

Upcoming Events of the Seventy-Fifth Season of The William Nelson Cromwell and F. Lamot Belin Concerts

Arianna Zukerman, soprano
Joy Schreier, piano

“Washingtonians on Wednesdays”
March 29, 12:10
West Building, East Garden Court

Apollo's Fire
Sugarloaf Mountain: An Appalachian Gathering
Presented in honor of *East of the Mississippi: Nineteenth-Century American Landscape Photography*
April 2, 4:00
West Building, East Garden Court

Ben Williams Trio
“Washingtonians on Wednesdays”
April 5, 12:10
East Building Auditorium

Alliage Quintett
Dancing Paris
April 9, 3:30
West Building, East Garden Court

John Kilkenny, percussion, and Tobias Werner, cello
“Washingtonians on Wednesdays”
Music by Nick Didkovsky, Stephen Gorbos, Osvaldo Golijov, and Marc Mellits
April 12, 12:10
East Building Auditorium

General Information

Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free of charge, except as noted.

The use of cameras or recording equipment during the performance is not allowed. Please be sure that all portable electronic devices are turned off.

Concerts are made possible in part through the generosity of donors to the National Gallery of Art through The Circle. Reserved seating is available in recognition of their support. Please contact the development office at (202) 842-6450 or circle@nga.gov for more information.

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Cover Max Arthur Cohn, *Quartet* (detail), 1946, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Reba and Dave Williams Collection, Gift of Reba and Dave Williams

75TH SEASON OF CONCERTS

MARCH 26, 2017 • NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART



MARCH 26

3:30 • West Building, East Garden Court

Parker Quartet

Daniel Chong, violin

Ying Xue, violin

Jessica Bodner, viola

Kee-Hyun Kim, cello

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)

String Quartet no. 1 in E-flat Major, op. 12

Adagio non troppo; Allegro non tardante

Canzonetta: Allegretto

Andante espressivo

Molto allegro e vivace

Augusta Read Thomas (b. 1964)

HELIX SPIRALS for string quartet (2015)

I: LOCI: *memory palace*

II: INTERLACING: *twists and threads*

III: SPIRALS: *life force*

Intermission

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975)

String Quartet no. 3 in F Major, op. 73

Allegretto

Moderato con moto

Allegro non troppo

Adagio

Moderato; Adagio

The Musicians

Inspiring performances, luminous sound, and exceptional musicianship are the hallmarks of the Grammy Award-winning Parker Quartet. Renowned for its dynamic interpretations and polished, expansive colors, the group has rapidly distinguished itself as one of the preeminent ensembles of its generation. In demand worldwide, the quartet has appeared at many important international venues since its founding in 2002.

Its 2016 summer season had the ensemble crossing North America for appearances at the Rite of Music Festival on New York's Governor's Island, Vermont's Yellow Barn Festival, the Toronto Summer Music Festival, the Garth Newell Music Center in Virginia, the Skaneateles Festival in Upstate New York, the San Miguel de Allende International Chamber Music Festival in Mexico, and the opening of the Rockport Chamber Music Festival in Massachusetts with pianist Menahem Pressler. In the fall of 2016, the Parker Quartet released its recording of Mendelssohn's String Quartets, op. 44, nos. 1 and 3, for Nimbus Records.

The ensemble's recent highlights include a January 2017 European tour featuring performances with violist Kim Kashkashian, the project "Schubert Effect" in collaboration with pianist Shai Wosner at the 92nd Street Y, the premiere of a new string quartet by American composer Augusta Read Thomas as part of the quartet's four-concert series at Harvard University, and appearances at Carnegie Hall, the National Gallery of Art, the Library of Congress, the Slee Series in Buffalo, New York's Lincoln Center Great Performers series, and with jazz pianist Billy Childs. The quartet also continues to be a strong supporter of violist Kim Kashkashian's Music for Food project, by participating in nationwide concerts for the benefit of various food banks and shelters.

Founded and currently based in Boston, the Parker Quartet's numerous honors include winning the Concert Artists Guild Competition, the Grand Prix and Mozart Prize at France's Bordeaux International String Quartet Competition, and Chamber Music America's prestigious Cleveland Quartet Award. Now Blodgett Artists-in-Residence at Harvard University's Department of Music, and also in residence at the University of Southern California School of Music, the quartet's numerous residencies have included the University of St. Thomas (2012–2014), the University of Minnesota (2011–2012), the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra (2008–2010), and Minnesota Public Radio (2009–2010).

The quartet's members hold graduate degrees in performance and chamber music from the New England Conservatory of Music and were part of the New England Conservatory's prestigious Professional String Quartet Training Program from 2006 to 2008. Some of their most influential mentors include the original members of the Cleveland Quartet, Kim Kashkashian, György Kurtág, and Rainer Schmidt.

Program Notes

Felix Mendelssohn may well be the most underrated major composer of the nineteenth century. Known during his lifetime as a conductor, and posthumously primarily as a composer of orchestral works, his chamber music in general, and string quartets in particular, were rarely performed. Nevertheless, his chamber scores are among his most striking compositions and have begun to get the credit they deserve.

