

FRIENDS OF  
CHAMBER MUSIC  
*50th Anniversary*

**Rossetti String Quartet**

Timothy Fain, violin  
Henry Gronnier, violin  
Thomas Diener, viola  
Eric Gaenslen, cello

2:30 PM, March 26, 2006

Faye Spanos Concert Hall

In cooperation with University of the Pacific  
Conservatory of Music  
Stockton, California

**Program**

**Quartet No. 20 in D Major, K. 499 "Hoffmeister" (1786)      Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**  
(1756-1791)

Allegretto

Menuetto: Allegretto

Adagio

Allegro

**Quartet No. 10 in E-flat Major, Op. 74 "Harp" (1809)      Ludwig van Beethoven**  
(1770-1827)

Poco adagio—Allegro

Adagio, ma non troppo

Presto—Più presto quasi prestissimo—

Allegretto con variazioni

*—Intermission—*

**Quartet in F Major (1903)      Maurice Ravel**  
(1875-1937)

Allegro moderato—Très doux

Assez vif—Très rythmé

Très lent

Vif et agité



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## The Artists

Praised as a “vital force among chamber music ensembles,” the Rossetti String Quartet is renowned for its highly sophisticated, sensual sound and extensive range of colors.

National appearances of the Quartet include the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, the 92<sup>nd</sup> St. Y, Carnegie Hall, and the Library of Congress. Internationally, the quartet has performed in England, France, Germany, Holland, Mexico, and the Netherlands. The Quartet’s festival appearances include Brevard, Caramoor, Mostly Mozart, Saint Riquier (France), Vail Valley, and Ventura Chamber Music.

Co-founded in 1996 by violinist Henry Gronnier and violist Thomas Diener, the Rossetti String Quartet is named after 19<sup>th</sup> century Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whose artistic ideals about the use of color, poetry, and naturalism are embodied in the Quartet’s music making. Cellist Eric Gaenslen and violinist Timothy Fain complete the group. Each member of the Quartet is an accomplished musician in his own right, and the musical depth and creative insight each artist brings to the group allows the Quartet to create the intimate, provocative atmosphere that has become their trademark.

## The Program

In 1781 when Haydn presented his Op. 33 string quartets, Mozart had not written a string quartet in almost 8 years. Haydn stated that Op. 33 was written in “an entirely new and special manner” where he departed from melody-with-accompaniment to create a four-part musical discourse where each instrument participated equally in the thematic development. This is similar to what we heard at our last concert where Mozart produced the same effect in his piano trio K.542. Today, we trace the development of the string quartet from this new beginning of Haydn as expressed in Mozart’s mature work, through the majestic and mighty work of Beethoven to the romantic, almost exotic quartet of Ravel. What, we must ask, is the future of the string quartet? Is it a finished, outdated genre due to its limitation of means and the imposed restraints of the refinement of the form? Do the intense dissonances of some modern writers create an effect that is foreign to their nature, or do they point the way to the quartet’s legacy?

### Mozart: *Quartet in D K.499*

Inspired by Haydn, Mozart returned to the quartet in 1782, and over the next 8 years wrote ten great quartets. Looking at these mature quartets, we find K.499 sitting alone

between the six dedicated to Haydn and the three written for the cellist King Frederick of Prussia. Subtitled “Hoffmeister” for Mozart’s friend, benefactor, and publisher, K.499 was completed in August 1786 in Vienna. By this time Mozart had achieved complete mastery of this form and K.499 is considered one of his best quartets. It is filled with superb, imaginative inner part writing. There is Mozart’s characteristic quiet and private atmosphere and also a wonderful vocal or operatic feeling to the music in the manner in which the players share phenomenal melodies and play off each other. We hear sections of light, cheerful, ornate music giving way to profound and grave passages of what the musicologist Alfred Einstein called “learnedness.” The piece is at once exacting and undemanding; and despite a resolutely cheerful viewpoint, the quartet conveys a sense of great unhappiness and discouragement beneath its surface glitter. In many enthralling passages it seems to presage the Romantics.

The *Allegretto* illustrates this musical coexistence of both gravity and lightness very well. The first movement is in sonata form with a theme in a relaxed, swinging unison down the D Major chord and a dotted rhythm characterizing the initial theme, which dominates the developmental sections. This motive returns many times throughout the movement, which is filled with promise of merry melody making. One tune follows another after this opening statement, sometimes in clusters of themes. But then Mozart displays intricate counterpoints involving pairs of instruments that place sharp contrasts between impassioned outbursts and timid responses. There is an extended canon-like passage for first violin and cello. A continuing eighth-note figure like a ticking clock accompanies the movement’s short development of the first theme. Finally the instruments come together signaling the recapitulation. The clock motive reappears in the coda and disappears at the end of the movement.

