eugene says. "You have to be not only tolerant of the differences between yourself and others but actually open to learning from different ways of doing things. A sense of humor is also important and the ability to take a step back ... and being able to laugh at oneself when your needs or desires are not necessarily met in a given situation. So I would say a sense of humor is an important lubricant."

The Emerson String Quartet is a well-oiled machine, whose creative work is documented in a new 52-CD, limited-edition box set of its complete recordings. I asked Eugene where he would suggest you start listening. "That's a good question - I haven't thought about that," he ponders. "You know, my advice to that person might depend a little bit on what I know of that person's musical taste and the extent to which he or she is indoctrinated in the world of classical music in general and in the world of chamber music. So, for example, we have found that Shostakovich's music has a really visceral effect on audiences when we perform it. So it might surprise you if I would suggest that they listen to a Shostakovich quartet to begin with instead of Haydn or Mozart. But I think for some people who are not that familiar with the repertoire and the way in which the narrative of the string quartet unfolds — for example in the classical period, late 18th century — I might try to find something that feels like it's from the more recent past to recommend to them.

"But I would want that person to sooner or later listen to the way we interpreted Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven," Eugene continues. "If you take the totality of Beethoven's work, those 16 quartets, which clearly divide into the early, middle, and late periods, you have really the cornerstone of the quartet repertoire. Music that to some extent was influenced by Haydn and Mozart and even music way before the existence of the string quartet. But most significantly, music that had a huge effect on generations of composers that followed Beethoven. So very early in this hypothetical listening project I would suggest that the person listen to some of the Beethoven quartets."

When I started to scan everything that's in this set, one thing that caught my ear was the Mendelssohn Octet. It's a unique performance featuring each member of the Emerson String Quartet on two different parts, using different instruments. "That's right," Eugene confirms. "We used the different instruments in order to try to differentiate our sounds as much as possible. So for example, when I played first violin and fourth violin, the sounds were somewhat different. Of course, it was still me playing and by the way the nature of the way those parts are written is quite different. The first violin is the lead line, it's very extroverted, very flamboyant, concerto-like writing. The fourth violin is more of a team player. But the fourth violin does get a couple of very beautiful, lyrical solos in the course of that octet. Each one of us then used a pairing of a new instrument for one part and an old Italian instrument for the other part he was playing. In addition to that, we sat in different places on the stage. So for the audience, the imaginary configuration of this group that one is listen to — let's say you're in your living room, listening on your stereo system ... there are eight different locations of sound coming out of your speakers. We didn't want a flatness of texture, of the auditory impression it made on the listeners.

"A lot of this was conceived by our brilliant recording producer and engineer, Da-Hong Seetoo, who himself is an excellent violinist," Eugene adds. "He had to build hardware into his computer, I think, at that time in order to give a sense of this kind of spatial dimension in which this imaginary octet was functioning. He did a great job."

So I'm looking at the list of all the special guests with whom you've performed over the years. Can you share a memorable story about your experience with that special guest?

"We performed and recorded the Schubert Cello Quintet with Rostropovich in late 1990. We performed the Quintet with Slava, and David Finckel, our cellist, had studied with Slava and absolutely worshiped him. As a young man, David followed him around, trying to get lessons whenever he could ... [Rostropovich] was a big drinker and got us all to drink a lot during that week we were together. It was a very festive time. We enjoyed the dinners we had with him and the mayor and the cultural department of BASF. He also had an apartment in Paris that was one of his homes, and our next stop was Paris, where we had a

concert without him in a Sunday morning series, at the Champs Elysées. He offered us a ride in the Falcon jet that was made available to him by the head of the BASF Corporation because he was president of the festival. So we rode in that Falcon jet with him and the champagne flowed freely during that one-hour flight, I can tell you that."