Mendelssohn's String Quartet no. 1 in E-flat Major, op. 12, was brewing in his mind during a visit to Coed Du, the Welsh estate of the Taylor family, a business acquaintance of Mendelssohn's father. The quartet was completed on September 14, 1829, and published later that year. It was on this same trip — an extended one to the British Isles — that Mendelssohn found inspiration for his *Scottish Symphony* and *Hebrides Overture*. Despite its opus number, it was actually the second string quartet he composed — the String Quartet no. 2 in A Minor, op. 13, was written two years earlier. Mendelssohn greatly revered Beethoven, and that admiration shines through the pages of the E-flat quartet. In general, it is more lyrical than the earlier String Quartet in A Minor, and is more controlled and masterfully composed. However, the influence of Beethoven is still clear.

Each of the quartet's four movements is in a different key — quite uniquely: 1. Adagio non troppo; Allegro non tardante — E-flat major; 2. Canzonetta: Allegretto — G minor; 3. Andante espressivo — B-flat major; and 4. Molto allegro e vivace — C minor. The quartet features the cyclic recurrence of themes and also similarities to Beethoven's Quartet in E-flat Major, op. 74 (*Harp*), and Mendelssohn's own *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Next to his Octet in E-flat Major, op. 20, the String Quartet no. 1 in E-flat Major, op. 12, may be Mendelssohn's most frequently performed chamber score.

HELIX SPIRALS for string quartet celebrates the Meselson-Stahl DNA replication experiment. Here is how Yale historian Frederic Lawrence Holmes described this singular achievement of Matthew Meselson and Franklin Stahl:

In 1957 two young scientists at the California Institute of Technology performed an experiment that provided convincing evidence that DNA replicates in the manner predicted by the model of the double helix proposed four years earlier by James Watson and Francis Crick. Its timely appearance, after several years of controversy about whether the two strands of DNA could come apart without breaking, not only settled the issue as it was originally posed but persuaded many, beyond the immediate circle of enthusiastic supporters, that the double helix was more than an "ingenious speculation." Quickly known by the surnames of the two men who performed it, the Meselson-Stahl experiment became a classic model in the young field of molecular biology. It has been reproduced in schematic form in textbooks of molecular biology, biochemistry, and genetics for more than three decades. It is seen not only as a landmark but also as possessing special qualities that lift it above the thousands of other experiments on which the modern biological sciences have been constructed.

Jeanne Guillemin and I spoke at length about the project, and we agreed from the start that *music is music* and *science is science*. That being so, for a composer to use exact data (for instance, the code in a DNA sequence) and then assign pitch or rhythm to each data point, might result in something interesting but would, most likely, never be a strong musical composition that effectively, dramatically, expressively, and musically sculpts time over a twenty-four-minute arc. If, though, one moves into the realm of metaphor, great synergies exist between science and music; and it was in this realm that Jeanne and I started our collaboration — celebrating that music can be an abstract and intellectual expression of nature.

The four string parts are equally and evenly virtuosic. There are many solo moments for each member of the quartet, allowing each musician's skill, elegance, and radiance to shine.

The three movements encompass a vast array of contrasting colors, motives, textures, rhythmic syntaxes, harmonies, and counterpoints, such that each movement contributes to a larger, twenty-four-minute gestalt.

Deeply honored to have been asked to compose *HELIX SPIRALS*, I spent eight months working on the music, which is dedicated with admiration to Matthew Meselson, Franklin Stahl, Jeanne Guillemin, and the Parker Quartet.

I: LOCI: *memory palace — 7 minutes and 30 seconds* — In genetics, a locus (plural loci) is the specific location of a gene, a DNA sequence, or a position on a chromosome. In this movement, the string quartet plays many kinds of colorful sounds in a kaleidoscopic range of combinations and is, metaphorically speaking, portraying loci with capricious, playful, energized, vibrant, resonant, and lively musical unfoldings.

II: INTERLACING: *twists and threads — 7 minutes and 30 seconds* — In semiconservative replication, when the double-stranded DNA helix is replicated, each of the two new double-stranded DNA helices consists of one strand from the original helix and one newly synthesized strand. In this movement, the quartet "draws a picture" of DNA semiconservative replication. Much of this movement is, by necessity, focused on pairs of instruments, but the intricate contrapuntal lines are always enhanced with fleeting, supportive, plucked and bowed materials played by the other two musicians.

The movement starts with violin 1 playing "DNA STRAND A." Forty-five seconds later, the cello takes over playing "DNA STRAND B." (From here to the end of the movement, before every next helix episode, a gentle moment of calm serves as an aural guidepost so that the audience can clearly follow the form.)

After a quiet note in the viola, violin 2 reiterates "DNA STRAND A," while at the same time the viola restates "DNA STRAND B," such that the whole DNA helix has been revealed.

After another quiet note in the viola, the cello plays the "leading DNA STRAND A" (previously played by violin 1) and violin 2 plays a new "COMPLIMENTARY LAGGING DNA STRAND."

