



presents...

ÉBÈNE QUARTET

Pierre Colombet | Violin
Gabriel Le Magadure | Violin

Hélène Clément | Viola*
Yuya Okamoto | Cello

*Hélène Clément, former member of the Doric Quartet, is replacing Marie Chilemme on the Quatuor Ébène's Spring 2026 United States tour.

Thursday, April 16, 2026 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

BEETHOVEN

String Quartet in G Major, Opus 18, No. 2

Allegro
Adagio cantabile
Scherzo: Allegro
Allegro molto quasi presto

DEBUSSY

String Quartet in G Minor

Animé et très décidé
Scherzo: Assez vif et bien rythmé
Andantino doucement expressif
Très modéré; Très mouvementé; Très animé

INTERMISSION

BRAHMS

String Quartet in A Minor, Opus 51, No. 2

Allegro non troppo
Andante moderato
Quasi Minuetto, moderato; Allegretto vivace
Finale: Allegro non assai

This program is made possible in part by the generous support of
Jeanne Newman and Schoenberg Family Law.

The **Ébène Quartet** is represented by Arts Management Group, Inc.



ENSEMBLE PROFILE

San Francisco Performances presents the Ébène Quartet for the sixth time. It first appeared in December 2011.

“The way scents seem to transition into sounds, echoes resonate from the depths of space, and the Four intertwining attentively, only to then grab hold vigorously and expand vivaciously—it was exhilarating.”
—*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, March 2023

A concert by **Quatuor Ébène** is and remains a musical and sensory experience. For more than two decades, the ensemble has been at the forefront, perpetually breathing new life into familiar repertoire while always seeking further connection to its audience.

After studying with Quatuor Ysaÿe in Paris and with Gábor Takács, Eberhard Feltz and György Kurtág, Quatuor Ébène’s unprecedented and outstanding victory at the ARD Music Competition in 2004 marked the beginning of its rise to prominence, leading to numerous further prizes and accolades. In 2005 the quartet received the Belmont Prize of the Forberg-Schneider Foundation, was a recipient of the Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award in 2007, and in 2019 became the first ensemble to be honored with the Frankfurt Music Trade Fair Prize.

Alongside traditional repertoire, the quartet regularly explores other musical genres, as the *New York Times* made note of in 2009: “A String Quartet That Can Easily Morph Into a Jazz Band.” What began in 1999 as a bit of fun for the four young musicians at university—improvising on jazz standards and pop songs—became Quatuor Ébène’s

trademark. To date, the quartet has released three albums in these genres: *Fiction* (2010), *Brazil* (2014) and *Eternal Stories* (2017). Their ease in blending different styles creates a dynamic energy that enriches all aspects of their artistic work—a versatility that has been warmly embraced by audiences and critics alike from the beginning.

Quatuor Ébène’s albums featuring Bartók, Beethoven, Debussy, Haydn, Fauré and the Mendelssohn siblings have received much acclaim, including awards from *Gramophone*, *BBC Music Magazine* and the Midem Classic Award. In 2015 and 2016, the musicians dedicated themselves to the theme of the “Lied”, seen through their collaboration with Philippe Jaroussky on the album *Green (Mélodies françaises)*. For their Schubert album, they collaborated with Matthias Goerne (featuring Lied arrangements for string quartet, baritone, and double bass by Raphaël Merlin) and with Gautier Capuçon (for the *String Quintet in C major, D 956*).

Together with Antoine Tamestit, Quatuor Ébène recorded Mozart’s *String Quintets K. 515 and K. 516*, released in spring 2023. The album was honored with awards such as *Choc de Classica*, *Diapason d’Or*, and *Gramophone’s* Recording of the Month.

A major milestone in their career was the complete recording of Beethoven’s 16 string quartets. Between May 2019 and January 2020, the quartet recorded this cycle across six continents in a globe-spanning project. With this achievement, the four French musicians celebrated their 20th anniversary as a quartet, crowned with complete Beethoven cycles in leading venues such as the Philharmonie de Paris and Alte Oper Frankfurt. Their schedule

also included appearances at Carnegie Hall in New York, the Verbier Festival, and the Wiener Konzerthaus.

In January 2021, the quartet was appointed by the Munich University of Music and Performing Arts to establish a string quartet class as part of the newly founded “Quatuor Ébène Academy”.

Since the 2021–22 season, the quartet, together with the Belcea Quartet, has been curating a concert series at the Vienna Konzerthaus. In the 2023–24 season it was resident ensemble at the Philharmonie Luxembourg, and from 2022–23 to 2024–25 it held the post of *Quatuor en résidence à Radio France*, with three concerts per season in Paris.

In January 2026, the Ébènes opened the String Quartet Biennale at the Philharmonie de Paris—again together with the Belcea Quartet—and conclude it with *Absolute Jest* by John Adams, performed with the Orchestre Français des Jeunes.

