

presents...

ALEXANDER STRING QUARTET | Ensemble-in-Residence

Zakarias Grafilo | Violin
Yuna Lee | Violin

David Samuel | Viola
Sandy Wilson | Cello

ROBERT GREENBERG | Music Historian-in-Residence

Saturday, November 11, 2023 | 10am

Herbst Theatre

Music as a Mirror of Our World: The String Quartet from 1905 to 1946

Program 2: Russia

STRAVINSKY **Three Pieces for String Quartet**
No. 1
No. 2
No. 3

STRAVINSKY **Concertino**

INTERMISSION

PROKOFIEV **String Quartet No. 1 in B Minor, Opus 50**
Allegro
Andante molto; Vivace
Andante

**The Saturday Morning Series is sponsored in part by the
Mark D. Kaplanoff Lecture Fund of San Francisco Performances' Endowment.**

The **Alexander String Quartet** is Ensemble-in-Residence with San Francisco Performances.

The **Alexander String Quartet** is represented by Besen Arts
7 Delaney Place, Tenafly, NJ 07670-1607 besenarts.com

The Quartet frequently performs and records on a matched set of instruments by the San Francisco-based maker Francis Kuttner, circa 1987.



ARTIST PROFILES

The Alexander String Quartet celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2021. The Quartet has been Ensemble-in-Residence since 1989 with San Francisco Performances. Starting in 1994, the Quartet joined with SF Performances' Music Historian-in-Residence, Robert Greenberg, to present the Saturday Morning Series exploring string quartet literature.

The Quartet has appeared on SF Performances mainstage Chamber Series many times, collaborating with such artists as soprano Elly Ameling and mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato; clarinetists Richard Stoltzman, Joan Enric Lluna and Eli Eban; pianists James Tocco, Menahem Pressler, Jeremy Menuhin, and Joyce Yang; and composer Jake Heggie.

Robert Greenberg, in addition to his programs with the Alexander String Quartet, lectures frequently for SF Performances.

The **Alexander String Quartet** stands among the world's premier ensembles, having performed in the major music capitals of five continents. The quartet is a vital artistic presence in its home base of San Francisco, serving since 1989 as Ensemble in Residence of San Francisco Performances. Widely admired for its interpretations of Beethoven, Mozart, and Shostakovich, the quartet's recordings have won international critical acclaim. Founded in New York City in 1981, the ensemble quickly captured attention, initially winning the Concert Artists Guild Competition in 1982, and then becoming the first American quartet

to win the London (now Wigmore) International String Quartet Competition in 1985. The members of the Alexander String Quartet are recipients of honorary degrees from Allegheny College and St. Lawrence University, and Presidential medals from Baruch College (CUNY).

Since its inception, the Alexander String Quartet has maintained an unyielding and passionate commitment to education. For decades, the ensemble has trained generations of gifted performers, emerging string quartets, and talented young musicians destined to pass on their knowledge and love of music as teachers in schools across the globe. The 2023–24 season marks the beginning of a new initiative that brings together the quartet's expertise in education and devotion to its community. Partnering with schools, arts organizations, and community institutions in the Bay Area and beyond, the Alexander String Quartet will be hosting a series of innovative workshops, performances and collaborations that are designed to support and bolster chamber music awareness and education for individuals from all walks of life.

The Alexander String Quartet has performed at Lincoln Center, the 92nd Street Y, the Metropolitan Museum, Jordan Hall, the Library of Congress, and appeared as guests at universities including Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Lewis & Clark, UCLA, and many more. Numerous overseas tours include the U.K., the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal,

Switzerland, France, Greece, the Republic of Georgia, Argentina, Panama, and the Philippines. Their visit to Poland's Beethoven Easter Festival is beautifully captured in the 2017 award-winning documentary, *Con Moto: The Alexander String Quartet*.

