

# St. Lawrence String Quartet

<http://www.slsq.com>

**Geoff Nuttall**, violin

**Mark Fewer**, violin

**Lesley Robertson**, viola

**Christopher Costanza**, cello

**“A sound that has just about everything one wants from a quartet, most notably precision, warmth and an electricity that conveys the excitement of playing whatever is on their stands at the moment.”**

– *The New York Times*

Established in 1989, the St. Lawrence String Quartet has developed an undisputed reputation as a truly world class chamber ensemble. The quartet performs over 120 concerts annually worldwide and call s [Stanford University](#) home, where the group is Ensemble in Residence

The SLSQ continues to build its reputation for imaginative and spontaneous music-making, through an energetic commitment to the great established quartet literature as well as the championing of new works by such composers as John Adams, Osvaldo Golijov, Ezequiel Vaino, and Jonathan Berger.

SLSQ maintains a busy touring schedule. The quartet’s 2014/15 season includes a three-concert series at the Library of Congress in Washington DC, during which the quartet will play Stradivari instruments from the library’s prized collection. In January, 2015, SLSQ will premiere a string quartet by John Adams—his third work composed for SLSQ—at Stanford University. The quartet will also perform and give master classes around North America, with visits to Houston, Toronto, Philadelphia, Oberlin, Durham, and many other cities. During the summer season, SLSQ is proud to continue its long association with the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, SC.

Since 1998 the SLSQ has held the position of Ensemble in Residence at Stanford University. This residency includes working with music students as well as extensive collaborations with other faculty and departments using music to explore a myriad of topics. Recent collaborations have involved the School of Medicine, School of Education, and the Law School. In addition to their appointment at Stanford, the SLSQ are visiting artists at the University of Toronto. The foursome's passion for opening up musical arenas to players and listeners alike is evident in their annual summer chamber music seminar at Stanford and their many forays into the depths of musical meaning with preeminent music educator Robert Kapilow.

Lesley Robertson and Geoff Nuttall are founding members of the group, and hail from Edmonton, Alberta, and London, Ontario, respectively. Christopher Costanza is from Utica, NY, and joined the group in 2003. Mark Fewer, a native of Newfoundland, begins his first season with the quartet in 2014, succeeding violinist Scott St. John. All four members of the quartet live and teach at Stanford, in the Bay Area of California.

## Notes on the program

### FRANZ JOSEF HAYDN (1723-1809)

*String Quartet in E-flat, Op. 33 No. 2, 'The Joke' (Hob.III.38) (1781)*

In music, what goes around comes around. Towards the end of 1781, Haydn kick-started his own crowd funding platform. He mailed a series of letters to likely backers who might have an interest in a series of quartets he was about to create. There are to be six “entirely newly produced quartets,” he said in his pitch, “written in an entirely new special manner, for I have not composed any [quartets] for ten years.” In return for their pledges, backers (read ‘patrons’) would receive pre-publication manuscript copies and their names included in the list of subscribers in the printed edition. Haydn’s aim in the six Op. 33 quartets was to broaden his audience without dumbing down his style or in any way compromising his integrity as a composer. His innovation largely lies in the sense of humor and wit that runs throughout the quartets. At the same time, he makes the medium of the string quartet – rather than his symphonies, piano sonatas or operas – a vehicle for his most sophisticated writing. When published, the new quartets, combining accessibility with artistic excellence, immediately created a stir. Their popularity is reflected in the number of nicknames that have become attached to the collection (‘*Russian*’, ‘*Jungfernquartette*’). Another nickname, ‘*Gli Scherzi*’ (Italian for ‘joke’), reflects the fact that Haydn adopts the newer, more folk-like scherzo, in place of the older, more stately minuet. The slow movements of Op. 33 are generally deeper and more complex in texture. And elements of popular folk music find their way into the finales. Mozart, just launching a career as a freelance composer in Vienna when the quartets were first published in 1782, admired their compactness, their perfect balance of character, form and technique, and the way in which Haydn gives all four instruments equal importance. He painstakingly composed a set of six in emulation of Haydn’s Op. 33, with several of Haydn’s movements clearly used as direct models.

The opening movement of Haydn’s E-flat Quartet is built rigorously on the good-natured rhythmic figure of its first few bars. Its musical argument is intricate. Very little in the movement has to do with anything other than this thematic material. In the Scherzo, Haydn’s focus moves from high culture to folk culture, to accessibility and innovation. It begins as a country dance, a *Deutsche Tanz*, with suggestions of thigh-slapping, stamping, and the swirling movement of a peasant dance. Later, Haydn makes the first documented use of the wavy line in a score to indicate that typically Viennese *glissando*, famous shortly afterwards from the waltzes of the Strauss family and others. It’s a rustic touch in a rustic movement and was viewed with suspicion by generations of editors. In fact it wasn’t until 1974 that Haydn’s original directions were restored to a printed score. The mood swings again in the highly sophisticated variations of the slow movement, where a transparent, eight-measure melody is shared among the instruments in every possible permutation. The E-flat Quartet is often called ‘*The Joke*’ because of the witty ‘false ending’ of its rondo finale. Here, in a touch of self-mockery perhaps, Haydn deconstructs the much-repeated theme, giving us the melody phrase by phrase, each separated by a measure of silence. Three more measures of silence and he now gives us the opening phrase again, *pianissimo* – and with it, a good chuckle.

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### John Adams Second Quartet (2014)

*This work was commissioned by Stanford Live, Carnegie Hall, the Juilliard School, the Library of Congress’s Dina Koston and Roger Shapiro Fund for New Music, and Wigmore Hall with the support of André Hoffmann, president of the Fondation Hoffmann, a Swiss grant-making foundation. The World Premiere was given by the St. Lawrence String Quartet at Bing Concert Hall, Stanford University on January 18, 2015.*

Both of John Adams’ string quartets were composed with the St. Lawrence String Quartet in mind. But this latest work is actually the third he has composed for them. The original String Quartet (now likely to be known as the First Quartet) was written in 2008 and premiered January of 2009 at the Juilliard School, the work’s principal commissioner. The St. Lawrence Quartet went on to perform that work many times throughout the world and made the first recording of it for Nonesuch Records.

Adams followed several years later with a grander idea: *Absolute Jest*, a 25-minute work for solo quartet and orchestra based on fragments from Beethoven, primarily from the Opus 131 and 135 string quartets. Commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony to celebrate its centennial season, *Absolute Jest* was given its first performance in March of that year under that orchestra’s music director, Michael Tilson Thomas with the St. Lawrence String Quartet performing the solo parts. The orchestra has twice toured with

*Absolute Jest* and has also recorded it for a forthcoming CD release. Adams and the SLSQ have performed the work together in London, Toronto and with the New World Symphony in Florida.

The Second Quartet is thus the third piece to result from this exceptionally fruitful relationship between a composer and his favorite chamber group. Speaking of their working relationship, Adams says, “String quartet writing is one of the most difficult challenges a composer can take on. Unless one is an accomplished string player and writes in that medium all the time—and I don’t know many these days who do—the demands of handling this extremely volatile and transparent instrumental medium can easily be humbling, if not downright humiliating. What I appreciate about my friends in the St. Lawrence is their willingness to let me literally ‘improvise’ on them as if they were a piano or a drum and I a crazy man beating away with only the roughest outlines of what I want. They will go the distance with me, allow me to try and fail, and they will indulge my seizures of doubt, frustration and indecision, all the while providing intuitions and frequently brilliant suggestions of their own. It is no surprise then for me to reveal that both the First Quartet and *Absolute Jest* went through radical revision stages both before and after each piece’s premiere. Quartet writing for me seems to be a matter of very long-term ‘work in progress.’”

Although not a string player himself, Adams admits to a lifelong absorption in the literature, having discovered the Beethoven, Mozart and Bartók quartets as a teenager. While still a teenager he often played clarinet in the great quintets by Mozart and Brahms, and during that formative time he attended what he called “life-changing” performances by both the Juilliard and the Budapest Quartets.

The new quartet uses the same tropes as *Absolute Jest* in that it too is based on tiny fragments—“fractals,” in the composer’s words—from Beethoven. But the economy here is much stricter. The first movement, for example, is entirely based on two short phrases from the scherzo to the late Opus 110 piano sonata in Ab major. The transformations of harmony, cadential patterns and rhythmic profile that occur in this movement go way beyond the types of manipulations favored in *Absolute Jest*.

Like the First Quartet this new work is organized in two parts. The first movement has scherzo impetus, and moves at the fastest pace possible for the performers to play it. The familiar Beethoven cadences and half cadences reappear throughout the movement like a homing mechanism and each apparition is followed by a departure to an increasingly remote key and textural region.

The second part begins “Andantino” with a gentle melody that is drawn from the opening movement of the same Opus 111 piano sonata. Here the original Beethoven harmonic and melodic ideas go off in unexpected directions, almost as they were suggestions for a kind of compositional “free association.”

The Andantino grows in range and complexity until it finally leads into the “Energico” final part of the piece, a treatment of one of the shortest of the Diabelli Variations. This particular variation of Beethoven’s features a sequence of neighbor-key appoggiaturas, each a half step away from each main chord. Adams amplifies this chromatic relationship without intentionally distorting it. Like its original Beethoven model, the movement is characterized by emphatic gestures, frequent uses of “sforzando” and a busy but convivial mood of hyperactivity among the four instruments.