To mark the 40th anniversary of Suntory Hall, the quartet is set to present the complete Beethoven string quartet works in Tokyo. They will also begin new Beethoven cycles at venues including the Berlin Philharmonie, Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome, and Wigmore Hall in London.

PROGRAM NOTES

String Quartet in G Major, Opus 18, No. 2

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
(1770–1827)

It has been easy for some to overlook the six quartets of Beethoven’s *Opus 18*, composed during the years 1798–1800, especially in light of his astonishing expansion of string quartet form over the course of his career. Some have been quick to point out the influence of Haydn and Mozart (influences the young Beethoven would readily have acknowledged), while others have found these works wanting because they do not approach—or even point the way toward—Beethoven’s later quartets. For many listeners, these early quartets remain in Joseph Kerman’s elegant phrase—“a merely mortal, not a celestial, nourishment.”

Nevertheless, this first set of quartets offers many pleasures, including the stormy *Fourth*, the experimental *Sixth*, and the motivic concentration of the *First*. Among the *Opus 18* quartets, the *Second*—in G Major—is easily the most good-natured: if Beethoven does not set out to be comic in this

music, there are moments when he comes very close to that.

The courtly and graceful themes of the opening *Allegro* have drawn particular attention. Their regular phrase-lengths and the question-and-answer quality of some of the writing have suggested an extra-musical discourse, and certain observers have gone so far as to hear in this movement an urbane and civilized conversation; every commentator feels obligated to mention that this quality has earned the music the nickname *Komplimentierungsquartett* (“Compliments-Quartet”) in Germany. Listeners should be warned not to search for a literal depiction of a conversation—that nickname refers more to the music’s gracious atmosphere. Given all this geniality, the recapitulation brings a nice bump when Beethoven combines his two themes and has the first try to sing over the suddenly-fierce rhythms of the second.

The *Adagio cantabile*, in C Major, seems similarly urbane: its themes are smooth and well-proportioned, and the movement might promise blandness were it not for an unusual episode at the center that changes everything. The opening music slows and seems to conclude with a quiet cadence, but Beethoven then transforms that cadence-rhythm into a blistering (and completely unexpected) *Allegro*. This section dashes about breathlessly and then vanishes, all within the space of forty seconds, but now the opening material is greatly embellished when it returns. Evidence from Beethoven’s manuscripts suggests that this fast center section was a late addition to the movement.

The sparkling *Scherzo* is pleasing music: it gracefully tosses rhythmic bits between the four instruments, and its trio section demands virtuoso playing from the first violin. Beethoven himself referred to the concluding *Allegro molto quasi presto* as “ausgeknopft”: “unbuttoned.” The main theme of this rondo-finale is in fact derived from a transition passage in the opening movement, and this movement is full of bright energy, relaxed spirits, and a sense of fun. Beethoven brings back some of the rhythms of the *Scherzo*, and once again there are concertante passages for the first violin in the energetic coda.

String Quartet in G Minor

CLAUDE DEBUSSY
(1862–1918)

Early in 1893 Debussy met the famed Belgian violinist Eugene Ysaÿe. Debussy was

at this time almost unknown (*Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* was still a year in the future), but he and Ysaÿe instantly became friends—though Ysaÿe was only four years older than Debussy, he treated the diminutive Frenchman like “his little brother.” That summer, Debussy composed a string quartet for Ysaÿe’s quartet, which gave the first performance in Paris on December 29, 1893. Debussy was already notorious with his teachers for his refusal to follow musical custom, and so it comes as a surprise to find him choosing to write in this most demanding of classical forms. Early audiences were baffled. Reviewers used words like “fantastic” and “oriental,” and Debussy’s friend Ernest Chausson confessed mystification. Debussy must have felt the sting of these reactions, for he promised Chausson: “Well, I’ll write another for you...and I’ll try to bring more dignity to the form.”

But Debussy did not write another string quartet, and his *Quartet in G Minor* has become one of the cornerstones of the quartet literature. The entire quartet grows directly out of its first theme, presented at the very opening, and this sharply rhythmic figure reappears in various shapes in all four movements, taking on a different character, a different color, and a different harmony on each reappearance. What struck early audiences as “fantastic” now seems an utterly original conception of what a string quartet might be. Here is a combination of energy, drama, thematic imagination, and attention to color never heard before in a string quartet. Debussy may have felt pushed to apologize for a lack of “dignity” in this music, but we value it today just for that failure.

Those who think of Debussy as the composer of misty impressionism are in for a shock with his *Quartet*, for it has the most slashing, powerful opening Debussy ever wrote: his marking for the beginning is “Animated and very resolute.” This first theme, with its characteristic triplet spring, is the backbone of the entire quartet: the singing second theme grows directly out of this opening (though the third introduces new material). The development is marked by powerful accents, long crescendos, and shimmering colors as this movement drives to an unrelenting close in G minor.