Next, violin 1 plays the "DNA STRAND B" (previously played by the cello) and the viola plays a new "COMPLIMENTARY LAGGING DNA STRAND."

By this point in the composition, we have arrived at two double helices.

After a long, quiet note played by the whole quartet, we enter the final episode in which violin 1 and the viola link up to play “DNA STRAND A,” while violin 2 and the cello team up to play “DNA STRAND B.” In this final episode, we still have the original two DNA strands, but they are amplified harmonically and emotionally by nature of the fact that all four musicians are playing.

III: SPIRAL: *life force — 8 minutes and 30 seconds* — During a phone call with Matthew Meselson, just as I was starting to compose *HELIX SPIRALS*, he explained, with passion in his voice, that the DNA molecule “holds past memories and present times, and that it is a key to the future.” “Links and chains,” he went on to say. The helix spirals that give life, the DNA molecule encodes the genetic instructions in the development and functioning of all living organisms. In this final movement, the quartet conveys the beauty, richness, and expressivity of life. The movement is extremely lyrical, intricately contrapuntal, utterly optimistic, and ever-renewing of its materials and transformations. *Program notes by Augusta Read Thomas*

Having already achieved, by 1946, a unique mastery of quartet writing in number 2, Dmitri Shostakovich tackled the medium again. Also by this time, he had successfully tackled a formal challenge that had long fascinated Beethoven — the joining together of movements of different character, yet done in such a way as to make their continuation both seamless and inevitable. Shostakovich had done this in the Eighth and Ninth Symphonies, as well as in the Piano Quintet and Piano Trio, but had not thus far attempted it in quartet writing. The String Quartet no. 3, which is in some respects superficially akin to the Ninth Symphony, revealed new facets of this great composer’s compositional mastery.

The work is ostensibly in five movements and begins, somewhat lightheartedly, in a clear, F-major Allegretto, with an innocent-sounding theme. The second subject, in C, is rhythmically first cousin to that in the Ninth Symphony, and with the double bar and repeat (as in the Second Quartet and Ninth Symphony), the listener may be forgiven for imagining that Shostakovich has here embarked upon another friendly neoclassical piece. If he has, he does not continue it, at least in terms of sonata structure, for the development is nothing less than a double fugue, and the recapitulation strains to keep on track — the second subject hinting at B minor and the coda finally getting us back on track with a pizzicato perfect cadence. The second movement, *Moderato con moto*, is like a slower, troubled reminiscence of the Scherzo in the Eighth Symphony at first, the viola ostinato heralding bitter music — strongly dissonant, the freely contrapuntal nature producing a deep unease almost throughout the movement — not always violent, but full of foreboding. The tonality is E minor — so near and yet so far from the clear F major that began the work.

Aggression is the emotion of the gripping third movement, a mixture of scherzo and march, 3/4 and 2/4 alternating almost at every bar in a bitter G-sharp minor, looking forward, surely, to the eruptive second movement in the Tenth Symphony. The tonality switches to a kind of E-flat major for what must pass as the trio section, dominated first by the viola, before the opening bursts through the fabric to end the movement with a fierce challenge.

The fourth movement, an extended passacaglia — a form in which Shostakovich had already proved himself an expert — anticipates a movement in another masterpiece, the Violin Concerto no. 1 of 1947–1948, but here it is rather freer and therefore more personal and expressive. Beginning fortissimo, it tends to fall in dynamic, and in tonality, becoming almost bereft of energy until the finale enters, faster of course but very quietly and simply, a little uncertain at first, but growing in confidence until the music sings more lyrically, with F major more or less firmly established.

But it is not so easily achieved. As a climax builds, the theme from the passacaglia strides across the texture, and then fades over a single repeated E from the cello. Was it all, tonally, in vain? No, for Shostakovich reaches his goal by making E the dominant of A minor, in turn the mediant of F major. By this unclassical, yet infinitely logical and moving progression, Shostakovich has revealed a profound musical truth; the pizzicatos that ended the first movement now bring a deep pacification to the music that had earlier so troubled us.

It is sometimes claimed, not always convincingly, that there is often a hidden meaning in Shostakovich’s work. While the character of his instrumental art frequently exhibits great drama, his mastery of composition is such that his music has, in the last analysis, to stand or fall solely as music, and not through the imposition of some extra-musical program. With regard to his Third String Quartet, however, the Borodin Quartet — one of the leading Soviet ensembles of their day — insisted upon the following subtitles being appended to the movements in every program, whenever they performed this work. While the subtitles have never been published in any edition of the music, the Borodin Quartet clearly felt that the appendages had the composer’s approval, and they fit the nature of the music:

- I: Calm unawareness of the future cataclysm
- II: Rumbles of unrest and anticipation
- III: The forces of war unleashed
- IV: Homage to the dead
- V: The eternal question: Why? And for what?

If indeed these are Shostakovich’s original thoughts, then they assist in understanding the character of the work more, but what cannot be denied is that, in his Second and Third String Quartets, Dmitri Shostakovich declared himself to be one of the greatest quartet writers of the century, and continued as such in his successive masterpieces in the genre.

Program notes by Robert Matthew-Walker