**ANTONIN DVOŘÁK (1841-1904)**  
*Quartet No. 11, in C, Op. 61, B.121 (1881)*

Dvořák composed his eleventh string quartet for Joseph Hellmesberger, the Viennese court kappellmeister, concertmaster of the Hofoper and Conservatory director – the very pillar of the Viennese musical establishment. Hellmesberger’s string quartet had held a reputation as Vienna’s finest for over three decades when they first began to perform music by Dvořák. It was a good time for the musician from provincial Prague. After four decades of poverty and state stipends, his music was being championed by Brahms and the influential Viennese critic Hanslick. He now had a German publisher and the Vienna Philharmonic Society had just requested a new symphony. At the beginning of October 1881, he immersed himself in a new opera for the inauguration of the new National Theater in Prague, reassuring Hellmesberger that he would work on the opera in the mornings and the quartet in the afternoons. By the middle of November he opened a Viennese newspaper. “I see in the papers that on December 15 Hellmesberger is to perform my new quartet which does not yet exist,” he wrote with some humor to a friend. “There is nothing left for me to do but to compose it!”

Three weeks later, the quartet was complete. The mood is at once intimate, with an affirmative theme that is rich in potential for development. It soon plunges dramatically into the minor and Dvořák explores the resulting tonal ambiguity throughout the opening movement, traveling through a range of emotions from the joyous to the wistful. The spacious slow movement, one of Dvořák’s generously romantic utterances, again successfully exploits a frequent major-minor shift in modality. It is based on a discarded sketch for the F-major Violin Sonata. Similarly – probably to hasten completion of the work – the third and fourth movements incorporate themes from a Polonaise for cello and piano that Dvořák was working on a year or two earlier. The Scherzo brings a return to the urgency of the opening movement and an echo of a motif from its opening theme. In its brilliant trio section, Dvořák allows his love for folk-like themes to surface, though the development of the material remains securely within the traditions of the Viennese quartet.

Dvořák knew he was treading a fine line between national feeling and an international musical language. “Viennese audiences seem to be prejudiced against a composition with a Slav flavor,” he had written to conductor Hans Richter just the previous year, recognizing that political tensions could intrude on the concert hall. The rigorous development of musical motifs continues in the finale as the driving force behind its exuberant, technically demanding, Slavonic-colored music.

Joseph Hellmesberger never gave the premiere of the work that Dvořák dedicated to him. A fire at the Vienna Ringtheater one week before the concert killed hundreds, destroyed the theater and led to the cancellation of the advertised performance. The C-major Quartet was given its première in Berlin the following year by the Joachim Quartet, followed a few days later by a performance by the Heckmann Quartet in Cologne.

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## Review: John Adams and St. Lawrence Quartet

By Richard Scheinin

STANFORD -- Plan A was to begin this review with a discussion of John Adams' eagerly awaited "*Second Quartet*," which received its world premiere Sunday from the St. Lawrence String Quartet at Bing Concert Hall. However, the totality of the St. Lawrence's program was so astonishingly good -- it ended with a performance of Beethoven's great *Op. 131 string quartet*, one that I won't soon forget -- that we now turn instead to Plan B.

It's only a short detour on the way to Adams' devilishly dynamic new work, but it needs to be reported here that the St. Lawrence -- in its 25th season, overall, and in its 17th as ensemble-in-residence at Stanford -- is at the top of its game. To be performing at this level of technical clarity and expressive clout after 25 years, united in its exploration of a wide repertory -- that's an accomplishment.

In one sense the group is invisible; it just lets the music speak. But that said, how often do you hear any group play Haydn (in this case the *String Quartet in F minor, Op. 20, no. 5*) with this much passion and wisdom, or with such a beautiful sound? Picking just one example, the quiet propulsion of Haydn's closing fugue was eye-opening: all that delicacy and fire. And to seize on a single instant from Beethoven's 40-minute *String Quartet in C-sharp minor, Op. 131*, the *Presto* was delivered with such a ridiculously light touch and with such a strong sense of song that it became an overwhelming Beethoven moment.

So hats off to violinist Geoff Nuttall and violist Lesley Robertson (founding members of the quartet), cellist Christopher Costanza (in his 12th season) and violinist Mark Fewer (who joined the group this season, though he has long been part of its inner circle of friends).

Now back to Plan A.