The *Scherzo* may well be the *Quartet*’s most impressive movement. Against powerful pizzicato chords, Debussy sets the viola’s bowed theme, a transformation of the quartet’s opening figure; soon this is leaping between all four voices. The reca-

pitulation of this movement, in 15/8 and played entirely pizzicato, bristles with rhythmic energy, and the music then fades away to a beautifully understated close. Debussy marks the third movement “Gently expressive,” and this quiet music is so effective that it is sometimes used as an encore piece. It is in ABA form: the opening section is muted, while the more animated middle is played without mutes—the quartet’s opening theme reappears subtly in this middle section. Debussy marks the ending, again played with mutes, “As quiet as possible.”

The finale begins slowly but gradually accelerates to the main tempo, “Very lively and with passion.” As this music proceeds, the *Quartet*’s opening theme begins to appear in a variety of forms: first in a misty, distant statement marked “soft and expressive,” then gradually louder and louder until it returns in all its fiery energy, stamped out in double-stops by the entire *Quartet*. A propulsive coda drives to the close, where the first violin flashes upward across three octaves to strike the powerful G major chord that concludes this most undignified—and most wonderful—piece of music.

String Quartet in A Minor, Opus 51, No. 2

JOHANNES BRAHMS
(1833–1897)

In one of the most candid admissions in the history of music, Brahms lamented to the conductor Hermann Levi about the strain of having to compose within the shadow of Beethoven:

“You have no idea how the likes of us feel when we hear the tramp of a giant like him behind us.” This comment is usually taken to refer to the overpowering example of Beethoven’s symphonies, but Brahms was just as haunted by the prospect of composing string quartets, and in that form he had to confront not one, but a number of giants from the past. Brahms was all too aware of the string quartets of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert, and he knew that any quartet he wrote would be judged against the achievement of those four masters. Brahms tried to write quartets for years, but he was the most self-critical of composers, and he said that he had written and destroyed at least twenty quartets before he wrote two he liked well enough to publish in 1873 as his *Opus 51*. One of his friends reported seeing sketches for these quartets as early as 1859, which means that

Brahms had worked on them for 14 years before he felt they were finished.

After his long delay in writing a symphony, Brahms wrote a stormy and impassioned *First Symphony in C Minor*, then quickly followed it with a lyric and expansive *Second*. The situation is somewhat similar with the two quartets of Opus 51: the dark *Quartet in C Minor* was followed by the more relaxed *Quartet in A Minor*. It was as if Brahms's opening work in a form needed to be a clenched confrontation in which he could attack the form and make it his own, and only then could he relax and write a sunnier work in the same form.

That said, however, it must be noted that *Quartet in A Minor* is marked by the same concentration of materials and motivic development that animated its predecessor, and much of this quartet grows directly out of the first violin's opening theme. Brahms intended this quartet for his friend Joseph Joachim, and he incorporated Joachim's personal motto "Frei aber einsam" ("Free but lonely") in the notes F-A-E that shape the opening theme. In addition, the three rising eighth-notes that appear innocently in the fourth measure of this theme will return in various forms here and in subsequent movements. But the Quartet is not

an exercise in crabbed motivic manipulation, and Brahms supplies a second subject that simply glows: it is a long duet for the violins, and he marks it *dolce* ("sweet"), *lusingando* ("charming, coaxing"), and *mezza voce* ("half voice"). From these contrasted materials, he builds an extended sonata-form movement that concludes on evocations of Joachim's motto. The *Andante moderato* takes the shape of its main theme from that innocent figure from the very beginning. Most striking here is the duet of first violin and cello at the center: over buzzing tremolos from the middle voices they sing a "Hungarian duet" in close canon before the movement closes on a return of the opening material.

In the third movement, Brahms bends traditional minuet form for his own purposes. He calls this movement a "quasi-minuet" and rather than building it on the standard minuet-and-trio form Brahms presents a lilting, ghostly minuet, then contrasts it with two sections—marked *Allegretto vivace*—where the music suddenly flashes ahead on a steady patter of sixteenth-notes, only to rein back to resume the more stately minuet tempo.

Many have heard the influence of Hungarian music in the finale: the first violin's

vigorous, strongly-inflected dance at the very beginning seems to have its origins in gypsy fiddling. And perhaps this "gypsy fiddling" in a quartet intended for Joseph Joachim is a nod to that violinist's Hungarian background. This movement is in sonata-rondo form: that "gypsy" theme, full of energy and snap, recurs throughout but subtly evolves on each return. Brahms speeds this wild dance to its close on a *Più vivace* coda.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger

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