

Ivalas Quartet



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The Juilliard School
presents

Lisa Arnhold Memorial Recital

Ivalas Quartet

Reuben Kebede and Tiani Butts, Violins

Marcus Stevenson, Viola

Pedro Sánchez-Mijares, Cello

Tuesday, May 21, 2024, 7:30pm

Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall

LUDWIG VAN
BEETHOVEN
(1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 16 in F Major, Op. 135 (1826)

Allegretto

Vivace

Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo

“Der schwer gefaßte Entschluß” Grave, ma non troppo tratto
(“Muss es sein?”)—Allegro (“Es muss sein!”)—Grave, ma non
troppo tratto—Allegro

ALVIN SINGLETON
(b. 1940)

String Quartet No. 3, *Somehow We Can* (1994)

Intermission

FELIX MENDELSSOHN
(1809-47)

String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor, Op. 13 (1827)

Adagio—Allegro vivace

Adagio non lento

Intermezzo: Allegretto con moto—Allegro di molto

Presto—Adagio non lento

Performance time: approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes, including an intermission

The members of the Ivalas Quartet are Lisa Arnhold Fellows at Juilliard. Juilliard’s graduate resident string quartet is supported by the Arnhold Foundation and the George L. Shields Foundation.

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The Ivalas Quartet on Tonight's Program

Shortly before the end of his extraordinarily productive life, Ludwig van Beethoven wrote a question on the score of the final movement of his last completed major work, the String Quartet No. 16: "Muss es sein?" ("Must it be?") Later, on another page in the same movement, he answered his own question with "Es muss sein!"—"It must be!" What did Beethoven mean with this enigmatic question and its answer?

Alvin Singleton's quartets are known for their curious, often provocative, titles, like *Secret Desire to Be Black* and *Hallelujah Anyhow*. Singleton's third string quartet, *Somehow We Can*, was written shortly after the death of Marian Anderson, a champion of and icon for Black musicians in classical music. Dedicated to her, the quartet musically evokes the kind of speculation Beethoven sparked with his question. Often sparse and filled with speechlike interjections and figures, Singleton's quartet offers the listener a complex and compelling experience. While Singleton does not explicitly offer a written question like Beethoven, after hearing *Somehow We Can* and its conclusion, one may pose the question "Can we?"

Shortly after Beethoven's death, the budding young composer, Felix Mendelssohn, posed his own question in a similar manner, writing "Ist es wahr?" ("Is it true?") on the score to his String Quartet No. 2. Was Mendelssohn making a connection with Beethoven's final quartet and its similar musical question? Like Beethoven, Mendelssohn responds with a three-note answer at least twice: in the main theme of the first movement and again at the very end of the quartet. Considering Mendelssohn's admiration for Beethoven, the connection seems undeniable.

Notes on the Program by Gavin Plumley

String Quartet No. 16 in F Major, Op. 135 LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

The importance of chamber music to Beethoven was underlined by the composer's own superscriptions in the last movement of his String Quartet No. 16. The work's Finale is subtitled "Der schwer gefaßte Entschluß" (The Difficult Decision) and it begins with a question. Annotated in the score, the music asks: "Muß es sein?" (Must it be?). The answer comes in the form of the main Allegro theme: "Es muß sein!" (It must be!).

There is an element of self-parody here. Can something so existential—and, according to Beethoven's own description, difficult—be answered so quickly? Or has it been resolved by the 16 quartets Beethoven wrote over the course of his life, of which this is the last? Yet the question remains, indicating just how crucial this work must have been to the composer as well as revealing something of his persistent quest for musical and philosophical insight over the course of a long and often gruelling career.

The opening bars of the F-major quartet, penned in October 1826 in the winemaking hamlet of Gneixendorf in Lower Austria—nowadays an hour's drive from central Vienna—are no less inquisitive. But, as in the Finale, initial uncertainty is answered quickly and with diatonic confidence. The unison that follows, on the other hand, picks at the awkward intervals of a second and a seventh, contradicting such easy solutions. The tonic having been denied, its subsequent arrival is both understated and rather brief.