In his introductory remarks to "*Second Quartet*," Berkeley-based Adams -- whose every new piece is an Event (capital E) -- joked about the St. Lawrence: "They continue to embarrass me by putting me on programs like this, between Haydn and Beethoven. I end up being the Chihuahua between" the larger breeds.

He is no Chihuahua.

This is the third piece that Adams has composed for the St. Lawrence. There was his "First Quartet" (2008), followed by "Absolute Jest" (2012), a concerto for string quartet and orchestra that manipulates fragments of Beethoven's *Op. 131* and *Op. 135* string quartets into something big, thorny and thoroughly Adams-ian.

Likewise for "*Second Quartet*." It is structured in two movements. It lasts a little over 20 minutes, and it again digs ingeniously into bits of Beethoven, using them as a developmental device. It also grooves as if it were composed by someone who came of age in the 1960s -- someone like Adams, who can hold forth on John Coltrane, Jimi Hendrix and the Beatles.

The first movement (*Allegro molto*) borrows a single phrase -- really just seven declamatory notes -- from the scherzo to Beethoven's *Op. 110 piano sonata* in A-flat major, and goes to work. Put in contemporary terms, Adams samples Beethoven. The phrase gets repeated and stretched and clipped at its edges. Adams shoots it full of vitamins and rhythm. He pumps it through a droning groove that the St. Lawrence dug down into with vehemence, with such insistent fiddling that the group sounded something like a folk-music string band gone bananas.

Earthy and vital -- much like Beethoven -- the music was constantly mutating, moving through weird textures and toward unexpected harmonic points. Leaping and lurching, it climaxed with air-raid violins above a boiling "bass line" for cello and viola.

The second movement (*Andantino-Energico*) builds on Beethoven, too, borrowing a phrase from the song-like opening movement of the same *Op. 110 sonata*.

The mood here was one of soft hymn-like pleading, of striving toward a higher ground. Adams, though, proved once again to be full of surprises. The St. Lawrence hung in with his hard-spliced jumps between airy lyricism - notes just hanging there in the silence -- and thick storm. The music climbed by half-steps. It careened and hugged tight turns. It quoted and fed off one of Adams' favorite *Diabelli Variations*, by Beethoven. (At least so he says; I didn't hear it.) It went flying down a chute -- and it ended, just like that.

Was there any fat in the piece -- one or two too many turns in the road? I wondered, though I'd have to hear it again. Mostly, it sounded exactly like what you would want to hear from John Adams, master of the wild ride.

Contact Richard Scheinin at 408-920-5069, read his stories and reviews at [www.mercurynews.com/richard-scheinin](http://www.mercurynews.com/richard-scheinin) and follow him at [www.twitter.com/richardscheinin](http://www.twitter.com/richardscheinin).

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## St Lawrence String Quartet, Bing Concert Hall, Stanford, California – review

By Allan Ulrich

### John Adams introduced this premiere of his rapturous new Second Quartet St Lawrence String Quartet

Fortunate are those composers who can depend on sympathetic interpreters to communicate their message to the world. For most of the past decade, the St Lawrence String Quartet has served John Adams whenever he has produced chamber music for strings. The relationship reached its zenith on Sunday evening when the group premiered the composer's *Second Quartet*. It is a rapturous 22-minute effusion that acknowledges the past while enlivening the present. Fresh from leading the San Francisco Symphony in his *Grand Pianola Music*, the composer was on hand to introduce the piece.

Adams has admitted his hesitancy in the intricacies of string writing (he grew up playing the clarinet). The almost laboratory relationship with the St Lawrence (long in residence on the Stanford University campus) yielded two earlier compositions, both eminently listenable but neither felt quite as natural nor sounded quite as economical as the latest piece, which glowed in the acoustics of two-year-old Bing Hall.

In the two-part Second Quartet, as in its predecessors, Adams seems determined to position himself within the central western chamber music tradition. His guiding inspiration (explicit or not) is Beethoven. Here, in the Second Quartet, Adams finds aesthetic nourishment in two phrases from the *Op. 110 piano sonata* and later, from the briefest of the *Diabelli Variations*. He uses them as connective tissue in a densely harmonized, rhythmically buoyant and gratifyingly lucid essay that, for all its feverish energy, ultimately deserts Beethoven and melts into one of those lyric passages that have distinguished Adams' writing in recent years.

The St Lawrence invested the work with tremendous authority, uncommon clarity and empathy to its hushed final pages. The foursome, whose sense of ensemble is peerless, sandwiched Adams between two masterpieces. Haydn's *Op. 20, No. 5 quartet* is a rare, minor-key effusion that came off with a dour majesty, down to the melancholic scherzo. At the end the group climbed the peak of Beethoven's *Op. 131* with a speedy and coherent traversal that left the listener entirely satisfied.