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# DANISH STRING QUARTET

Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen | Violin  
Frederik Øland | Violin

Asbjørn Nørgaard | Viola  
Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin | Cello

Tuesday, April 14, 2026 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

## STRAVINSKY

*(arr. by the Danish  
String Quartet)*

## Suite Italienne

*Introduzione  
Serenata  
Tarantella  
Gavotte  
Scherzino  
Minuet; Finale*

INTERMISSION

## SCHNITTKE

## String Quartet No. 2

*Moderato  
Agitato  
Mesto  
Moderato*

**Arrangements of traditional Nordic  
music by the Danish String Quartet**

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The Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation**

The Danish String Quartet is represented by Kirshbaum Associates Inc. [kirshbaumassociates.com](http://kirshbaumassociates.com)

The Danish String Quartet is currently exclusive with ECM Records and has previously recorded for DaCapo and Cavi-Music/BR Klassik.



## ENSEMBLE PROFILE

*San Francisco Performances* presents the Danish String Quartet for the third time. It first appeared in February 2018.

The Grammy®-nominated **Danish String Quartet** continue to assert their preeminence among the world's finest string quartets. Celebrated for their "intense blend, extreme dynamic variation (in which they seem glued together), perfect intonation even on harmonics, and constant vitality and flow" (*Gramophone*) and renowned for the palpable joy they exude in music-making, the Danish String Quartet has become one of today's most in-demand classical quartets, performing to sold-out concert halls around the world.

The Quartet's inventive and intriguing programming and repertoire choices have produced critically acclaimed original projects and commissions as well as sophisticated arrangements of traditional folk tunes. In August 2024, the Quartet released their long-awaited third album of folk-inspired traditional and original tunes, *Keel Road*, on ECM. Comprising 14 tracks, all arranged by the Danish String Quartet, *Keel Road* is a retracing of musical pathways across the North Sea, from Denmark and Norway to the Faroe Islands, England, and Ireland. The release of *Keel Road* marked the Quartet's tenth anniversary of exploring Scandinavian folk traditions, beginning with their 2014 album *Wood Works* and followed by *Last Leaf* (ECM 2017); both *Last Leaf* and *Keel Road* were chosen as one of the top classical albums of the year by *NPR* and *The New York Times*.

With a growing audience in North America, they embark on three tours this season

that bring them to 22 cities in the US and Canada. They perform at prestigious series including Washington Performing Arts, San Francisco Performances and UC Santa Barbara Arts & Lectures in California, Carnegie Hall in New York, The University Musical Society in Ann Arbor, Celebrity Series of Boston, and the Schubert Club in St. Paul Minnesota. Outside the US, they perform this season in Denmark, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, Italy and Brazil.

The Danish Quartet's April US Tour in 2026 features longtime collaborator, the Danish National Girls' Choir in their first coast-to-coast tour together. Violist Asbjørn Nørgaard describes the choir as highly original, with "an almost tangible power" that makes them the perfect partner for the bold visions of the Quartet. The wide-ranging program includes a new co-commissioned work by David Lang, *in wildness*, to receive its U.S. premiere on April 10 at the University of California Santa Barbara and its New York premiere at Carnegie Hall on April 17. The program also includes music by Caroline Shaw, Lotta Wennäkoski and Schubert as well as traditional and original tunes arranged by the Quartet. The Danish String Quartet also plan two more tours in November 2025 and February 2026. Showcasing their dynamic artistry and inventive programming, the Quartet present a rich mix of classical masterworks—including pieces by Beethoven, Ravel and Stravinsky, among others—paired with their own original compositions and arrangements (from *Keel Road* and elsewhere).

The final disc in the Quartet's five-disc PRISM series on ECM was released to great acclaim in April 2023, and *The New York*

*Times* dubbed the collection "essential listening." PRISM explores the symbiotic musical and contextual relationships between Bach fugues, Beethoven string quartets, and works by Shostakovich, Schnittke, Bartók, Mendelssohn, and Webern. The Quartet's discography also reflects the ensemble's special affinity for Scandinavian composers, with the complete quartets of Carl Nielsen (Dacapo, 2007 and 2008) and Adès, Nørgård & Abrahamsen (their debut on ECM in 2016).

The Quartet takes an active role in reaching new audiences through special projects. In 2007, they established the DSQ Festival, which takes place in intimate and informal settings in Copenhagen. In 2016, they inaugurated a concert series, *Series of Four*, in which they both perform and invite colleagues to appear. They have been the recipient of many awards and appointments, including *Musical America's* 2020 Ensemble of the Year; the Borletti-Buitoni Trust; BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artist; and the Bowers Program (formerly CMS Two). In 2011, the Quartet were awarded the Carl Nielsen Prize, the highest cultural honor in Denmark, and in June 2025, the Léonie Sonning Music Prize—the first ensemble to receive what is one of the most prestigious awards in classical music.

The Danish Quartet recently celebrated their 20th Anniversary in 2024, having formed when violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard were teenagers under the mentorship of Tim Frederiksen of Copenhagen's Royal Danish Academy of Music. In 2008, the three Danes were joined by Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin.