The *Menuetto* continues the easy relaxed mood of the first movement in a seemingly happy, innocent style. But the dense texture, the chromatic ure, and the extensive imitative writing give it a special depth of feeling. The trio in D minor is another matter: it is a masterpiece of contrapuntal scurrying marked by lively running triplets, which Einstein called “a piece of musical wizardry.”

The lyrical *Adagio* in G major is one of the most moving and beautiful slow movements

of any Mozart quartet. It is big and expansive with very expressive writing, and its initial motive refers back to the opening of the *Allegretto*. It is in sonata form, but you must listen carefully because the long vocal-like melodies reminiscent of operatic arias all but obliterate that form (recall his use of this in K.542). It begins with a duet between the two violins, setting a pattern for the entire movement as one duo follows another, achieving an extraordinary level of expression. It continues in the style of the first two movements with its outside warmth seeming to hide what Einstein called “past sorrow.”

Mozart starts the *Finale* by parsing out snippets of the first theme before embarking on its complete presentation. After this tentative, quizzical beginning, the *Allegro* bounces along as a bright sonata-rondo driven by triplet rhythms in the violins. This is rudely interrupted by the viola compromising the merriment. The music seems to catch its breath and dances merrily away again. The concluding theme of the exposition features an awkward rising triplet figure in the cello that is answered by the viola’s descending run. The short development section leads to a direct and forthright recapitulation and coda.

### Beethoven: *Quartet in E-flat Op. 74*

Beethoven had moved to Vienna to study composition with Haydn, writing this quartet in the year of Haydn’s death. This is not one of those innovative, angry pieces we usually associate with Beethoven; it is polished, coherent, disciplined, and superbly balanced instead. All of this is surprising considering what Beethoven had to put up with in 1809. Although he anticipated financial security from an annual stipend granted by three noblemen, he was rejected in love for the third time and was living in abject squalor. To protect what was left of his hearing, he was trembling in a basement covering his ears against the bombardment of Vienna by Napoleon’s troops. But, as is often the case with composers under duress, Beethoven composed a quartet that completely belies the unhappy circumstances of its composition.

The slow introduction to Op. 74—a concession to Haydn, who favored slow introductions—is questioning and hesitant in a reserved manner that would come to characterize Beethoven’s later quartets. It centers around a four-note motive heard immediately from the first violin and then is repeated a number of times. Beethoven interrupts the leisurely flow with a

compelling chord twice before returning to an unruffled tranquility. After this restrained opening, the following *Allegro* bears the classical hallmarks of balance and untroubled lightness. The movement is straightforward and easy, but it is enlivened by specific textural touches. Extended pizzicato passages, especially in the development, have earned this quartet its unfortunate nickname, the "Harp." Although they are of minor musical importance, no quartet to that time had used pizzicati so extensively, especially in passages that are not merely accompaniment, and they probably surprised listeners of the 1800s. Now, they sound modest, especially to those who know Bartók's Fourth. The periodic unison playing also brings another kind of textural variety. The viola introduces the second theme (a long note followed by a flurry of ascending and descending notes) and is soon joined by the other instruments. The exposition closes with a theme driven by jarring accents, followed by brief sections of development and recapitulation.

This first movement is one of the best examples of Beethoven's management of musical tension. Compare its short introduction to his *Introduzione* of Op. 59, No. 3, both of which are not thematically integrated with the rest of their respective first movements. The main motives of the *Allegro* are the lyrical melody appearing several bars from the beginning, and the pizzicato arpeggios played by two instruments accompanied by repeating quavers played by the other two. The pizzicati are passed off between the instruments in a little riff on the opening chords of the *Allegro*, and they return at strategic moments in the movement. At first these two themes seem thematically and rhythmically unrelated, but listen closely at the end of the movement to discover what Beethoven's true purpose is for them when played simultaneously beneath the mad violin part that generates the climax of the movement.

The sonata-form first movement closes with a long, striking coda on the pizzicato cello motive erupting with that brilliant, forceful first violin cadenza which attempts to transform the prominent pizzicato idea into something darker and more dramatic. Despite this drama, Beethoven ends the movement with humor as the other instruments play riffs on the opening melodic fragments.

