



Sunday, February 18, 2018, 3pm
Hertz Hall

St. Lawrence String Quartet

Geoff Nuttall, *violin*
Owen Dalby, *violin*
Lesley Robertson, *viola*
Christopher Costanza, *cello*

PROGRAM

John ADAMS (b. 1947) First Quartet (2008)
Movement I
Movement II

Second Quartet (2014)
Allegro molto
Andantino – Energico

INTERMISSION

Samuel Carl ADAMS (b. 1985) String Quartet in Five Movements (2013)
I. fluid
II. quiet, rocking
III. quiet, austere
IV. fluid
V. metronomic, brittle

St. Lawrence String Quartet recordings can be heard on EMI Classics and ArtistShare (www.artistshare.com).

The St. Lawrence String Quartet is Ensemble-in-Residence at Stanford University.

Cal Performances' 2017–18 season is sponsored by Wells Fargo.

John Adams**First Quartet (2008)**

“String quartet writing is one of the most difficult challenges a composer can take on,” American composer John Adams once said. Adams is not a string player and views the medium of quartet writing “a matter of very long-term ‘work in progress.’” His ongoing collaboration with the SLSQ has resulted in three substantial, half-hour works that occupy a significant corner of a large catalog. The two most recent were both completed in 2014 after a long gestation: a Second Quartet and *Absolute Jest*, for quartet and orchestra, based on fragments of two of Beethoven’s late quartets and commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony to celebrate its centennial season. The 28-minute First Quartet was the earliest, in 2008. Originally the only work with a generic title in Adams’ catalog, it’s an intriguingly direct, no-nonsense header from a composer known for evocative titles that invite immediate investigation. It follows an earlier string quartet titled *John’s Book of Alleged Dances* (1994), written for Kronos Quartet and for performance with the pre-recorded sounds of a prepared piano. A five-minute second string quartet, *Fellow Traveler* (2007), was a 50th birthday present for director Peter Sellars, with whom Adams has collaborated on several major—often controversial, often hugely successful—stage works over the past three decades. It was a characteristically compelling SLSQ performance of *Alleged Dances* and Beethoven’s Op. 132 that led to the commission for this string quartet. “I’ve got about 10 other things that I should be doing, but I dove right in,” Adams said.

Given its premiere at the Juilliard School on January 31, 2009, Adams’ First Quartet is in two movements, the first more than twice the length of the second. It opens in a rhythmically driven, pulsing manner, as fragments of a theme are passed from one instrument to another, creating a constantly shifting texture. “I started out as a young composer very influenced by American minimalism and you can still hear vestiges of this in the quartet,” Adams said at the Canadian premiere of the piece at the Banff Centre. “You can hear a very strong sense of beat. The

first movement starts in a very ticking, energized way and then lyrical shapes start filtering in and out. That basic sense of pulsation—a regular ticking—is present throughout the piece.” The opening movement is essentially three movements in one, played without a break. In the central slow section, recitative-like declamations from solo instruments are juxtaposed with more reflective ensemble passages. This leads to a spiky scherzo (“a crazy little scherzo”) that soon fades away into wisps of sound and a tranquil close. The energy and momentum of the work’s opening is played out in the pulsing finale.

“This piece was inspired by this wonderful quartet, the SLSQ,” Adams says. “I was reminded how much the sound of the string quartet is like elevated human discourse. It’s like speech brought to the highest, most sublime level in the hands of a great composer. So I wanted to attempt to express my own voice in the medium of the quartet.”

—2017 Keith Horner
(khnotes@sympatico.ca)

Second Quartet (2014)

“I play risky because I use late Beethoven,” smiles John Adams, as he confesses a composer’s desire to inhabit familiar music from the past. Where Brahms makes variations out of a theme by Haydn or Handel, where Liszt transcribes Mozart arias or Schubert songs, or where Schoenberg crafts a compelling orchestral soundscape out of a Brahms piano quartet, Adams turns to the piano music of late Beethoven as the starting point for his Second Quartet. It’s his third collaboration with the St. Lawrence String Quartet, written for the group’s 25th anniversary in 2014. Its predecessor, *Absolute Jest* (2012), a 35-minute piece for quartet and orchestra, also reworked fragments of Beethoven, primarily from the scherzo movements from two of the late quartets. Adams came upon the idea after hearing how Stravinsky successfully marries the music of Pergolesi and his contemporaries with his own distinctive musical voice in his ballet *Pulcinella*. Adams now further develops his homage to Beethoven in his Second Quartet (2014), where

he takes even shorter fragments of Beethoven—”fractals” as he refers to them—drawn from his penultimate piano sonata, Op. 110, and, more elusively, from the *Diabelli Variations*. The longest fragment is just eight bars in duration. “I throw them into a petri dish and let them grow in whatever way they want to,” he says. “Sometimes they get out of hand and I have to reel them back in.”

The collaboration between composer and string quartet was by no means inevitable. Speaking of the difficulty of writing for string quartet, Adams has said, “Unless one is an accomplished string player and writes in that medium all the time—and I don’t know many these days who do—the demands of handling this extremely volatile and transparent instrumental medium can easily be humbling, if not downright humiliating. What I appreciate about my friends in the St. Lawrence is their willingness to let me literally ‘improvise’ on them as if they were a piano or a drum and I a crazy man beating away with only the roughest outlines of what I want. They will go the distance with me, allow me to try and fail, and they will indulge my seizures of doubt, frustration, and indecision, all the while providing intuitions and frequently brilliant suggestions of their own. It is no surprise then for me to reveal that both the First Quartet and *Absolute Jest* went through radical revision stages both before and after each piece’s premiere.”

The process was repeated in the Second Quartet. The piece is structured in two parts. The first begins by refracting a descending six-note figure from the second movement of Beethoven’s Op. 110 through the prism of Adams’ imagination. A second motif from the same movement later emerges. “The familiar Beethoven cadences and half-cadences reappear throughout the movement like a homing mechanism,” Adams says. “Each apparition is followed by a departure to an increasingly remote key and textural region.” In the process, the shape of the phrase, its harmony, pitch, texture, and dynamics are in a constant state of flux. The “sampling” continues in the Andantino, which opens with a reflective melody and dialogue drawn from the first movement of Op. 110.

Again, the music heads off in unexpected directions, with extreme mood changes. Adams once referred to it as “emotionally bi-polar” and, he adds, “it finally leads into a wild finale in which you may hear the *Diabelli Variations*.”

—2018 Keith Horner

Samuel Adams

String Quartet in Five Movements (2013)

About two months prior to starting work on this quartet, I read a series of lectures by the Italian author Italo Calvino on the topic of lightness in poetry. An idea of his that stuck—and one that was very important for me to understand at the time—is that art need not indulge in the weight of the world to be serious. Rather, art can deflect its weight without necessarily evading its presence.

Calvino wrote: “The only hero able to cut off Medusa’s head is Perseus, who flies with winged sandals; Perseus, who does not turn his gaze upon the face of the Gorgon but only upon her image reflected in his bronze shield... Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don’t mean escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective” (Calvino, from *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*).

I found this image striking and meaningful—timely, too, since it provided an approach to writing my first string quartet (a daunting task!). It also seemed appropriate given the character of the St. Lawrence: a very serious group of musicians who do not take themselves too seriously.

So this string quartet is a kind of thought experiment, one that takes inspiration from Calvino’s stance. And although it references its historical predecessors (Joseph Haydn, John Cage, Helmut Lachenmann) through allusion and quotation, it does so as Perseus might have: with winged feet. The five movements function independently, and only occasionally do they directly refer to one another.

The first movement, *fluid*, is constructed of a series of winding melodies and out-of-context

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cadences. The music is gentle and to be played without vibrato or heavy bow pressure.

The second and most substantial movement is a pastorale that moves at varying degrees of slowness: first slow, then slower, then so slow that the music almost seems to fray at the edges. A stratospheric minuet, rewritten in 5/8 for the two violins, surfaces about a third of the way through.

An intermezzo lasting only two minutes, the third movement takes its material from Haydn's String Quartet Op. 20, No. 5, which is only openly revealed in its last gesture.

The fourth movement is very fast and slightly irreverent, built of quickly alternating harmon-

ics that transform as the players gradually move towards (and away from) the bridges of their instruments. The last gesture we hear is the quiet, distant sound of white noise.

The fifth and final movement is a fractured, distorted hymn that has no source and departs not via cadence but via disintegration.

String Quartet in Five Movements is dedicated to the St. Lawrence String Quartet.

—*Samuel Adams*

Commissioned by Spoleto Festival USA for the St. Lawrence String Quartet. Premiered June 1, 2013 in Charleston, SC.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

The **St. Lawrence String Quartet** is renowned for the intensity of its performances, its breadth of repertoire, and its commitment to concert experiences that are at once intellectually exciting and emotionally alive. Recent highlights include performances of John Adams' *Absolute Jest* for string quartet and orchestra with Gustavo Dudamel and the Los Angeles Philharmonic and with Marin Alsop and the Baltimore Symphony, as well as the first European performances of Adams' Second Quartet.

Fiercely committed to collaboration with living composers, the SLSQ's fruitful partnership with Adams, Jonathan Berger, Osvaldo Golijov, and many others has yielded some of the finest additions to the quartet literature in recent years. The ensemble is also dedicated to the music of Haydn, recording his groundbreaking set of six Op. 20 quartets in high-definition video for a free, universal release online in 2017.

Established in Toronto in 1989, the SLSQ quickly earned acclaim at top international chamber music competitions and was soon playing hundreds of concerts each year worldwide. The group established an ongoing resi-

dency at the Spoleto Festival USA, and made prize-winning recordings for EMI of music by Schumann, Tchaikovsky, and Golijov, earning two Grammy nominations and a host of other honors. The St. Lawrence String Quartet was appointed ensemble-in-residence at Stanford University in 1999.

At Stanford, the SLSQ is at the forefront of intellectual life on campus. The musicians direct the music department's chamber music program, and frequently collaborate with other departments, including the schools of law, medicine, business, and education. The quartet performs regularly at Stanford Live, hosts an annual chamber music seminar, and runs the Emerging String Quartet Program through which the artists mentor the next generation of young string quartet musicians.

The St. Lawrence String Quartet appears by arrangement with David Rowe Artists (www.davidroweartists.com).

www.slsq.com