In 2013, David Finckel decided to step down after spending 34 years with the Emerson String Quartet. That was an emotional transition for the ensemble, that was made easier by the addition of Paul Watkins. "Paul is an amazing and versatile musician. He's an accomplished pianist and fine conductor in addition to being a stellar cellist," Eugene explains. "David Finckel of course was a hard act to follow, and nobody was more aware of this than Paul himself. Paul is a different sort of cellist — his sound is different — the cello sound is a foundation of the string quartet's tone. So in addition to sound there's a question of pacing of our interpretations and I think that the rhythmic sense might be a little bit looser now than it was before. A little more expansive than times, especially looking back 15 or 20 years the way we used to play or record the Beethoven quartets, for example, where we were very conscious of B's metronome markings ... it's a different experience with Paul and the general tone so to speak in our rehearsals is very relaxed and friendly. It's almost like a social club getting together. But we also have the great joy of playing all these wonderful pieces. Preparing them and then performing them together. There's a really strong collegial sense of enthusiasm."

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Boston Globe

December 12, 2015

The best classical albums of 2015: Jeremy Eichler

7. EMERSON QUARTET AND RENEÉ FLEMING

Works by Berg and Wellesz From the venerable Emersons comes this generous serving of sensuous Viennese modernism. Best known is Berg's "Lyric Suite," in which they are joined by Fleming, who also lends a glowing soprano to an Egon Wellesz rarity, the "Sonnets by Elizabeth Barrett-Browning."

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Guardian

December 21, 2015

Andrew Clements' top 10 classical CDs of 2015

2. Berg: Lyric Suite; Wellesz: Sonnets – Fleming/Emerson Quartet (Decca)

The Emerson Quartet's new lease of life with Paul Watkins as their cellist is perfectly demonstrated in their warmly expressive account of Berg's masterpiece, which also includes the "secret" vocal version of the finale, sung by Renée Fleming.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

SINFINI MUSIC

December 21, 2015

Norman Lebrecht : Albums of the Year 2015

Still in small form, the Emerson Quartet's choice (on Decca) of Berg's Lyric Suite with unknown works by two Hitler refugees, Egon Wellesz and Eric Zeisl, struck me as the most daring and compelling venture the group has attempted in its long and justly lauded lifetime – and that's without mentioning Renée Fleming as the vocal bonus to the Lyric Suite. The sound is just stunning.

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

The Guardian

September 9, 2015

Berg: Lyric Suite; Wellesz: Sonnets CD review - emotional directness and technical assurance

By Andrew Clements

Alban Berg's Lyric Suite has always seemed an intensely personal work, a string quartet larded with autobiographical allusions, which appeared the most likely explanation for the quotations from Wagner's Tristan und Isolde and Zemlinsky's Lyric Symphony that it explicitly includes. But it was not until the 1970s that the full extent and importance of those references became clear. The Berg scholar George Perle was given access to a copy of the printed score of the quartet containing Berg's handwritten annotations, detailing not only the programme behind each of the six movements, which charted the progress of Berg's affair with Hanna Fuchs-Robettin, the wife of a Prague industrialist, but also the hidden text of the final movement, revealed as a setting of a German translation of Baudelaire's De Profundis Clamavi, from Les Fleurs du Mal.

Whether Berg ever intended the Lyric Suite to be performed with the text of the Largo Desolato movement sung by a soprano seems doubtful. But it has been recorded in that form a few times before, most recently by the Quatuor Diotime and Sandrine Piau for Naive in 2011. The Emerson Quartet offers the option of both finales, with the version with soprano – Renée Fleming no less – following the traditional one on the disc. Fleming sings with velvety evenness, threading her vocal line through the swirling strings, but in a rather impersonal, neutral way. But it's the performance of the whole work by the Emersons that it is so remarkable; there is much more emotional directness, less of the usual armour-plated efficiency about their playing, and that, combined with the total technical assurance, suits the world of late Berg perfectly.

The pairing with another nearly contemporary work for soprano and string quartet is a hugely rewarding one too. Egon Wellesz was a pupil of Schoenberg alongside Berg and Webern in the mid-1900s, and remained in contact with the group until the rise of the Nazis forced him to flee Vienna in 1938; he came to England and eventually settled in Oxford. His Sonnets are settings of those by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in German translations by Stefan George, composed in 1934. They show Wellesz's music at that time to be closest to Berg's, but still retaining echoes of Brahms, Mahler and even Richard Strauss. The vocal and string writing are both immaculate, and the world of each song is perfectly evoked; Fleming handles them all with great care.