

# St. Lawrence String Quartet with Pianist Stephen Prutsman

January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021 at 7:00 PM

## Program

### Joseph Haydn (1732–1809)

String Quartet in A major op. 20 no. 6, Hob. III:36 (1772)

- I. *Allegro di molto e scherzando*
- II. *Adagio: Cantabile*
- III. *Menuetto: Allegretto — Trio*
- IV. *Fuga a 3 soggetti: Allegro*

### César Franck (1822–1890)

Piano Quintet in F Minor, op. 14 (1879)

- I. *Molto moderato, quasi lento — Allegro*
- II. *Lento, con molto sentimento*
- III. *Allegro non troppo ma con fuoco*

## Program Notes

### Joseph Haydn (1732–1809)

String Quartet in A major op. 20 no. 6, Hob. III:36 (1772)

When Haydn composed his op. 20 string quartets, in 1772, he perfected the nascent genre and crystallized the newly minted Viennese Classical style in one fell swoop. It was the latest iteration in a creative process that had already engaged the 40-year-old Haydn for at least a decade and would continue to do so for the next thirty years, yielding approximately 68 complete string quartets. Henceforth regarded as the “father” of the string quartet, Haydn produced no fewer than 30 masterpieces that remain active in a great canon now spanning some 250 years. But even with so much still ahead, in op. 20, Haydn reached an extraordinary milestone—one where, in the oft-quoted words of the musicologist Donald Tovey, “further progress is not progress in any historical sense but simply the difference between one masterpiece and the next.” Indeed, the string quartets of op. 20, known as the “Sun” quartets, are not merely historical relics: in the right hands, they are living, breathing musical expressions, still fresh and vital today.

Nonetheless, these quartets remain particularly famous within a storied history, essentially the very first greats in the genre, representing the time and place where it all started. The “Sun” quartets comprise six quartets, each unique and displaying a truly astonishing array of ingenuity and variety, with a breadth, as well as a newly plumbed depth, of character and feeling. They are celebrated for numerous aspects of craft and expression, making them exemplars of the genre. The now familiar four-movement plan is fully in place, an effective vehicle for variety in form, topic, and mood within an overarching unity. In a similar sense, the quartet ensemble is at once a singular entity and a set of individuals, and its fluidity of texture finds all four players engaged in a rich dialogue. A particular hallmark of the high Classical style is the constant presence of “learned” counterpoint within the otherwise accessible flow of “gallant” melody and accompaniment. Op. 20 is the celebration par excellence of this achievement; it features three fugal finales, each a four-part polyphonic web sustaining two, three, or four simultaneous melodies.

The sixth quartet, in A major, sports a predominantly bright and jovial affect, lending it the occasional nickname of “Sun” all by itself. The first movement, with a lilting dance rhythm and the virtuosity of a fiddle piece, projects the play and humor that its “scherzando” marking implies. The slow movement comes next, a touching and tuneful aria complete with “improvisational” embellishments the second time around. The third-movement minuet is based on the initial theme from the first movement, demonstrating a clever cyclic unity within this quartet. The second minuet, traditionally named the “trio,” vividly embodies its namesake, as Haydn omits the second violin to form a reduced ensemble—a string trio. The contrast is further enhanced by a change of timbre as each player is instructed to play softly and entirely on one string. The quartet concludes with one of the famous fugues, this one based on three subjects. In a follow-the-leader kind of round, each player joins separately until the quartet juggles three different themes simultaneously in a complex welter of music-making. Toward the end, the first theme appears upside down, and the welter collapses into a bold unity as the predominantly soft dynamic rises to a resounding shout.

### **César Franck (1822–1890)**

Piano Quintet in F Minor, op. 14 (1879)

César Franck was Belgian but spent the majority of his life in Paris, where he was one of several composers leading a renaissance of French instrumental music toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century after the Franco-Prussian War. A child prodigy, he entered the Paris Conservatoire at the tender age of twelve when he astonished the faculty with his virtuosity at the piano. After a short career as a touring musician, Franck settled into the organ loft of one or more Parisian cathedrals, where he once again dazzled with his improvisations, earning the admiration of no less than Franz Liszt. Frank eventually acquired a faculty position at the Conservatoire, where his organ classes became celebrated forums for harmony and

composition, establishing a cult following among a younger generation of composers including Vincent d'Indy and Claude Debussy. As a gifted and original composer, Franck left two different legacies: first, his religious works, including a number of pieces for organ; and, second, a small but extraordinary cache of instrumental works dating from the last decade or so of his life, which ended in 1890, just before the ascendance of Debussy. Franck's famous compositions include a violin sonata, a symphony, a string quartet, and the magnificent piano quintet of 1879.

The piano quintet is a mighty ensemble comprising two self-sufficient entities in a powerful unity: the string quartet and the piano. Capable of nearly orchestral sound and color, the piano quintet has engendered equally epic compositions, with the most noteworthy examples coming from the likes of Schumann, Brahms, Dvořák, and Shostakovich, among others (and there are many others). Though arguably less well known, Franck's powerful quintet easily joins the others of the first rank and, fitting chronologically between the quintets of Brahms and Dvořák, is stylistically the most Romantic of the lot. Indeed, though Franck belongs to the French "school," his music is much closer to Schubert, Brahms, and especially Wagner, with formal and harmonic tendencies toward the latter. The premiere of Franck's quintet, at the Société Nationale de Musique, fairly stunned the audience with its searing passion and its unbridled sensuality, causing even Liszt to exclaim that it was unexpected from a composer from the "organ loft." Its unrestrained expression, along with its "modern" (i.e., late Romantic) tendencies, led French compatriot and contemporary Camille Saint-Saëns, the pianist who sight-read the premiere and the work's dedicatee, to walk offstage at the conclusion in protest.

Franck's quintet comprises three lengthy movements, with two stormy outer movements enclosing a central, slower movement of comparative repose. The ponderous introduction to the first movement vividly establishes a dichotomy of mood and corresponding musical motion, between a dark, downward force and a light, upward buoyancy, perhaps best (if crudely) described as despair and love. A dotted rhythm in the downward motion gives a sense of fatally tumbling, while the upward motion features an undulating motion like levitating. The first is introduced by the string quartet, the second, by the piano. These become the two contrasting themes in the main body of the first movement, with analogous tendencies pervading the entire quintet. The second, hovering and rather magically mesmerizing theme recurs in numerous guises throughout the first movement and onward through the second and third movements, becoming a cyclic "motto" that binds all three movements together with a striking thematic unity, a technique and artistic principle featured in several of Franck's compositions. Franck was also fond of combining his contrasting themes so they play simultaneously. He does so with the two themes in the first movement; even more remarkably, toward the end of the finale, he combines themes from all three movements, including the "motto" theme, in an astonishing apotheosis that seems to resolve all conflict in a cathartic synthesis. The deep pleasure of Franck's music involves the extended, unresolved

and sustained journey toward that end, featuring a breathtaking range of colors, dynamics, textures, harmonies, and modulations.

—Kai Christiansen, musicologist and founder of [earsense.org](http://earsense.org)