



Beethoven 250 Celebration ~ Alexander String Quartet **Sunday, January 24, 7:00pm and Thursday, January 28, 6:00pm PST**

Dear Friends,

Happy New Year and welcome to Music at Kohl's Virtual Season 38! We're coming to you online all season as we continue to observe the safety regulations mandated by our county and state. While we miss being with you live and in person in the warm and intimate setting of the Kohl Mansion's Great Hall, we are grateful that you have chosen to join us in this new virtual realm to enjoy great performances from the comfort of your home.

This season affords us new opportunities to share these concert broadcasts with audiences far and wide outside the concert hall walls, as well as the chance to see and hear our superb performers in their own home towns. We're delighted to be able to bring you these programs – brief, compact, modestly priced, and easily accessible from your personal screens. You can still enjoy the popular, lively introductions by beloved musicologist Kai Christiansen before each concert, as well as informal, up-close conversations with the artists inviting us to learn about their lives off the stage.

Music at Kohl is now global! Friends and family members near and far may sign up online at www.musicatkohl.org and become part of our extended concert family. We hope you'll invite them to experience Music at Kohl Online!

Now more than ever, great music brings us comfort and offers us a welcome respite from the challenges of our daily lives. Thank you for joining us for this new adventure in chamber music.

Zerlina Chen Hayes
President

Patricia Kristof Moy
Executive Director

Tickets and information: 650.762.1130 ~ www.musicatkohl.org

Music at Kohl Mansion

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Beethoven 250 Celebration

Alexander String Quartet

Zakarias Grafilo & Frederick Lifnitz, violins

Paul Yarbrough, viola

Sandy Wilson, cello

Program

String Quartet No. 13 in B-flat Major, Op. 130 with the *Grosse Fuge*, Op. 133

Ludwig van Beethoven

- I. Adagio ma non troppo - Allegro
- II. Presto
- III. Andante con moto, ma non troppo. Poco scherzoso
- IV. Alla danza tedesca. Allegro assai
- V. Cavatina. Adagio molto espressivo
- VI. *Grosse Fuge*. Ouverture. Allegro – Meno mosso e moderato – Allegretto – Fuga.
Allegro – Meno mosso e moderato – Allegro molto e con brio – Allegro

Music at Kohl Mansion wishes to thank Karin Albright
for her generous sponsorship of this concert broadcast.

Music at Kohl Mansion is presented in collaboration with
Mercy High School, Burlingame – Natalie Cirigliano Brosnan, Head of School.

Program Notes

Ludwig van Beethoven, 1770-1827

String Quartet No. 13 in B-flat Major, Op. 130, 1825-1826

(In its original form including the *Grosse Fuge* finale)

Beethoven's last string quartets were composed during the final years of his life between 1824 and 1826. The project began in 1822 with a commission from Russian Prince Nicholas Galitzin, an amateur cellist who requested "one, two or three" string quartets. Once Beethoven began work in earnest, he turned out not one, two or three, but five massive string quartets that ultimately become six separate works known simply and profoundly as "Beethoven's Late Quartets" in accordance with division of his

artistry into three phases, early, middle and late. For decades, these quartets were regarded by most as strange, difficult, anomalous, quite possibly the work of a once great composer now degenerated into a deafness and insanity. (Schubert, Mendelssohn and Schumann thought differently). It was not until the 20th century that the late quartets became widely regarded as profound and transcendent masterworks worthy of entering and if not becoming the apex of the traditional repertoire.

The third of the late quartets in the order Beethoven composed them, the String Quartet in B-flat Major Op. 130 was completed in its first version in November of 1825 (about six months before Schubert's quartet in G). Beethoven and his publisher surprisingly came to agree that the finale did not sit well with the rest of the quartet movements. A bristling, difficult fugue of epic proportions was deemed "too much." The fugue was detached henceforth as a separate opus and Beethoven composed a fresh, much lighter finale to complete Op. 130 in its revised, final version. Beethoven completed the new finale in November 1826 (after Schubert's quartet in G). It was the very last piece of music Beethoven wrote. He died shortly after in March 1827. For this performance, the Alexander String Quartet will play Op. 130 in its original form including the *Grosse Fuge* finale.

Like nearly all of the Beethoven's late quartets, Op. 130 can be approached in many ways. Without regard to the well-established elite tradition of quartet form, style and expression, Op. 130 presents a surface beauty, technical facility and rich emotional aspect that can't fail to strike a casual listener as truly lovely music with profound tendencies. But seen within a framework of traditional works by Haydn and Mozart, Op. 130 is, like the other late quartets, a very odd and possibly incomprehensible departure. Herein lies one origin of the term "difficult" applied to these late works as in "difficult to follow" compared to the rhetorical conventions of the time. But surely another meaning behind the term "difficult" is the emotional demands they make, the deep states of feeling they induce. Throughout the late quartets, one finds extreme emotional states that can, at times, be "difficult" to endure because they are simply so intense and effective.