Throughout, Beethoven nods toward Classical style, though nothing adheres to our expectations of tonic-dominant interplay and equal phrase lengths, hackneyed though they may be. Similarly, the opening movement, tracking sonata form, refuses to be broken down into easily digestible sections, with the sheer variety and development of its motifs engendering a feeling of discovery and change throughout. But the movement is likewise keen not to overstate its case and concludes in a surprisingly pert manner. In music, Hegel said, it is not objectivity but "the most intimate self" that resounds, with Beethoven simultaneously revealing so much and so little.

The second movement, pushing through the composer's customary scherzo vein to a more daring vivace, again tries to evade the listener's grasp. Syncopation and a drastic harmonic shift in the second section are both emphatic and surprising. No sooner has Beethoven moved into E-flat Major than the music is chirruping back in the original F Major. The violins then play a ditty in clear triple time, though the slurred, staggering accompaniment provides insecure foundations, as do the ensuing series of modulations that evade the tonic, before the music makes its way home via A Major.

**Ludwig van
Beethoven**

Born:
c. December 16,
1770, in Bonn,
Germany

Died:
March 26, 1827,
in Vienna

Notes on the Program (Continued)

The opening notes of the Lento portend the tonic minor—an F in the viola, followed by an A-flat in the second violin—but Beethoven then lands in a balmy D-flat Major. The slow harmonic pace and intense homophony prove sincere before the music transfers to the tonic minor for a stuttering and winded variation on the initial theme. Finally, the third section, back in the tonic proper, offers an even more heartfelt version of the original. If anything in this quartet suggests the autumnal scenes Beethoven would have observed out of his window while writing this music, with the last vines having been stripped around Gneixendorf, it is to be found in the tranquil, disarming Lento.

The balm poured, the Finale then returns to the cat-and-mouse games of the first two movements, though the seriousness of the slow movement has also left its mark. A dark introduction in F Minor poses the famous question. The lower strings ask and the upper strings respond, with the silence between the two proving just as eloquent. Having found no lasting solution, Beethoven returns to F Major with glee. The harmonic language is, again, far from clear, and a series of cadences, featuring more breathless pauses, fails to confirm the tonal goal. When the music shifts to A Major, some conviction may be perceived, though this is also not the destination. As a result, the development has to be particularly thorough in its search for the right answer, before Beethoven finally forges a new relationship with the tonic during the recapitulation. So if the answer to “the difficult question” is to be found within this quartet, it is one based on the building blocks of music. Or as Theodor Adorno put it: “Beethoven’s music is an image of that process which great philosophy understands the world to be. An image, therefore, not of the world but of an interpretation of the world.”

String Quartet No. 3, *Somehow We Can* ALVIN SINGLETON

Alvin Singleton was educated at NYU and Yale before studying at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome on a Fulbright fellowship. Influenced by contemporary European music, improvisation, jazz, and his African American roots, albeit tempered by the civil rights struggle, he has created a broad, emotionally engaging output. His four string quartets span 52 years of his career. The first, dating to 1967, bares no title, though its three successors have all been named: *Secret Desire to Be Black* (1988), composed for the Kronos Quartet; *Somehow We Can* (1994), which we hear this evening; and *Hallelujah Anyhow* (2019), commissioned by Chamber Music America and the Andrew Mellon Foundation for the Momenta Quartet, which recorded the complete cycle.

Somehow We Can was first performed at Alice Tully Hall in February 1995 by the Marian Anderson String Quartet, having been commissioned by the Eastman School of Music in memory of the ensemble's namesake, the celebrated contralto. A civil rights pioneer, she was the first African American singer to appear at the Metropolitan Opera, in 1955.

Like its assenting title, *Somehow We Can* is a headlong, confident work, with the opening unison B-flat providing a centring device. Played as a violent tremolando, "tutta la forza," and with rhythmic interplay among the four musicians, it is nonetheless more propulsive than gathering. Repeated, the section would appear to have primacy, though the contrast with a harmonically rich and lachrymose music thwarts the initial understanding. The juxtaposition of the two engenders an unpredictability, even a rage, that is both engaging and destabilizing, the one making you hanker for the other as well as for the silence that mediates between the two. It is also a matter of energy and sheer force, as needed to maintain both the tremolandos and the dampening calm of a prayerful beauty that dares to soothe, to speak, and to sing.

