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Thalea String Quartet

CHRISTOPHER WHITLEY, violin

KUMIKO SAKAMOTO, violin

LAUREN SPAULDING, viola

ALEX COX, cello

2:30 pm, Sunday, November 19, 2023

Faye Spanos Concert Hall

University of the Pacific

AKSHAYA AVRIL TUCKER **RADHA IN THE FOREST** (2020)
(b. 1992) *Commissioned by the Thalea String Quartet*

MISSY MAZZOLI **DEATH VALLEY JUNCTION** (2010)
(b. 1980)

— *INTERMISSION* —

CAROLINE SHAW **VALENCIA** (2012)
(b. 1982)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN **STRING QUARTET NO. 16 IN F MAJOR, OP. 135** (1826)
(1770–1827) Allegretto
Vivace
Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo
Grave, ma non troppo tratto—Allegro

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ARTIST PROFILE



The Thalea String Quartet brings their signature vibrancy and emotional commitment to dynamic performances that reflect the past, present, and the future of the string quartet repertoire while celebrating diverse musical traditions from around the world. Fueled by the belief that chamber music is a powerful force for building community and human connection, the Thalea String Quartet has performed across North America, Europe, and China, and has appeared at the Kennedy Center, Massey Hall, and Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall. They have shared the stage with luminaries of the chamber music world, including members of the Emerson, St. Lawrence, and Borromeo String Quartets, and they have performed alongside celebrated artists including Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Caroline Shaw, violist Lawrence Power, acclaimed Canadian band BADBADNOTGOOD, and visionary R+B artist Charlotte Day Wilson.

Winners of the 2021 Ann Divine Educator Award from the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition, the members of the Thalea String Quartet have been celebrated for their innovative approach to education and community engagement. Pioneers of virtual educational programming, TSQ has developed a variety of digital content, including two digital video series for students of all ages and the CHAMPS Virtual Chamber Music Seminar, which brought together students from across North America for an eight-week intensive study.

The Thalea String Quartet is the Doctoral Fellowship String Quartet at the University of Maryland. The quartet has also held fellowship positions at the University of Texas at Austin and the San Francisco Conservatory. They served as Associated Artists at the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel in Waterloo, Belgium for the 2019-20 season and were the 2019-20 Ernst Stiefel Quartet-in-Residence at the Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts. They were top prize winners at the 2018 Fischhoff Competition and 2018 Chamber Music Yellow Springs Competition.

Tucker: *Radha in the Forest*

Akshaya Avril Tucker is a composer who draws inspiration from the music and dance traditions of South Asia, having trained as a cellist and Odissi dancer from an early age. She explores meditative, gestural, and effervescent soundscapes, especially in her works for strings. Originally from Western Massachusetts, Akshaya is currently based in Los Angeles where she is pursuing her doctorate in composition at the University of Southern California.

The text for this piece is an adaptation of a Gita Govinda verse from 1100 CE. The composer imagines Radha, the classical Sanskrit heroine, in her family's forest during a lonely Massachusetts winter in 2020. The poem shows Radha's strange delirium completely taken by love of Krishna, imagining him here, but fully alone. She imagines the splendor of nature in spring/summer, while the present is a desolate winter, with fires raging across the globe in Australia.

The musical material is inspired by various modes including Raag Charukeshi, a very melodious raga with a unique and independent character. In terms of tempo, the piece starts at a moderate speed (with longing) and ends fast (dance-like).

Ms. Tucker adds, "In my 20 years studying Odissi Classical Indian dance, I have personally danced to several versions of this song, 'Pashyati Dishī Dishī.' In order to effectively enact this poetry through dance, you become, at times, all the characters: Radha (the protagonist), her friend, and Krishna (her divine lover). The atmosphere is delirious joy floating above painful loneliness. To me, some of the most beautiful aspects of this poetry exist in metaphor, how we use traits of human love and longing to describe divine love. My adapted text brings this 12th-century experience to my experience, and my/our present. Here, we have passionate love, and ebullient, divine joy, but also, the weight of environmental tragedy, loneliness, and social isolation. My hope is that a song

that contains all these contradictory states is some means of distracting, inspiring, escaping, knowing the present and moving forward.