## PROGRAM NOTES

### Suite Italienne

**IGOR STRAVINSKY**  
(1882–1971)

In the years after World War I Stravinsky found himself at an impasse as a composer, unwilling to return to the grand manner of the "Russian" ballets that had made him famous, but unsure how to proceed. Serge Diaghilev, impresario of the Ballets Russes, suggested a ballet based on themes by the Italian composer Giovanni Pergolesi (1710–36) and showed him some of Pergolesi's music. Stravinsky was entranced. Over the next year he composed a ballet with song in eighteen parts, based on themes from Pergolesi's operas and instrumental

music (though subsequent research has shown that not all these themes were written by Pergolesi). Stravinsky kept Pergolesi's melodic and bass lines, but supplied his own harmony and brought to this music his incredible rhythmic vitality. First produced in Paris on May 15, 1920, with sets by Picasso and choreography by Massine, *Pulcinella* was a great success.

Ever the pragmatist, Stravinsky had become interested at this time in ballets for smaller ensembles, for he realized that they could save expense and make possible productions in places that lacked a large symphony orchestra. *Pulcinella* was a step in this direction—it is scored for an orchestra of 37 players—but Stravinsky was interested in ensembles of just a few players, and his arrangements of excerpts from *Pulcinella* may be regarded as explorations of those possibilities.

Stravinsky made several arrangements for instrumental duos of excerpts from *Pulcinella*. First was a *Suite for Violin and Piano* based on themes from the ballet, made in 1925. Next came an arrangement of different excerpts for cello and piano, made in 1932 by the composer and Gregor Piatigorsky; this version was the first to be called *Suite Italienne*. The following year, Stravinsky and violinist Samuel Dushkin made an arrangement of excerpts for violin and piano and called it *Suite Italienne* as well. (Somewhat later, Jascha Heifetz and Piatigorsky made an arrangement for violin and cello, which they also called *Suite Italienne*.)

Stravinsky's violin and piano version of *Suite Italienne* is in six movements. It opens with a jaunty *Introduzione* (the ballet's *Overture*), followed by a lyric *Serenata*, based on an aria from Pergolesi's opera *Il Flaminio*. A blistering *Tarantella* (with its surprising and sudden ending) leads

to a stately *Gavotte*, which is followed by two ornate variations. The *Scherzino* flies along on an almost non-stop pulse of eighth-notes; Stravinsky specifies that he wants it played *sempre staccato*. The concluding section is in two parts: a slow *Minuet* full of complex double-stops leads without pause to the exciting *Finale*.

## String Quartet No. 2

**ALFRED SCHNITTKE**  
(1934-1998)

Alfred Schnittke composed his *String Quartet No. 2* in 1980, shortly before he left the Soviet Union to make Germany his home. The Quartet was commissioned by his publisher, Universal Edition, but the music itself was inspired by a tragic event: the death in an automobile accident of the Soviet film director Larissa Shepitko. She and her husband had been close friends of the composer, who dedicated the Quartet to her memory. What gives this quartet its particular flavor is Schnittke's decision to derive his themes from old Russian church music, specifically the sacred music of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That music is only a starting point, however; Schnittke adapts these sources freely, changing both intervals and meters to suit his own purposes. The *Quartet No. 2* treats this material continuously across its span of four connected movements, and the result is music of sharp contrasts and considerable expressive power.

This quartet is also notable for its scrupulous attention to string sonority. Though Schnittke was not a string player, he notates the parts with extraordinary detail, indicating exactly the kind of bowing and sound he wants. The opening is a perfect example. The *Moderato* begins with close

canonic entrances, all played in artificial harmonics. At the end of the first phrase, the four instruments resume the canonic entrances but now bow entirely without vibrato. In the next phrase, they are allowed just a little vibrato. Schnittke introduces bits of themes across the span of this first movement, every measure of which is notated with this sort of detail, and the music then explodes at the second movement, aptly named *Agitato*. Here frenzied arpeggios slash against each other in simultaneous patterns of eight, seven, six, and five notes per beat. While the pounding intensity of this pattern is interrupted by several episodes, the fury of the opening is never far off. This movement suddenly breaks off in mid-phrase, leaving us in absolute silence.

Out of this pause, the *Mesto* (*sad*) begins, marked triple *piano*. Viola and cello have the chant-like main idea, played in double stops and built on shifting meters; the violins sometimes join them, sometimes fade away. This gradually builds to a climax that brings back the atmosphere—and the actual themes—of the second movement, then concludes on a polyrhythmic 13/4 measure and grinding tone clusters. The concluding *Moderato* brings yet another sharp change. Not only are the instruments muted, but Schnittke marks the opening quadruple *piano* and asks that the parts sound *quasi niente*: “as if nothing.” Despite some violent intrusions—like anguished protests—along the way, this music finally fades into silence on sustained harmonics. Wishing to emphasize this fade into absolute nothingness, Schnittke marks the final measure sextuple *piano*.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger