

Eli and Edythe Broad Stage  
Santa Monica College Performing Arts Center  
**Jane Deknatel**, *Director, Performing Arts Center*

**2017/18 The Broad Stage Artists-in-Residence**

# **Calder Quartet**

**SUN / FEB 25 / 4:00 PM**

Benjamin Jacobson, *violin*

Andrew Bulbrook, *violin*

Jonathan Moerschel, *viola*

Eric Byers, *cello*

## **PROGRAM NOTES**

**Please reserve your applause until the end of each entire work.**

## PROGRAM

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

String Quartet No. 2, Op. 13

Adagio – Allegro vivace

Adagio non lento

Intermezzo. Allegretto con moto – Allegro di molto

Presto – Adagio non lento

György Kurtág (b. 1926)

6 Moments Musicaux for string quartet, Op.44

Invocatio

Footfalls

Capriccio

In memoriam György Sebök

[étude pour les harmoniques]

Les adieux (in Janáček's Manier)

Intermission

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 15, Op. 132

Allegro

Allegro ma non tanto

Molto Adagio. Andante

Alla marcia, assai vivace

Allegro appassionato. Presto

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## Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

### String Quartet No. 2, Op. 13

- i. Adagio – Allegro vivace
- ii. Adagio non lento
- iii. Intermezzo. Allegretto con moto – Allegro di molto
- iv. Presto – Adagio non lento

Mendelssohn's rise to mature talent was precocious and meteoric: he wrote the *Octet* at sixteen, the *Overture to the Midsummer Night's Dream* at seventeen and his first mature string quartet at eighteen. Despite the higher opus number and the occasional label, "No. 2", Mendelssohn composed Op. 13 two years before his next quartet, Op. 12 in E-flat Major, often called "No. 1." As his real first quartet, Op. 13 is astonishing by several measures besides the youth of its composer. It is lyrical, intensely passionate and utterly winning. It is also ingeniously constructed. The formal structure revolves around a tender love song that Mendelssohn wrote months before he began the quartet. The lied — *Frage*, Op. 9/1 — makes literal appearances in both outer movements while lending its spirit to the inner ones. A crucial motif from the song influences several themes across the quartet while other close relationships bind all the movements into stunning thematic unity. The finale literally quotes the previous movements eventually circling back to the very beginning to resume the introductory adagio and bring the song to its long awaited conclusion. Mendelssohn wrote one of the very first "cyclical" chamber works.

Yet another amazing facet is the unmistakable influence of Beethoven.

Beethoven composed his ineffable late quartets between 1824 and 1826;

he died in 1827 right around the time Mendelssohn wrote his love song. Mendelssohn deeply admired Beethoven and, unusual for the time, was intently studying these radical chamber works written just a year or two earlier. Mendelssohn was way ahead of his time in drawing inspiration from music considered inscrutable by many of his contemporaries. Op. 13 makes several vivid references to Beethoven's quartets. It is packed with intricate, extended contrapuntal imitation including numerous fugal entrances and a massive chromatic fugue in the second movement. The slow introduction, the surging primary themes, the poignant lyricism, the tonal effects and even the key signature point directly to Beethoven's Op. 132.

And then there is Mendelssohn's song. The title, "Frage", means "Question" in English. The music begins with a three-note rising motif to the words, "Ist es wahr?" ("Is it true?"). Was Mendelssohn making a connection with Beethoven's finale quartet with its similar musical question "Musst es sein?" ("Must it be?"). As with Beethoven's musical query, Mendelssohn responds with a three-note answer at least twice: in the main theme of the first movement and again at the very end of the quartet. The connection seems undeniable. Regardless, Mendelssohn's questioning song is crucial to his quartet in terms of formal structure, thematic variation and even the dramatic use of recitative to punctuate his decidedly vocal orientation. In writing this extended instrumental "song without words", Mendelssohn became, like Schubert, a Romantic pioneer.