Joyce Yang, Marc-André Hamelin, Richard Stoltzman, Joyce DiDonato, Midori, Lynn Harrell, Branford Marsalis, David Sánchez, Jake Heggie, Augusta Read Thomas, Tarik O'Regan, Wayne Peterson, and Samuel Carl Adams are only a few of the many distinguished instrumentalists, singers, and composers with whom the Alexander String Quartet has collaborated in performance and recording projects crossing genres from classical to jazz, rock, and folk in its more than four decades of music making. Their most recent collaborative project, "British Invasion," brings the Quartet together with guitarist William Kanengiser to explore the music of Sting, Led Zeppelin, John Dowland, and the Beatles by way of contemporary composers Ian Krouse, Dušan Bogdanović, and Leo Brouwer. The quartet continues to enjoy a longstanding collaboration with the richly entertaining composer-lecturer, Robert Greenberg, with whom it presents series of concerts every season with San Francisco Performances and at the Mondavi Center at the University of California in Davis. These concerts, which have also reached audiences at the Library of Congress in Washington, Merkin Concert Hall in New York, and many other venues, provide a deep dive into the history and essence of the works being presented in addition to a full performance of each piece.

Recording for the Foghorn Classics label, the Alexander String Quartet's extensive recording catalogue includes complete string quartet cycles by Bartók, Beethoven, Brahms, Kodály, and Shostakovich. Their most recent release is the third installment of a Mozart chamber music project, *Apotheosis Volume 3*, featuring the string quintets of Mozart with violist Paul Yarbrough. *Apotheosis Volumes 1 & 2*, released in 2018 and 2019, featured the late string quartets and piano quartets (with Joyce Yang) of Mozart. Both recordings received critical acclaim ("These are by far, hands down and feet up, the most amazing performances of Mozart's two piano quartets that have ever graced these ears." —*Fanfare*). Other major recordings include the 2020 release of the Mozart and Brahms clarinet quintets (with Eli Eban) and the 2019 release, *Locale*, featuring Dvořák's "American" quartet and piano quintet (with Joyce Yang). Their re-

ording catalogue also includes the Mahler Song Cycles in transcriptions for mezzo-soprano (with Kindra Scharich) and string quartet by the Quartet's first violinist, Zakarias Grafilo.

The Alexander String Quartet performs on Michael Fischer and unlabeled circa 1800 Italian violins, a Hiroshi Iizuka viola, and a Francis M. Kuttner cello. They have also had the distinct honor on numerous occasions to record and perform on a matched set of instruments known as the Ellen M. Egger Quartet, made in San Francisco by the late Francis M. Kuttner.



Dr. Robert Greenberg was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1954 and has lived in the San Francisco Bay Area since 1978. He received a B.A. in Music, magna cum laude, from Princeton University in 1976 and a Ph.D. in music composition, *With Distinction*, from the University of California, Berkeley in 1984.

Greenberg has composed more than 50 works for a variety of instrumental and vocal ensembles. Performances of his works have taken place across the United States and Europe.

Dr. Greenberg has received numerous honors, including commissions from the Koussevitzky Music Foundation in the Library of Congress, the Alexander String Quartet, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, San Francisco Performances, and the XTET ensemble. His music is published by Fallen Leaf Press and CPP/Belwin and is recorded on the Innova label.

Greenberg is a Steinway Artist.

Dr. Greenberg is currently the Music Historian-in-Residence with San Francisco Performances, where he has lectured and performed since 1994. He has served on the faculties of the University of Califor-

nia, Berkeley; California State University, East Bay; the Advanced Management Program at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business; and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where he chaired the Department of Music History and Literature from 1989 to 2001.

Dr. Greenberg has lectured for some of the most prestigious musical and arts organizations in the United States, including the San Francisco Symphony (where for 10 years he was host and lecturer for the symphony's nationally acclaimed Discovery Series), the Chautauqua Institution (where he was the Everett Scholar-in-Residence during the 2006 season), the Ravinia Festival, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the Van Cliburn Foundation, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, Villa Montalvo, the Phoenix Orchestra, the University of British Columbia (where he was the Dal Grauer Lecturer in September 2006), and Philadelphia's College of Physicians (where he has been the Behrend Lecturer since 2017).