If you are one who thinks Beethoven's gift for lyrical melody is limited, the slow movement may help you change your mind. The movement revolves around the tender main theme, initially stated by the first violin, which is heard three times in varied repetitions separated by contrasting episodes—the first

repeat in minor key, conveying despondency, the second with a loftier and more spiritual tone. The music halts and sighs and the pauses add a feeling of mystery and wonder to this tender movement, the profundity of which anticipates the meditative quality of the later quartets.

The concentrated energy and drive of the intense *Presto* make this the high point of the quartet. Beethoven gives the movement a power and a force rare in chamber music. The second section, led by the cello, is marked "even faster" and Beethoven asks the performers to imagine that two measures of  $\frac{3}{4}$  are actually one measure of  $\frac{6}{8}$  in order to heighten the section's intensity and drive. Both themes are repeated before a third hearing of the opening (where everything is played in a whisper) acts as a transition back to the home key of E-flat and to the final movement, which follows without pause.

The last movement, a set of six of the most innocuous variations on a simple, easy-going, and slightly quirky theme, is full of humorous contrast, alternating between hearty outbursts of good fun and tender variations on the theme. This is the only time Beethoven ended one of his string quartets with a piece of this kind, and it is not so much anticlimax as the energy of the third movement dissipating into tranquility. The first five variations are straightforward, but the last variation is marked faster than the others, and even accelerates to a *Presto*. The music, based on the melodic line of the third variation, seems to build towards a high-speed, brilliant conclusion but instead ends with a quiet wink.

### Ravel: *Quartet in F*

Ravel's quartet was one of his earliest works to appear without a programmatic or literary title, and critics have called it one of his most perfect achievements. Dedicated to his composition teacher and mentor Fauré, Ravel's single string quartet lost him the *Prix de Rome* for the third of four times. The first movement, marked *Allegro moderato* but also specified *très doux* (very sweet), offers the expected two themes. The first is a rich, calm, warmly scored melody in which the first violin plays over scalar harmonies in the lower instruments. It rises and falls through a long arc with elegance and ease, generating melodic materials for the subsequent three movements. Passages of greater animation lead to a soaring and haunting complementary theme, introduced by the first violin and viola, playing two octaves apart over the rustling background figurations of the second violin, to produce striking tone color. The brief

development weaves the two themes in and out of each other and is as concerned with the rustlings as with the themes. As in the model based on Mozart, the recapitulation returns the earlier themes to balance and complete the movement, which ends with a powerful (*fff*) climax that fades gently into silence.

The second movement, a scherzo in ternary form, features changing moods and tones of the rhythmic complexity of Iberian folk dances placed against brisk snapping pizzicati. Listen for the sound of a massive guitar. The first violin and the cello play in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time broken into 3 groups of two eighth notes (2+2+2), while the second violin and viola superimpose in  $\frac{6}{8}$  time (3+3). Each measure contains six eighth-notes but stressed differently (referred to as hemiola) to give the music a pleasing vitality. Trills and tremolos create a gleaming luster of lyric beauty before the cello introduces a dreamy middle section with evolving variations of the first movement's second theme. The pizzicato resumes quietly, gathers speed and vigor, and races up the scale in one of the quartet's most brilliant passages reprising the movement's opening theme and closing with an explosive pizzicato cadence.

The nocturne-like slow movement begins with muted strings and a gentle theme in the viola and suggests the erotic ennui of Debussy's *Afternoon of a Faun*, then just a decade old and still rather contentious. Think of this movement as a rhapsody based loosely on themes from the first movement. The movement's impression of freedom results from its frequent changes of key, sonorities, and meter. At one point the players play on the fingerboards of their instruments, and at another, everyone plays in the treble clef, sounding as though they were playing in an ever increasing vacuum. As in the previous movements, Ravel treats us to a changing progression of new and imaginative tone colors—a remarkable feat with only four instruments at his disposal.

After the serene close of the third movement, the *Agité* leaps abrasively to life with an insistent rush of vigorous eighth notes. The agitated effect comes from its steadily-driving double-stroked passages, a mood which continues for the duration of the movement. The basic metric unit is the rapid  $\frac{5}{8}$  heard at the beginning, though

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there are changes in meter frequently, with excursions into  $\frac{3}{4}$  and  $\frac{5}{4}$ . Ravel alternates a tumult of melodic scraps with calmer segments which provides an energetic, although unexpectedly brief, conclusion to the quartet.

Today, we regard Ravel's quartet as one of the staples of the literature and regret that he did not return to this form as a mature artist. His quartet has a feeling of classical restraint, and the listener can appreciate, even on first hearing, that thematic transformation is the key to the work's structure. Just let it un-Ravel as you listen to it.

—Notes by Dr. M̄rch Yieces-Parnell

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