## **György Kurtág (born 1926)**

### **6 Moments Musicaux for string quartet, Op.44**

Invocatio

Footfalls

Capriccio

In memoriam György Sebök

[étude pour les harmoniques]

Les adieux (in Janáček's Manier)

György Kurtág, a living composer now in his early nineties, is widely regarded as one of the most important avant-garde composers coming into prominence in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kurtág was born of Hungarian parents but grew up in a part of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire that became part of Romania in 1918. Speaking Hungarian at home and Romanian at school, he moved to Budapest in 1946 to study music at the Franz Liszt Academy and soon became a Hungarian citizen. Kurtág graduated with degrees in piano, chamber music and composition and established his initial reputation as a pianist. Despite the disastrous uprising of 1956 and a brief yearlong sojourn in Paris in 1957/8, Kurtág chose to remain in Hungary and has been cited as the only composer to live through the communist regime (lasting until 1989) and achieve an international recognition. Yet his time in Paris was crucial to his future: there he studied with Messiaen and Milhaud and, for the first time, studied the scores of Anton Webern. At the same time, Kurtág suffered with depression seeking therapy with Marianne Stein whom Kurtág regarded as his most important encounter in Paris. The struggles and revelations of the period gave a new definition to the mature Kurtág and, after returning to Budapest, he composed a new string quartet in 1959 that he significantly numbered “Opus 1.”

Kurtág is known as a meticulous and painstaking composer so his oeuvre is comparatively small, yet to date, he has composed nine pieces for string quartet, a particularly prodigious and intense part of his music. While exploring his works for string quartet, it becomes obvious why his music is typically described as compressed, epigrammatic and masterful in miniature. Whether a complete work, a movement or a piece within a set, Kurtág's string quartet music rarely exceeds a few minutes in duration and often less. No doubt this reflects the profound influence of Webern with his own two landmark sets of string quartet miniatures. A further similarity can be found in the wide ranges of pitch, timbre and dynamics where every note, nuance and gesture is precise, intentional and significant. Even silences are saturated with musicality. A listener is compelled to "lean in", attentive to every sound, almost afraid that a breath will break the spell.

Kurtág's composed his *6 Moments musicaux, Op 44* between 1999 and 2005 when he was in his mid-seventies. Dedicated to his son, they are, like their namesakes from Schubert, individual pieces in a set, each concerned with its own soundscape and programmatic suggestion. *Invocatio* (invocation), is a supplication to the gods, a calling of the muse before the recitation of an epic. The process is tense and fraught. *Footfalls* is tentative, suspenseful and sparse. The title may refer to the play by Samuel Beckett who has been an enduring influence on Kurtág's music, but it also comes from a poem by Hungarian poet Endre Ady about the sound of footsteps, the hopeful anticipation, yet, ultimately, no one comes, leaving only loneliness. The third piece, *Capriccio*, is, by comparison, quirky, erratic and capricious, full of what Kurtág called "cunning pitfalls." One detects the influence of Stravinsky here. The fourth piece is an elegy for Hungarian teacher and pianist György Sebök. *Rappel des oiseaux (étude pour les harmoniques)* is the memory or recall of birds expressed almost entirely in harmonics, a technique giving the stringed instruments uncanny,

birdlike sounds. The influence of Messiaen is unmistakable. In the final piece, *Les Adieux (in Janáček's manner)*, Kurtág specifically calls out the influence of Czech composer Leoš Janáček whose passion, rhythmic vitality and emphasis on the natural cadences of speech all seem to be in play in the music. The concluding fadeout vividly evokes departure and disappearance, the essence of “goodbyes.”

## Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

### String Quartet No. 15, Op. 132

- i. Allegro
- ii. Allegro ma non tanto
- iii. Molto Adagio. Andante
- iv. Alla marcia, assai vivace
- v. Allegro appassionato. Presto

The “late” quartets of Beethoven are also his final compositions. After all the revolutionary piano sonatas, the monumental symphonies including the apotheosis of the 9th, the opera, the *Missal solennis*, the brilliant corpus of diverse chamber music and even tentative sketches for a 10th symphony, Beethoven occupied his last few years exclusively with the intimate and exacting genre of the string quartet. With the preceding five quartets Beethoven had already revolutionized this genre as well. Since then, well over a decade had passed including some of the most personally challenging years of his life. Since 1816, according to most accounts, Beethoven was completely deaf. He was now fifty-three years old with but three years left. November of 1822 brought a commission to write “one, two or three” quartets from Prince Nicholas Galitzin, an amateur cellist from St. Petersburg. By mid-1824, Beethoven began work in earnest ultimately finishing five quartets, in order, Op. 127, 132, 130 (including the *Grosse Fuge*), 131, 135 and the alternate ending for Op. 130. And that was all. With these final works, Beethoven created a fresh world of transcendent music that remains, in the minds and hearts of most, the unsurpassed pinnacle of Western classical chamber music. About the *Grosse Fuge* alone, Stravinsky famously remarked that it was the first piece of modern music, to remain eternally modern.