"Growing up studying Odissi with Guru Ranjana Devi provided me with a repertoire of stories, myths, and cultural practices. I still hold onto the devotional affect of the many dances that we learned. It's something I try to express in my music for Western instruments, some confluence of music, dance, poetry, love, and spirituality. The final, trance-like patterns recall bhajans (devotional music of South Asia), during fast, call-and-response improvisations."

Mazzoli: *Death Valley Junction*

Missy Mazzoli is an American composer and pianist who is a member of the composition faculty at the Mannes College of Music. She has received critical acclaim for her chamber, orchestral, and operatic work. In 2018 she became one of the first two women to receive a commission from the Metropolitan Opera House. She is the founder and keyboardist for Victoire, an electro-acoustic band dedicated to performing her music. From 2012-2015 she was composer-in-residence at Opera Philadelphia, in collaboration with Gotham Chamber Opera and Music-Theater Group. Her music is published by G. Schirmer. Mazzoli received a 2015 Foundation for Contemporary Arts Grants to Artists Award, a Fulbright Grant to the Netherlands, and in 2018 was nominated for a Grammy Award in the category of Best Classical Composition. In 2018, Mazzoli was named for a two-season term as the Mead Composer-in-Residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Mazzoli was named the Bragg Artist-in-Residence at Mount Allison University beginning in 2022.

Death Valley Junction is a sonic depiction of the town of the same name, a strange and isolated place on the border of California and Nevada. The "town" is home to three people and consists of a café, a hotel, and a fully functional opera house. Death Valley Junction is dedicated

to Marta Becket, the woman who resurrected and repaired the crumbling opera house in the late 1960's and performed one-woman shows there every week until her retirement last year at age 86. The piece begins with a sparse, edgy texture — the harsh desert landscape — and collapses into a wild and buoyant dance. Marta Becket once compared herself to the single yellow flower that is able, against all odds, to flourish in the desert. This piece attempts to depict some of Becket's exuberant energy and unstoppable optimism and is dedicated to her.

Shaw: *Valencia*

Caroline Adelaide Shaw is an American composer of contemporary classical music, violinist, and singer who moves among roles, genres, and mediums, trying to imagine a world of sound that has never been heard before but has always existed. She is best known for the a cappella piece Partita for 8 Voices, for which she won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Music. She is also the recipient of several Grammy awards, including the 2022 Grammy Award for Best Contemporary Classical Composition for her Narrow Sea. She is also the recipient of an honorary doctorate from Yale and a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship. She has worked with a range of artists including Rosalía, Renée Fleming, and Yo-Yo Ma, and she has contributed music to films and TV series including *Fleishman is in Trouble*, *Bombshell*, *Yellowjackets*, *Maid*, *Dark*, and *Beyoncé's Homecoming*. Her favorite color is yellow, and her favorite smell is rosemary.

The artist adds: "There is something exquisite about the construction of an ordinary orange. (Grocery stores around the country often offer the common "Valencia" as the standard option.) Hundreds of brilliantly colored, impossibly delicate vesicles of juice, ready to explode. It

is a thing of nature so simple, yet so complex and extraordinary. In 2012, I performed at the MoMA with the musician and performance artist, Glasser — a song which she described as being about the simple beauty of fruit. Later that summer I wrote Valencia for a concert I was playing with some good friends in Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts. I decided to channel Glasser's brave and intuitive approach to melody and texture, such that Valencia became an untethered embrace of the architecture of the common Valencia orange through billowing harmonics and somewhat viscous chords and melodies. It is also a kind of celebration of awareness of the natural, unadorned food that is still available to us.”

Beethoven: *String Quartet No. 16*

After 12 years, the stimulus for Beethoven to revisit composing string quartets was a commission from Prince Gallitzin in November 1822 for “1, 2 or 3 quartets.” In November 1825, Beethoven completed the commission with the three progressively sophisticated quartets Op. 127 (four movements), Op. 132 (five movements) and Op. 130 (six movements ending in the Grosse Fugue). He kept on writing, finishing the seven-movement C# minor quartet Op. 131 in August 1826 as he simultaneously began work on Op. 135.

Beethoven's general health and state of mind worsened rather quickly as the end of his life drew near. He was plagued by physical disorders, bouts of serious depression, and major monetary crises. Beethoven was also drawn into tending his erratic teenage nephew, Karl, whom he thought of as a son. In the fall of 1826 after Karl's failed suicide attempt, he took his nephew on an extended retreat to the country home of his brother Johann near the village of Gneixendorf in the Danube valley in an attempt to help with his own fits of depression.

Finished on October 30, 1826, Op. 135 was Beethoven's last full string quartet but not quite his last work for string quartet; it preceded the alternative

Rondo finale for the Grosse Fugue end of Op. 130. In the following March, he died of pneumonia he had acquired on the return trip to Vienna when he was forced to ride in an open cart in terrible weather.

The first movement is in customary sonata form, but the tempo, *allegretto*, is more leisurely than usual. The themes come in morsels and pinches—at least six of them—and in the development they interlock with one another like an intricate mechanism. Of particular importance is the eerie opening phrase in the viola and its quivering, flippant answer in the first violin. These figures spend the movement being developed. Make sure you also listen for them in the following movements.

The core theme of the scherzo is a dispute over the beat to be emphasized: the first violin stresses the second beat; the second violin, the third; the viola, the first; and the cello, the first and third: a game of let's play hide the downbeat! Longer than the scherzo proper, the trio raises ample excitement when the first violin plays an enthusiastic dance over a five-note figure that is insistently, nearly unendingly¹, repeated by the other instruments: you wanted to know where the downbeat was? Now you know!

Beethoven notated a sketch of the slow movement, a cavatina, as a “sweet song of rest or peace” ...the calm after the storm. It comprises a poignantly simple, elegiac theme, ten measures long, with four variations. The first variation restates the theme in fuller harmony. The second fractures the theme into anguish-laden chords. The third repeats the theme in the minor. The fourth follows the harmonic outline of the theme but not the melody.

The fourth movement, as famous for its words as its music, presents a riddle that has long teased Beethoven scholars. Beethoven superscribed the movement “*Der schwer gefasste Entschluss*”—roughly, the difficult resolution. He then added at the top of the page two musical

mottos, one a question “*Muss es sein?*” (“Must this be?”) and the other the answer “*Es muss sein!*” (“This must be!”). The first motto, with the rising modulation of a question, is the striking introduction of the movement; the comeback motto becomes the main theme.

There has been much speculation and endless debate about just what this “difficult resolution” was, and many theories have been advanced. Was it Beethoven's agony over which version of a theme to use for the finale? Was it the grocer's bill that had to be paid? Beethoven's note to his publisher hints that it might simply be the difficulty but necessity of finishing the composition. Some evidence indicates that it refers to a price a patron would have to pay to have one of his pieces played at his home. Was Beethoven pulling *our* leg? Or is it about facing and accepting his impending death? Whatever it means, there is the distinct sound of victory.

In many ways, this is not what we might imagine would be the final piece from the celebrated master of the string quartet. With his classic execution of clarity, restraint, and balance in his initial period, the intense study of the idea of content prompting and even determining form in his middle period, and the expansive span of statement depicted in his late quartets, we might expect his final work to be a continuation of his former process: writing even more exceptional, grander musical scenery. Instead, it is something of an anomaly.

In Op.135 he depicts the inherent nature of his music-composing life journey. The music of Op.135 is deep and introspective, but it achieves a clarity and transparency that recalls the work of his teacher Haydn. The quartet ends gloriously and is a proper culmination of Beethoven's heroic life.

¹ At least 50 times

67TH SEASON 2023-2024

*Presented in Cooperation with
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2:30 PM Sunday, September 17, 2023
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2:30 PM Sunday, October 29, 2023
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Vida Guitar Quartet

2:30 PM Sunday, January 28, 2024
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William Schuman, composer and
President of Julliard, 1945-62*

*Chamber Trivia for 1/28:
Which of Beethoven's string
quartets contains the well-known
Cavatina, the beautiful, almost
hymn-like, slow movement?*

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