Op. 130, particularly in its original form, is truly an odd duck from a conventional perspective. Rather than the traditional four movements, it has six. Of the six, two of the movements are almost laughably short while the original fugal finale was outrageously long and truly "difficult" in every possible sense of the word. The fourth movement is a triple meter German dance with a trio of a rustic character but the second movement is also clearly a scherzo of ternary design. Two scherzi? Although the opening movement appears to be in a rather straightforward sonata form (it is far more), the fifth movement is a basic operatic *cavatina* of surprisingly simple design with an indescribably haunting character nonetheless. The late musicologist Michael Steinberg suggests that to the listeners of the day, this must have seemed like a miscellany of movements, more like a divertimento or suite than a string quartet. Musicologist Leonard Ratner provides a convincing analysis that Beethoven was indeed intentionally invoking an antique form of suite complete with Renaissance canzona, a march, an aria and a gigue, a design that practically renders the *Grosse Fuge* an inextricable part of a grand design.

All of this only reinforces the essential fact that Beethoven was an undaunted pioneer and artistic visionary who created, particularly in the late quartets, truly complicated works of high art that speak on many levels, lending themselves to multiple if not infinite interpretations and reactions. They are indescribably compelling works that have mesmerized players, composers, scholars, poets and avid listeners for nearly two hundred years. Perhaps one of their most essential traits is that they can

become as "difficult" as one wishes or, miraculously, as direct, simple and obvious as one's willingness to hear and feel. It is entirely your own prerogative to "understand" them as you can and as you will. It is a project worthy of a lifetime.

At the largely unsuccessful premiere of the original String Quartet, Op. 130 during Beethoven's lifetime, the audience, in typical fashion, demanded an encore of two middle movements. A disgruntled Beethoven supposedly exclaimed, "And why didn't they encore the Fugue? That alone should have been repeated! Cattle! Asses!" As mentioned earlier, Beethoven and his publisher agreed to remove the fugue substituting an alternate finale. The fugue was eventually published in 1827 as an entirely separate work bearing the opus number 133 and the title *Grosse Fuge* (Grand Fugue). The audience members at the premiere were apparently not the only "cattle" with regards to this monumental piece of music. Reactions from personages of high musical cultivation over time have yielded such responses as "repellent", "incomprehensible", "a confusion of Babel" and so forth. Quite a different reaction came from Igor Stravinsky who famously remarked about the *Grosse Fuge*, "[it is] an absolutely contemporary piece of music that will be contemporary forever." Recall that Beethoven wrote this fugue in 1825.

The musical technique known by the name "fugue" goes back as far as the Renaissance and the keyboard music of the late 16th century. It has never gone out of fashion at least where music is cultivated by the learned practitioner. The most famous and possibly greatest composer of fugues was Johann Sebastian Bach – particularly in his compositions for organ and keyboard, including the absolute touchstone collection of fugues under the collective name *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Haydn wrote at least four fugues specifically as string quartet finales thereby setting a precedent that has inspired chamber composers from Mozart to Shostakovich with Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Schoenberg along the way. Beethoven is arguably the greatest master of the fugue after Bach and fugues or fughetto passages appear all through his piano sonatas, string quartets and symphonies. As for setting a Grand Fugue as the finale of a string quartet, Beethoven was well within traditional precedent. What was unconventional, indeed, confounding about the *Grosse Fuge* was its length, its emotional intensity and its extreme obsession with dissonance. If "difficult" was ever perfectly applied to Beethoven's music, the *Grosse Fuge* is the single most deserving work beyond question.

Clocking in at around sixteen minutes, the *Grosse Fuge* is far longer than any fugue Bach wrote. As a compositional form, it is way more than a conventional fugue. As with much of Beethoven's late music, the fugue has been analyzed from many different perspectives yielding multiple structural interpretations. A relatively simple and useful breakdown will suffice here.

This "Grand Fugue" readily divides into five parts. The first part titled "Ouverture" is a series of brief snippets that on first blush seem rather unrelated. Closer inspection reveals that it comprises a kind of table of contents, a terse preview of what is to come. Each of the snippets alludes to a section of the ensuing fugue, curiously, in reverse order.

The second part is the fugue proper, where, according to the tradition of the fugue, a melodic theme or subject is introduced by one player then picked up in imitation by each successive player until all four players are engaged in a complicated mesh of counterpoint with the subject at the center of a discussion of truly equal parts. Beethoven makes things a bit more interesting from the start,

however, in that he has not one but two subjects going at the same time from the very beginning, in essence, a double fugue. Whatever technical labels apply, it is a relentless imbroglia of urgent, dark musical counterpoint whose mood and chaotic complexity is nothing short of marvelously overwhelming.

The third part of the *Grosse Fuge* is a readily apparent section of repose and contrast to the blistering fugue. Where the fugue is spiky, dark, minor and dissonant, the third section is bright, major, soothing and lyrical, all at a slower pace. Really a kind of fugue in itself, close inspection reveals that the music is built from exactly the same material as the primary fugue ingeniously transformed into a field of bright flowers swaying gently amidst the barbed wire and rubble.