The *String Quartet No. 15 in a minor, Op. 132* was the second of the late quartets to be written. Sketches indicate that Beethoven planned a four-movement design, but his focus was interrupted by a severe bout of debilitating illness. Upon recovering, he wrote a new movement of “thanksgiving” that became the centerpiece of a rearranged five-movement quartet. It was finished in July 1825 and premiered in the fall.

The quartet opens with something resembling a sonata though highly original in form like most of the late quartet movements. Four long notes in the cello intone an austere and immediately memorable motif made from two pairs of cramped semitones separated by a leap. The motif recurs sporadically throughout the movement in easily discernible permutations as a fateful signpost. (The permuted motif also recurs in the subsequent quartets Op. 130 and 131, binding three of the late quartets into a ponderous, haunting unity). A sudden flight in the violin lands on a second, equally memorable motif that sets the music in motion with a mournful, dark preoccupation in the minor home key. The music gradually shifts into the second key area introducing a third important subject that sings the only extended lyrical theme of the movement, a warm melody in a major key with the achingly human tonality of the lower strings (using a different solo voice with each reappearance). With an astonishing fluidity of changing textures, mercurial shifts and disruptions and a rich expanse of expression from the tragic to the sublime, the allegro pursues a powerful drama of darkness engulfing light with a force and ultimate supremacy that is shattering.

The second movement brings relief with the combined effects of key change to A major and the gentle sway of a triple meter at a moderate pace. A rather “light” and, for Beethoven, tame scherzo becomes a foil for a contrasting trio of ecstatic grace, a delicate celestial music box glinting with a filigree of precious gold.

As musicologist Michael Steinberg aptly comments, this is “one of the moments at which Beethoven’s imagination for sonority and texture—the imagination, one is once again startled to remember, of a deaf man—is unsurpassed in freedom and freshness.” The juxtaposition of calculated but spontaneous simplicity with ferocious complexity in the late quartets is one of their chief hallmarks and surely one source of bewilderment for Beethoven’s contemporaries.

Perhaps initially most bewildering, yet ultimately the most sublime, is the vast centerpiece, the slow movement that Beethoven inscribed with a monumental dedication that Steinberg translates as “A Convalescent’s Holy Song of Thanksgiving to the Deity, in the Lydian Mode.” The greatest writers on the classical period stress that the mature quartets of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven each present as distinctive individuals. This is true as well of each individual movement of Beethoven’s late quartets, and among these masterpieces, one finds a few of the most singularly individual and hallowed movements throughout the entire literature (e.g. the *Cavatina*, the fugue that begins Op. 131, the *Grosse Fuge*, etc.). The Lydian mode evokes the otherworldly sacred church modes of the Renaissance, and the hymn, the ancient song of praise to the deity. The music combines three instantly recognizable elements: a wisp of counterpoint, an austere hymn in four-part unison harmony, and a lightning strike of glittering virtuosity labeled in the score as “a feeling of new strength.” Along a timeline that eludes any mortal reckoning, the music undergoes a slow, organic transformation of heart-rending beauty that feels to be the very embodiment of life infused with divinity. As if sparked into primordial life by bolts of new strength, the tender green shoots of counterpoint grow into a rich lyrical vine embracing the cold stone of hymnody, ultimately blossoming into the most precious song you may ever hear.

Perhaps the shortest movement Beethoven ever wrote bridges this “song of thanksgiving” to the finale. As if from necessity to make us earth-bound again, a bold, proud march heralds the arrival of worldly poise, but once scarcely begun, it frays into a cloud of suspense rent by a passionately urgent recitative from the first violin: something else is coming. Without pause—*attacca*—the surging finale is upon us, a forceful allegro appassionato reasserting the dark cast of the quartet with the turbulent swirl of the sea. Besides the restoration of A minor, a brisk tempo and a driving 3/4 meter, the sweep of the finale owes much to the ingeniously restless figurations of the cello that rasp relentlessly up and down in choppy chromatic waves that never quite resolve. The cello commands an important role throughout. Threading the episodes comprising this loose rondo form, Beethoven weaves some of his most bold transitions and challenging digressions, a nearly frantic struggle against the tide. As was many times his wont, in the coda, the headlong rush swiftly sheds its gravity to effervesce around the surprising arrival of a major key, a wink, a smile, a sprightly triumph in bold strokes of joy.