Alvin Singleton

Born:
December 28, 1940,
in Brooklyn

String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor, Op. 13 FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Felix Mendelssohn

Born:

February 3, 1809,
in Hamburg,
Germany

Died:

November 4, 1847,
in Leipzig, Germany

Felix Mendelssohn's second string quartet was written in October 1827, when the prodigious composer was just 18. Numbered second, it was, in fact, his first mature contribution to the genre, preceding "No. 1" in E-flat Major, Op. 12, by two years. Similarly misleading is the idea that it is "in" A Minor, at least at first, with the beginning of the work reversing expected tonal relationships by having an introductory Adagio in A Major.

Mendelssohn explained on the autograph manuscript that this was a quartet "sopra il tema" and even provided an incipit from "Frage," the first song of his *Zwölf Lieder*, Op. 9, which he had written earlier in 1827. The text, concerning matters of fidelity and likewise written by the composer, asks "Ist es wahr?" (Is it true?). Framing the song, this questioning motif similarly bookends the quartet, its dotted gestures spurring the trill that leads into the hectic energy of the first movement proper, dominated by those inquisitive rhythms.

The ensuing Adagio begins in the same mood as the start of the work, though it again belies the argument at the movement's core, here told in fugal form. The model was surely the middle section of the slow movement of Beethoven's String Quartet No. 11 in F Minor, Op. 95. This was a heartfelt tribute. Mendelssohn's teacher Carl Friedrich Zelter had often showed his pupil works by Haydn and Mozart, though Beethoven was considered too modern. Thankfully, Mendelssohn then visited Goethe in Weimar in November 1821, admittedly under Zelter's escort, when the young composer was invited to play through autograph manuscripts by both Mozart and Beethoven, thereby influencing his string quartet writing. In October 1827, when Mendelssohn composed this A-minor work, the music world was still grieving for Beethoven, who had died six months earlier.

The Intermezzo is entirely Mendelssohn's own soundworld as the tenacity relents and a lilting theme is contrasted with the kind of scurrying music associated with his incidental score for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—the Overture dated to the previous summer. A more turbulent mood then returns in the Finale, announced by a cadenza-like passage for the first violinist. This is followed by a charging Rondo, drawing its model from another Beethoven string quartet: No. 15 in A Minor, Op. 132. Occasionally, and as if marking the great man's death, Mendelssohn proves more reflective, though these passages also prepare for the conclusion, with the searching motifs of "Frage" bringing us full circle.

Gavin Plumley specializes in the music and culture of Central Europe and appears frequently on BBC radio as well as writing for newspapers, magazines, opera houses, and concert halls around the world. He is the commissioning editor of English-language program notes for the Salzburg Festival.

About the Ivalas Quartet



Consisting of violinists Reuben Kebede and Tiani Butts, violist Marcus Stevenson, and cellist Pedro Sánchez-Mijares, the Ivalas Quartet has been changing the face of classical music since its inception, at the University of Michigan in 2017. Ivalas seeks to disrupt and enhance the classical music world by introducing more audiences to BIPOC composers past and present including Jessie Montgomery, Daniel Bernard Roumain, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and Eleanor Alberga. In 2020, the quartet performed George Walker's *Lyric for Strings* at Carnegie Hall and worked with his son to program George's String Quartet No. 1 with Friends of Chamber Music Denver and the Colorado Music Festival. In 2021, the quartet created the first recording of Carlos Simon's *Warmth of Other Suns* for Lara Downes' digital label Rising Sun Music. The Ivalas is the graduate resident string quartet at Juilliard, studying with the Juilliard String Quartet. Its members spent 2019 to 2022 in residence at the University of Colorado-Boulder under the mentorship of the Takács Quartet. It has performed in numerous festivals, including the Aspen Music Festival, Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, Madeline Island Chamber Music, and Bowdoin International Music Festival, and is a proud partner in performance and community engagement with the Sphinx Organization. The members of the quartet have a shared dedication to their roles as educators. Through the Sphinx Organization, Ivalas has presented educational programming in the metro Detroit area, with an emphasis on community engagement in schools with Black and Latinx communities. In Colorado, the quartet developed a partnership with El Sistema Colorado and was part of the Aspen Music Festival Musical Connections program. In New York City, the quartet enjoys working with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center on its Chamber Music Beginnings program. The Ivalas Quartet has nurtured students from the early stages of their musical journey to the collegiate level, with coaching experience including residencies at the University of Northern Iowa, University of Central Arkansas, Madeline Island Chamber Music, and MacPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis. In New York City, the quartet members coach student groups at Juilliard.

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