The fourth part is the return of the brutal fugue. Hardly a repeat, here Beethoven subjects the fugal materials to the traditional battery of ingenious transformations including making the subject longer, shorter, playing it upside down and even backwards. Beethoven applies so much variation to the material that, in places, the music appears to explode into complete random chaos fraught with harsh dissonance, skewed rhythmic patterns and seemingly ungraspable complexity all subsumed in a terrifying darkness that suggests the word apocalyptic. The fifth and final part is Beethoven coming to our rescue (as he always does), where the fugue dissipates, the happy music from the middle reappears and everything is transformed into bright triumph if not outright humor. Beethoven knew exactly what he was doing and exactly how it would affect us and here he jovially slaps us on the back as if to say "everything is alright" and "wasn't that a great ride!" Most commentaries fail to mention one curious fact about the *Grosse Fuge*: It was not Beethoven's first. The final movement of the Piano Sonata No. 29 in B-flat known as the "Hammerklavier" from 1818 follows nearly the identical formal structure yielding a monstrous fugue of practically the same length, albeit in a much brighter mood. It is illuminating to hear them side by side.

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*Kai Christiansen is a musicologist, writer, and lecturer on chamber music
and is the founder of earsense, an online chamber music Exploratorium at earsense.org.*

Meet the Musicians

The Alexander String Quartet

Zakarias Grafilo, violin
Frederick Lifszitz, violin
Paul Yarbrough, viola
Sandy Wilson, cello

The **Alexander String Quartet** has performed in the major music capitals of five continents, securing its standing among the world's premier ensembles, and a major artistic presence in its home base of San Francisco, serving since 1989 as Ensemble in Residence of San Francisco Performances and Directors of the Morrison Chamber Music Center Instructional Program at San Francisco State University. Widely admired for its interpretations of Beethoven, Mozart, and Shostakovich, the quartet's recordings have won international critical acclaim. They have established themselves as important advocates of new music commissioning dozens of new works from composers including

Jake Heggie, Cindy Cox, Augusta Read Thomas, Robert Greenberg, Cesar Cano, Tarik O'Regan, Paul Siskind, and Pulitzer Prize-winner Wayne Peterson. Samuel Carl Adams' new "Quintet with Pillars" was premiered and has been widely performed across the U.S. by the Alexander with pianist Joyce Yang, and will be introduced to European audiences in the 2020-2021 season.

The Alexander String Quartet's annual calendar includes engagements at major halls throughout North America and Europe. They have appeared at Lincoln Center, the 92nd Street Y, and the Metropolitan Museum; Jordan Hall; the Library of Congress; and chamber music societies and universities across the North American continent including Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Lewis and Clark, Pomona, UCLA, the Krannert Center, Purdue and many more. Recent overseas tours include the U.K., the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, France, Greece, the Republic of Georgia, Argentina, Panamá, 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*.

Distinguished musicians with whom the Alexander String Quartet has collaborated include pianists Joyce Yang, Roger Woodward, Menachem Pressler, Marc-André Hamelin, and Jeremy Menuhin; clarinetists Joan Enric Lluna, Richard Stoltzman, and Eli Eban; soprano Elly Ameling; mezzo-sopranos Joyce DiDonato and Kindra Scharich; violinist Midori; violist Toby Appel; cellists Lynn Harrell, Sadao Harada, and David Requiro; and jazz greats Branford Marsalis, David Sanchez, and Andrew Speight. The quartet has worked with many composers including Aaron Copland, George Crumb, and Elliott Carter, and enjoys a close relationship with composer-lecturer Robert Greenberg, performing numerous lecture-concerts with him annually.

Recording for the FoghornClassics label, their release in 2019 of the Late Quartets of Mozart, has received critical acclaim. ("Exceptionally beautiful performances of some extraordinarily beautiful music." –*Fanfare*), as did their 2018 release of Mozart's Piano Quartets with Joyce Yang. ("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 releases have included the combined string quartet cycles of Bartók and Kodály ("If ever an album had 'Grammy nominee' written on its front cover, this is it." –*Audiophile Audition*); the string quintets and sextets of Brahms with Toby Appel and David Requiro ("a uniquely detailed, transparent warmth" –*Strings Magazine*); the Schumann and Brahms piano quintets with Joyce Yang ("passionate, soulful readings of two pinnacles of the chamber repertory" –*The New York Times*); and the Beethoven cycle ("A landmark journey through the greatest of all quartet cycles" –*Strings Magazine*). Their catalog also includes the Shostakovich cycle, Mozart's Ten Famous Quartets, and the Mahler Song Cycles in new transcriptions by Zakarias Grafilo.

The Alexander String Quartet formed in New York City in 1981, capturing international attention as the first American quartet to win the London (now Wigmore) International String Quartet Competition in 1985. The quartet has received honorary degrees from Allegheny College and Saint Lawrence University, and Presidential medals from Baruch College (CUNY). The Alexander plays on a matched set of instruments made in San Francisco by Francis Kuttner, known as the Ellen M. Egger quartet.