



BIRMINGHAM
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presents

Parisii Quartet



Reynolds-Kirschbaum Recital Hall
April 15, 2010



Parisii Quartet

Arnaud Vallin, violin • Jean-Michel Berrette, violin
Dominique Lobet, viola • Jean-Philippe Martignoni, cello

Formed in 1984 by four prize-winning graduates of the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Paris, the Parisii Quartet won early acclaim with its triumphs at three major international competitions: Banff (1986), Munich (1987) and Evian (1987). Invitations followed from the major concert halls and festivals of Europe, and the Parisii has since toured regularly throughout Europe and the United Kingdom. Highlights of the Parisii's recent European seasons include concerts in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Edinburgh, Lausanne, Barcelona, and Madrid. Much in demand in Paris, the Parisii has been featured in a presentation of all the Haydn quartets at the Opéra de la Bastille, performed all of the Beethoven string quartets at the Salle Gaveau and appeared frequently at the Musée d'Orsay.



In January 1995, the ensemble made an extraordinarily successful 17-concert debut tour of the United States, and has since appeared in Los Angeles, San Diego, Toronto, Miami, Washington, New York, New Orleans, Baltimore, Cleveland and St. Louis. The Parisii made its debut in East Asia in the fall of 1993, with concerts in Hong Kong, Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo, and has returned to the Far East twice since then. The Quartet has also made several tours of South America.

Noted for its performances of distinctive and unusual repertoire of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, the Parisii has distinguished itself with award-winning recordings of intriguing works by such French composers as Menu, Pierné and Tailleferre, as well as the complete works for string quartet by Anton Webern. The Parisii has recently recorded the 16 string quartets of Milhaud, which won the *Grand Prix Charles Cros*, and made the first-ever recording of *Le livre pour quatuor* by Pierre Boulez, and in the spring of 2003, Decca released its recordings of the complete works for string quartet by William Sheller.



Parisii Quartet is managed by Melvin Kaplan, Inc.,
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Program

DARIUS MILHAUD (1892-1974)

Quartet No. 4, Op. 46

Vif

Funèbre

Très animé

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

Quartet in G minor, Op. 10

Animé et très décidé

Assez vif et bien rythmé

Andantino, doucement expressif

Très modéré; très mouvementé et avec passion

Intermission

CÉSAR FRANCK (1822-1890)

Quartet in D Major

Poco lento; Allegro

Scherzo: Vivace

Larghetto

Finale: Allegro molto

Program Notes

Milhaud • Quartet No. 4, Op.46

Darius Milhaud was born in Provence, in southern France, to an old well-established Jewish family. During the course of his long career, he became (often out of necessity) a world traveler who delighted in the music of many cultures, and the sounds of Brazilian dances and American jazz both found their way into his scores. His early music also reflects the most “modern” trends in French music during the 1910s and 1920s. But Milhaud never forgot his heritage, and in works like the *Fourth String Quartet*, his Provençal roots come to the fore.

Milhaud composed the quartet in Rio de Janeiro in 1918, the final year of his service as secretary to the author Paul Claudel, then French minister to Brazil. Although he would write many pieces inspired by Brazilian music when he returned to Paris, the *Fourth Quartet* has nothing Latin about it. The brief first movement opens with a lively, (*vif*) theme in F major that has the sound of folk dance. The dissonance one hears is caused by the fact that the second violin and the viola accompany the theme not in F, but in the key of A major. This technique, called polytonality, was a favorite of Milhaud’s, and it flavors much of the remainder of the quartet. As one critic put it, the “rustic simplicity” of the melodies are given “earthy solidity” by the polytonal harmony.

The second movement is characterized by the slow tread of a funeral march. A quicker, “dotted” figure, introduced at the outset by the second violin, gradually assumes greater prominence through a series of episodes until it is played by all the instruments, *fortissimo*, at the climax of the piece.

The final movement is similar in character to the first. Three prominent themes are presented, each with some resemblance to a melody from earlier movements. Milhaud combines them in counterpoint at the end for an exuberant conclusion.

Notes provided by Melvin Kaplan, Inc.

Claude Debussy • Quartet in G Minor, Op. 10

The period around 1890 was a crucial time in Debussy’s life. The composer had just returned to Paris after a two-year *Prix de Rome* residency in Italy and was eager to rid himself of the restraints of the academicians. One of the first works in which he struck a new artistic direction was the *Quartet in G minor*, which, along with *L’Après-midi d’un faune* from the same time, established what is called the Impressionist style in music. Its varied tonal effects, soulful beauty, and freedom of form and structure provide an excellent musical counterpart to the Impressionist paintings and Symbolist poetry of the time.

The opening notes of the first movement are of overriding importance. They make up the germ, the melodic cell, from which the entire quartet unfolds and grows. This germinal motif is a rather rough-sounding *motto*; rhythmically complex and melodically convoluted, it zigzags back and forth within a comparatively limited *tessitura*. A distinguishing feature is the rapid three-note ornamental *fillip* at the central turning point.

Following the short motif and its repetition, three other melodies are heard. They come between restatements of the motif, each time, though in a slightly dif-

ferent form. The various themes, and especially the opening *motto*, are then heard in an imaginative procession of transformed shapes and guises – now surging with great passion, now stated in stentorian splendor, now stretched and drawn out in length, now plaintively sung – until the movement races to its climactic resolution.

The second movement offers a profusion of sparkling tonal effects, led by the viola playing an obstinately repeated, quickened version of the motif. Above, beneath, and all around this *ostinato* figure, the other instruments furnish brilliant *pizzicato* flourishes and scintillating cross-rhythms. The cello brings this section to a close and establishes the murmuring accompaniment for the first violin playing the opening motif in leisurely augmentation. Sections of new and derived melodic material follow, including a rhythmically attractive *pizzicato* passage in which the original *motto* is transformed into five-beat meter. Then, just as the cello seems to be starting the murmuring accompaniment again, the movement fades away.

After false starts by the second violin and viola, the third movement starts with the first violin softly singing a languid melody that rocks gently back and forth in pitch. The viola next seizes one fragment of the melody and expands it into a slightly faster theme. Another theme, also introduced by the viola, includes the three-note figure of the opening *motto*. It is worked up to an impassioned climax before a return of the quiet rocking theme brings the movement to a subdued conclusion.

The introduction to the final movement, also based on the original motif, continues the quiet mood. The music grows somewhat more animated as the cello starts a fugue-like passage, using a further transformation of the germinal *motif*. The fast part of the last movement then starts with a rapid, cluster-of-notes theme in the viola. From the final notes of this theme, Debussy spins out another melody. The shared notes of both themes become the accompaniment for the motif, this theme in grandiose elongation. A reminder of the opening theme of this movement leads to a *coda* and conclusion that provide a final, exciting glimpse of the considerably altered germinal *motto*.

Completed early in 1893, the quartet was dedicated to the Ysaÿe Quartet, which gave the first performance in Paris on December 29, 1893.

Notes from: Guide to Chamber Music by Melvin Berger, (© 1985)

César Franck • Quartet in D Major

The Belgian-born Franck came to Paris in 1835, shortly thereafter entering the Paris Conservatory, and soon was amassing a number of prizes for his precocious keyboard abilities, eventually becoming a member of the organ and composition faculty of the school.

After 1858, he also served as organist of the large church of St. Clotilde, where his imaginative improvisations during Sunday Mass on the great instrument, located high in the west gallery, drew throngs of admiring listeners. He was also one of the first French musicians to perform the organ music of Bach.

Although Franck was not a prolific composer, confining himself mostly to piano or organ music, he did leave three chamber music masterpieces: a violin sonata, a piano quintet, and the present quartet, completed less than seven months before his untimely death at 68 as a result of a traffic accident.

Franck's well-known penchant for writing works of a cyclic nature, in which a thematic idea is metamorphosized and appears in various guises throughout a

work, is heard in the very first bars of the *D Major Quartet*, in the first violin part, with a rich, full accompaniment in the other instruments. The theme is wide-ranging and highly expressive, sonorous and immediately arresting, and it is referenced over and over in a number of different appearances, providing the thread which binds together the entire work.

The first movement, divided into three distinct sections (slow, fast, slow), presents the main theme in a number of guises. Particularly effective is its employment as material for a series of slow-moving, highly expressive fugal entries led off by the viola, followed in turn by second violin, cello, and finally first violin. The writing is complex, rhythmically differentiated and rigorously controlled, as befits one who admired the contrapuntal workmanship of the immortal Bach. The return of the opening at the completion serves to round out the three-part form.

The second movement is an elfin-like *Scherzo* with strong hints of Mendelssohn, containing scurrying, staccato passages contrasted with a more reposeful trio in the middle, which is also repeated again at the end.

The third movement is one of those great hymnic slow movements in the tradition of the late Beethoven quartets, a veritable paean of intense fervor and rich harmony, combined with intricate contrapuntal manipulation in which all four instruments intertwine in a complex web of thematic development. The constantly modulating passages rise eventually to a fever pitch of dramatic intensity as the soaring first violin, accompanied by arpeggiated chords and ever-increasing volume in the three lower instruments, ascends to its highest pitches. The movement finally concludes with the return of the opening material.

The final movement is by far the longest and most involved, though lacking the tightness of construction of the first. It begins by employing the exact procedure by which Beethoven opens the last movement of the Ninth Symphony: a loud passage in unison introduces, in turn, short reminiscences of all the previous movements, beginning with the slow movement, then presenting the *Scherzo*, and finally the opening movement, at which moment we hear again the primary theme in the cello and first violin, followed by the viola and second violin in a quicker tempo.

A number of thematic areas are developed, particularly two extraordinary sets of materials, one a persistently repeated set of very full, rich, almost organ-like sonorities, and the other a continuing theme which gets tossed back and forth between the upper and lower strings. These fascinating episodes are constantly juxtaposed against the main theme to provide a mosaic of evolving formal structure combining the best elements of unity and diversity.

Note by Franklin S. Miller, © 1991; edited by Kate Barnes

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Birmingham Chamber Music Society
Concert Schedule for 2010-11 Season



SPECIAL EVENT IN COLLABORATION
WITH SAMFORD UNIVERSITY



Tokyo String Quartet

Tuesday, September 14, 2010 • 7:00 p.m.
Brock Hall

The Ritz Chamber Players

Sunday, October 3, 2010 • 4:00 p.m.
Reynolds-Kirschbaum Recital Hall

Pacific String Quartet

Sunday, February 6, 2011 • 4:00 p.m.
Reynolds-Kirschbaum Recital Hall

Trio Cavatina

Sunday, March 6, 2011 • 4:00 p.m.
Reynolds-Kirschbaum Recital Hall



Tickets for the Tokyo String Quartet may be purchased through the Samford University box office; call (205) 726-2853. Season tickets for the BCMS may be purchased through the Alyce Stephens Center box office.

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This program is made possible in part by a grant from the Alabama State Council on the Arts (ASCA) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)



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