In addition, Dr. Greenberg is a sought-after lecturer for businesses and business schools and has spoken for such diverse organizations as S. C. Johnson, Deutsche Bank, the University of California/Haas School of Business Executive Seminar and the Goldman School of Public Policy, the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, Harvard Business School Publishing, Kaiser Permanente, the Young Presidents' Organization, the World Presidents' Organization, and the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco. Dr. Greenberg has been profiled in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Inc. Magazine*, the *Times* of London, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, among other publications.

For 15 years, Dr. Greenberg was the resident composer and music historian for NPR's *Weekend All Things Considered* and *Weekend Edition, Sunday* with Liane Hansen. His show *Scandalous Overtures* can be seen on www.ora.tv/shows.

In May 1993, Greenberg recorded a 48-lecture course entitled "How to Listen to and Understand Great Music" for The Great Courses/The Teaching Company. (This course was named in the January 1996 edition of *Inc. Magazine* as one of "The Nine Leadership Classics You've Never Read.") Dr. Greenberg has since recorded 30 additional courses. The most recent, "The Great Music of the 20th Century," was released in January 2018.

In February 2003, Maine's *Bangor Daily*

News referred to Dr. Greenberg as the Elvis of music history and appreciation, an appraisal that has given him more pleasure than any other.

Dr. Greenberg is currently "blogging, vlogging, performing, Zooming, reviewing, opining, and bloviating 4-6 times a week" on his subscription site at [Patreon.com/RobertGreenbergMusic](https://www.patreon.com/RobertGreenbergMusic).

PROGRAM NOTES

Three Pieces for String Quartet

IGOR STRAVINSKY
(1882–1971)

Stravinsky wrote symphonies, concertos, ballets, and sonatas, but one important classical form is notable for its near-absence in his catalog: the string quartet. In his long career, he wrote only three brief works for quartet, and none of these is a true string quartet: *Three Pieces for String Quartet* (1914), the *Concertino* (1920), and a *Double Canon—In Memoriam Raoul Dufy* (1959). The resonant, lyrical sonority of the string quartet appears to have held little attraction for Stravinsky, who seemed to prefer a drier, more percussive sound, such as could be produced by the piano or wind instruments.

Stravinsky wrote the *Three Pieces for String Quartet* in Salvan, Switzerland, just a few weeks before the outbreak of World War I. The notorious premiere of *The Rite of Spring* had occurred the previous year, and he was now about to begin work on his secular cantata *Les Noces*. The *Three Pieces* lack a unifying structure and can seem isolated and unrelated pieces, quite short in duration (a total of eight minutes) and fragmentary in effect. But when Stravinsky arranged the pieces in 1928 as the first three movements of his *Four Studies for Orchestra*, he gave them names that may suggest a key to understanding them: "Dance," "Eccentric," and "Canticle." Stravinsky scholar Eric Walter White has shown that, however obscure in themselves, the *Three Pieces* are truly germinal pieces for the composer, for all three contain thematic cells that would figure centrally in Stravinsky's later works. The first movement, a Russian dance for the two violins over a steady viola drone, provided material that would later appear in the *Symphony in C* (1940). The second movement, an odd and nervous dance, was inspired by the clown Little Tich, whom

Stravinsky had seen earlier in the summer of 1914 in London; the composer noted that “the jerky, spastic movement, the ups and downs, the rhythm—even the mood or joke of the music—was suggested by the art of the great clown.” The first violin theme in the *Allegro* section was to become the subject of the slow fugue in the *Symphony of Psalms* (1930). The final movement, of religious austerity, brings the work to a very quiet close; the opening two measures were to figure importantly in Stravinsky’s *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* (1920).

Concertino

Stravinsky wrote his *Concertino* for string quartet in the summer of 1920 while living in France. Alfred Pochon, the first violinist in the Flonzaley String Quartet, had approached the composer about writing a work specifically for that quartet. In his *Autobiography* Stravinsky detailed the creation of the new work:

“M. Pochon wished to introduce a contemporary work into their almost exclusively classical repertoire, and asked me to write them an ensemble piece, in form and length of my own choosing, to appear in the programmes of their numerous tours. So it was for them that I composed my *Concertino*, a piece in one single movement, treated in the form of a free sonata allegro with a definitely concertante part for the first violin.”

