

Saturday, January 23, 2010 ■ 8 PM
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CYPRESS STRING QUARTET

Cecily Ward, Violin
Tom Stone, Violin
Ethan Filner, Viola
Jennifer Kloetzel, Cello

Jennifer Higdon, Composer

Quartet in G Minor, Op. 10
Animé et très décidé
Assez vif et bien rythmé
Andantino, doucement expressif
Très modéré: Très mouvementé

Claude Debussy
(1862-1918)

Comments by Jennifer Higdon

Impressions for String Quartet
Bright Palette
Quiet Art
To the Point
Noted Canvas

Jennifer Higdon
(b. 1962)

INTERMISSION

String Quartet, Op. 11
Molto allegro e appassionato
Molto adagio
Molto allegro

Samuel Barber
(1910-1981)

www.cypressquartet.com

Widely celebrated for the power of its performances and its passionate dedication to the genre, the Cypress String Quartet combines technical precision with imaginative programming to create unforgettable concert experiences. Cecily Ward, Tom Stone, Ethan Filner and Jennifer Kloetzel have shown an unfailing dedication to exploring the masterworks of the time-honored, classic chamber music repertoire with its unique and refreshingly open sound.

While individually acclaimed musicians in their own right with training from prestigious institutions including The Juilliard School, Interlochen Arts Academy, Cleveland Institute of Music, Guildhall School of Music and Drama and the Royal College of Music, the Cypress String Quartet has honed its ensemble skills with over 13 years experience performing around the world.

On top of a busy schedule of over 90 concerts each year at venues across America and internationally, including the Kennedy Center, Library of Congress, Stanford Lively Arts, Krannert Center and Ravinia Festival, the Cypress String Quartet is a vibrant member of the San Francisco arts community and is dedicated to reflecting and enriching the city's cultural landscape.

The Cypress String Quartet is excited to release the first volume of its collection of Beethoven's Late Quartets over three years. The highly anticipated first volume featuring the Op. 131 and Op. 135 string quartets was publicly launched in San Francisco in August, 2009.

Through its 'Call & Response' commissioning and outreach program, the Cypress String Quartet has created a dialogue between the old masters and living composers, performing known and loved repertoire in a fresh context and introducing ground-breaking new works to the chamber music genre. Over just a decade, the Cypress String Quartet has commissioned and premiered more than 25 new works, four of which are now included on *Chamber Music America's* list of "101 Great American Ensemble Works."

The Cypress String Quartet represents the voice of the new generation of American culture. As comfortable playing Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven in recital halls as it is being the foundation of multi-media collaborations, the Quartet brings passion, inspiration and enjoyment to every audience.

The members of the Cypress Quartet play on exceptional instruments, including violins by Antonio Stradivarius (1681) and Carlos Bergonzi (1733), a viola by Vittorio Bellarosa (1947) and a cello by Hieronymus Amati II (1701). The Cypress Quartet takes its name from the set of twelve love songs for string quartet, "The Cypressess" by Antonin Dvořák.

Quartet in G Minor, Op. 10**Claude Debussy (1862-1918)**

Some thirty-five years before Bartok's fourth quartet, Claude Debussy established a new direction in music with his G Minor Quartet which, along with his *L'après midi d'une faune*, put Impressionism on the musical map. The work represents a daring departure from standard string quartet writing at least in terms of cyclical form. Pierre Boulez speaks of Debussy as freeing the string quartet from "rigid structure, frozen rhetoric, and rigid aesthetics." Debussy himself said, "Any sounds in any combination and in any succession are henceforth free to be used in a musical continuity."

Melody, too, becomes secondary to tone colors and constantly shifting harmonies that break all the rules. Still, the opening melodic statement of the Debussy Quartet so grips us that we are conscious of its control over the whole quartet. Of its four movements, the second is probably the most startling, for here Debussy so loosens the thematic thread that the listener is forced to consider only texture. Because of this, the work stands as a model for twentieth century quartet composers, namely Webern and Bartók.

Any thoughts of watery Impressionism are dispelled in the first movement with its ferocious opening statement, the motto for the entire quartet. Debussy offers it in many guises resulting in great harmonic and melodic richness. Most noticeable in this movement is the repeated pattern of rising tension and release, each time more dramatic before the climactic end.

In the starkly contrasting second movement, the viola presents an *ostinato* version of the motto while the other instruments give a brilliant *pizzicato* show. The cello then offers accompaniment to the first violin's further explorations of the motto. All ends quietly.

One is reminded, in the elegiac third movement, of Debussy's statement in a 1894 letter to Chausson: "The color of my soul is iron-gray and sad bats wheel about the steeple of my dreams." The only consolation to sadness in this movement is beauty and a passionate tenderness. Both the viola and cello offer exquisite solos but not at the expense of the collaborative quality of the movement with its dramatic unison passages. Once again, all ends quietly after a return to the opening melody.

The ominous last movement brightens momentarily but grows dark again. The motto reappears in fugue form. New themes are developed then offered as accompaniment for the motto. Once again stark unison playing is contrasted against richly textured passages. An elaborate exploration leads to a breathtaking conclusion.

The work was premiered by the Ysaÿe Quartet in Paris on December 29, 1893.

"Impressions" for String Quartet**Jennifer Higdon (b. 1962)**

That Jennifer Higdon fares well under the most academic scrutiny yet retains a remarkable audience appeal seems reflected in her personality that has been described by Harrisburg Symphony conductor Stuart Malina, a classmate from Curtis years, as "kind, humble, and inspiring." Indeed, she is remarkably unassuming about being the second most performed American composer writing today. Only John Adams outscores her, and that can't be by much considering Higdon's statistics: more than two hundred performances a year of her works. Her beautiful and possibly best known piece, *blue cathedral*, has been programmed in multiple performances by more than 150 orchestras since its premiere in 2000 by the Curtis Symphony Orchestra.

She is equally modest about her six string quartets spun out in Haydnesque fashion—fearlessly but honoring the intimidating form. While her orchestral works receive more press, Jennifer Higdon's chamber music remains an important part of her output. This is certainly revealed in the 2006 Naxos CD, *Jennifer Higdon: Piano Trio/Voices/Impressions* recorded by the Cypress String Quartet, Anne Akiko Meyers, Alisa Weilerstein, Adam Neiman, Nicholas Kitchen, Melissa Kleinhart, Hsin-Yu Huang, and Mina Smith.

Jennifer Higdon comments on her work:

"Impressions" is a musical response to the artists of the Impressionist period in both music (Debussy and Ravel) and painting (Monet and Seurat). This work, like the Debussy and Ravel quartets, is in four movements. "Bright Palette", the first movement, refers both to the bright harmonic language of these composers and the brilliance of the paintings from this era, where light and bright colors are the focus. The second movement, "Quiet Art", is about the solitude in which artists work, and the passion and consistency that help to create a work of art. "To The Point" is a direct response to the Debussy and Ravel second movements, which both imitate the Gamelan that they heard at the 1889 World Exposition. In this movement, there is extensive use of *pizzicato* and other string colorings (as a reflection of the Gamelan ensemble's colorful percussion instruments). Each instrument has its own theme (as would a Gamelan instrumentalist) and there is no development of those themes (following Debussy and Ravel's lead). In addition, the word "point" in the title refers to the pointillistic technique in Impressionist painting. The final movement, "Noted Canvas" is a musical portrait of painting (in tribute to the many well-known canvases from this period). The chromatic, edgy language reflects the intensity of the Ravel 4th movement, and one of the motives is shaped similarly to one of the principal themes from the Debussy 4th movement. Musical materials from both the first and second movements are recalled in tribute to these two composers' craftsmanship in their own thematic development.

It was wonderful to be able to respond to the Debussy Quartet, written in 1893, the Ravel Quartet, written in 1903, with a quartet written in 2003. "Impressions" was commissioned by the Cypress String Quartet as part of their Call & Response series.

String Quartet, Op. 11

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

The outer movements of the Op. 11 quartet are its most modern if not its most famous. The opening statement is almost Beethovenian in its strength and rhythmic irregularity. A second theme is more lyrical but not without a sense of impending doom. The two-minute final movement comes close on the heels of the *Adagio* and returns to the fierce first statement.

The heart of this quartet is its middle movement which brings the sweet shock of recognition. This movement stands alone as Barber's most famous work, the *Adagio for Strings*, arranged for Toscanini and the NBC Symphony. Of course its fame was clenched forever as the theme of Oliver Stone's film, *Platoon*. Hearing it in its original string quartet version is a special kind of emotional revisit every bit as moving as its more popular treatments.

In his new *Dictionary of Chamber Music*, Arthur Cohn offers the following unrewarding description of the movement: *The Molto adagio is liturgical in sound, with chordal placements enriching a seventeen-note, monorhythmic-static theme that is ever repeated (eight times); thrice it is extended to eighteen successive sounds (some shortened), and three times to twenty-one.* That hardly seems adequate to describe the grief-stricken timelessness of the *Adagio* as it slowly pushes the strings to their highest ranges.

More enlightening might be Barber's own words quoted in Ewen's *American Composers*: "I have always believed that I need a circumference of silence. As to what happens when I compose, I really haven't the faintest idea." Barber is often criticized for his old-fashioned use of traditional musical language, certainly the language of this movement. True, he was no innovator, but neither was Brahms in the strictest sense. Both had their own subtle version of innovation deeply implanted in their music and not always evident to the casual listener.

Samuel Barber was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania and educated at The Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. He wrote the Op. 11 quartet in 1936 at the age of 26 while he was on a Pulitzer Traveling Scholarship. It was premiered the same year in Rome by the Pro Arte Quartet.

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