The actual composition of the *Concertino* took from July through September 1920, while Stravinsky was living in Carantec, a small fishing village. It was not a particularly enjoyable summer for the composer, who wrote to a friend:

“I can’t say I like Brittany very much ...the place is full of conventional middle-class trippers, who can’t afford to go to Deauville. It’s not at all amusing—people who start singing outside our windows when we’re in bed, and louder than is necessary in the streets at night; but apparently they think they’re justified in letting themselves go when on holiday. I’m sleeping badly and composing music.”

The *Concertino*, spare in both its harmonic idiom and emotional scope, has never become especially popular. As the composer notes, this brief (six-minute) work is in sonata form, and its most immediately attractive feature is an extended cadenza-like passage for first violin at the center of the movement. The *Concertino* opens with a rising scale for the first violin and cello (in C major) and for viola (in B major). The resulting harmonic friction will be very much a part of the language of the *Concertino*, and the rising scale figure recurs several times. The *Andante* center section makes virtuosic demands on the first violin, which is double-stopped throughout, and the music from the opening section returns before the brief concluding *Andante*; Stravinsky directs that the work’s final bar be performed *sospirando* (“sighing” or “plaintively”).

In 1952 Stravinsky arranged this music for twelve instruments (ten winds plus violin and cello). This version—which involved some re-barring of the original—had its first performance in Los Angeles on November 11, 1952.

String Quartet No. 1 in B Minor, Opus 50

SERGE PROKOFIEV
(1891–1953)

The name Serge Prokofiev is not one we automatically associate with the string quartet—the composer who had achieved notoriety for such dazzling (and assaultive) scores as *The Age of Steel* and *Scythian Suite* does not seem a likely candidate to take up this most disciplined of high classical forms. And that makes the decision by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation to commission a quartet from Prokofiev in 1930 all the more surprising. That year, the Boston Symphony Orchestra premiered Prokofiev’s *Fourth Symphony* as part of its fiftieth anniversary celebration, and Prokofiev came to the United States for that occasion and to give a series of concerts. Faced with the commission to compose a kind of music he

had never written before, Prokofiev prepared very carefully, studying the scores to Beethoven’s string quartets as he traveled by train to concert engagements. Listeners may be hard-pressed to discover the influence of Beethoven in Prokofiev’s *First Quartet*, though Prokofiev himself pointed out “a somewhat ‘classical’ idiom in the first movement of my quartet.” The first performance of the quartet took place at the Library in Congress in Washington on April 25, 1931.

Prokofiev noted two distinctive features of his quartet: it ends with a slow movement, and it is in B minor, an unusual key for a quartet. The opening *Allegro* is in sonata form, based on two theme-groups: the angular first subject is announced immediately by the first violin, with the more lyric second theme following quickly in the cello. The development is spirited and athletic, full of the surprising harmonic turns typical of Prokofiev’s best music, before the movement marches firmly to its sudden close.

The second movement begins with a brief slow introduction (Prokofiev specifies in the score that it should be played *gravamente*) before the main section—*Vivace*—leaps ahead with the lower strings in octaves. Much of the writing here is brilliant, with many passages suggesting a perpetual-motion rush. Prokofiev varies the pulse by switching to a rocking 6/8 meter and only gradually working back to 2/4 for the cadence.

Prokofiev was especially happy with the concluding *Andante*, saying that he “ended the quartet with a slow movement because the material happened to be the most significant in the whole piece.” Concluding a string quartet with a slow movement is unusual but not unheard-of: Bartók’s *Second Quartet* (1917) offers one of the most famous examples of a slow finale. Prokofiev liked his own finale enough to use it twice more: he arranged it for string orchestra and as one of his *Six Pieces for Piano, Opus 52*. It is a long, grieving song that passes through several remote keys, some of them rather astringent, before the music winds down to a quiet close on sustained B’s from the violins.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger