



2024/2025
77th SEASON

**Friends of Chamber Music presents the Schumann Quartet in concert
at the Vancouver Playhouse, Tuesday, February 11, 2025 – 7:30 pm**

Schumann Quartet

Erik Schumann - Violin
Ken Schumann - Violin
Veit Hertenstein - Viola
Mark Schumann - Violoncello



The Schumann Quartet, founded in 2007 in Cologne, Germany, has reached a stage where anything is possible. This has potential consequences for audiences, who from one concert to the next must be prepared for all interpretive eventualities: “A work really develops only in a live performance,” comment the members of the quartet. “That is ‘the real thing’, because we ourselves never know what will happen. On stage, all imitation disappears, and you automatically become honest with yourself. Then you can create a bond with the audience – communicate with it in music.”

Highlights of the Schumann’s 2024/2025 concert season include: a Beethoven string quartet cycle performed in Tokyo in June 2025; an extensive ~~string quartet~~ tour of North America; and the resumption of their “Expedition Mozart” project with pianist (and composer) Kit Armstrong, involving concerts in Brussels, Frankfurt and Hamburg. The quartet will also perform again at Wigmore Hall, London, the Gewandhaus, Leipzig, and the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam.

The Quartet’s 2018 album, “Intermezzo”, featuring music by Mendelssohn, Bartholdy, Schumann and Reimann (with Anna-Lucia Richter), received an “Opus Klassik“ Award in the quintet category. Their 2019 album, “Chiaroscuro”, included music by Mozart, Glass, Shostakovich, Webern, and Janáček. A 2020 recording, “Fragment”, focused on Schubert’s music for string quartet. For 2023, they recorded an album of pieces first heard in 1923, composed by Berg, Janáček, Ernst Krenek, and Copland.

The three brothers, Mark, Erik, and Ken Schumann, have been playing together since their earliest childhood – more recently joined by violist Veit Hertenstein. The quartet’s openness and curiosity, evident in performances, may result partly from the formative influence exerted by teachers including Eberhard Feltz, the Alban Berg Quartet, and occasional partners including

pianist and pedagogue Menahem Pressler. Critics have praised their “fire and energy” and “sparkling virtuosity and a willingness to astonish” (Harald Eggebrecht in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*).

Erik Schumann plays a violin by Joseph Guarneri filius Andrea from 1690, kindly made available to him by the Guadagnini Foundation, Stuttgart. Ken Schumann plays an Italian violin from the mid-18th century, kindly made available to him privately. Veit Hertenstein plays a viola made by the Amati brothers in 1616. Mark Schumann plays a cello by Giovanni and Francesco Grancino from 1680, generously loaned to him by MERITO Sit, Vienna.

The Schumann Quartet is represented by the Arts Management Group.

Programme

String Quartet No. 20 in D Major, K499 "Hoffmeister"
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Allegretto

Menuetto: Allegretto

Adagio

Allegro

Although a child prodigy, it was not until his later years (his 30s) that Mozart realized his musical talent, writing a series of masterful pieces for chamber music, orchestra, and the operatic stage. His six superb string quartets, composed between 1782 and 1785, are regarded as some of his best works, but the reaction to them at the time was not complimentary. More than a year elapsed before Mozart returned to writing quartets, by which time he had achieved complete mastery of the medium. His string quartet, K499, dedicated to his friend and publisher Anton Hoffmeister, is regarded now as one of his best quartets. Although the quartet is filled with melody and sounds apparently optimistic in outlook, the music also conveys a sense of despondency. Mozart's biographer Anton Einstein referred to this mixture of emotions as "despair under the mask of gaiety". The quartet was completed by August 1786 and was published one month later.

The Allegretto exhibits a mixture of gravity and lightness. It opens with a gay insouciant theme ending in a relaxed unison down the D Major chord. Developed in canon between the first violin and cello, this theme returns many times throughout the movement. Then, Mozart introduces new motives with intricate contrapuntal dialogues. Later, a darker side of the music emerges, characterised by sharp contrasts with impassioned outbursts and timorous responses. A short eight-note trilling figure, which is heard throughout, reappears in the coda and disappears quietly at the end of the movement.

The Menuetto has been described as "a piece of musical wizardry". Here, the relaxed mood of the Allegretto returns, with the music imparting great depth of feeling. However, the following Trio, "a masterpiece of contrapuntal scoring" has a sombre cast despite lively running triplets.

The Adagio, which combines reticence with superb compositional skills, is full of brightness. Many consider it to be one of the most moving and beautiful of all of Mozart's slow movements.

It begins with a lovely duet between the violins that sets the pattern for the entire movement. One duo follows another, achieving an extraordinary level of expression, reminiscent of an Italian opera.

The final Allegro brings a complete change of pace. Its major tonality and the bustling vitality of the themes give an impression of brightness that conceals traces of underlying melancholy. The movement begins with short fragments of the first theme before presenting it in full. A brighter, semi-serious second theme follows, played by the violin. A masterly development and recapitulation are both repeated before the quartet ends with a joyous coda.

String Quartet No 1 in B Minor, Opus 50

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Allegro

Andante molto - Vivace

Andante

Prokofiev wrote two string quartets, both divided into three movements. His first quartet is a passionate work written in a very conservative style; there is no modernity here! It was composed in 1930, and contrasts in approach with his second quartet that was written after Prokofiev returned to the Soviet Union.

The quartet opens with a prancing melodious passage played by the first violin. A touch of melancholy arrives but the violin pushes through with intervallic leaps before settling down again. The emotional intensity increases and, with rhythmic thrusts from the violins, it sounds somewhat chaotic. The opening atmosphere returns, and the second violin provides wonderful supporting melodies. This is an extended passage, which eventually leads to a brief period of uncertainty before the opening is revisited. The Allegro's final moments are contrasting and rhythmically incisive, ending with a solid chord.

The middle Andante starts in a melancholic mood, guided by the violins. After a time, the violins leap into action and the viola and cello pick up on the motion. The opening is left far behind as the music is stretched tight; the violins are positively dynamic. There is great feeling of forward movement in this passage. It continues to grow more intensely rhythmic, with many chordal punctuations. A solo cello part breaks the mood and brings a welcome warmth to the music. The cello continues magnificently as the violins return. Eventually, the violins parry with the cello for some time until the movement comes to an end.

The final movement, also marked Andante, begins in a minor key with repeated violin phrases while the cello quivers in the background. The violin melodies are particularly attractive and distinctly Russian, conveying a feeling of strength possessed by many Russian composers. Strong chords briefly dominate until the andante tempo returns. There is a gradual melodic development. Suddenly, the mood becomes heavy, with chords projecting in a minor key. A cello-based theme develops, but only for a short while as the work returns to the opening material. The rhythm resumes and leads into a strong solo cello melody. This is followed by gentle violin tunes that lead to a wistful conclusion played by the violin and cello.

Intermission

String Quartet No. 1 in E Minor "From my life"

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)

Allegro vivo appassionato

Allegro moderato a la Polka (Trio, meno vivo)

Largo sostenuto - piu moto - Tempo 1

Vivace - piu mosso - meno

Smetana's great talent was his ability to express pictorial imagery and programmatic action in terms of musical sound, so it was perfectly natural for him to use this approach in writing a string quartet dealing with the major events of his life. The quartet in E Minor, the first and most successful of the two quartets, was subtitled "From my life". When Smetana wrote the quartet, in 1876, he had given up all hope of a cure for his deafness. Information about the meaning of this quartet comes from a letter Smetana wrote to Josef Srb-Debrna in April 1878 - "I did not just set out to write a quartet according to custom in the usual form. With me the form of the composition is dedicated by the subject itself. My intention was to paint a tone picture of my life. The first movement depicts my youthful leaning towards art, the Romantic atmosphere, and the inexpressible yearning for something I could neither express nor define."

The first theme of the opening Allegro, a passionate outcry from the viola, represents Smetana's fateful "misfortune". The theme is played twice by the viola and once by the violin. The music grows quieter, and the second theme, that has a relaxed and gentle yearning, follows. Then, both themes are restated before the coda. Three pizzicato notes, played by the cello, bring the movement to a morose close.

The second movement, a quasi-tromba, represents Smetana's carefree life as a youth, conveying a sense of reckless abandon. The viola introduces into the dance an accompanying contrasting motif, designated "quasi trompa" (like a trumpet).

The Largo expresses Smetana's love for his wife, Katerina Kolar. This movement shows the influence of Liszt, who gave Smetana the financial support to marry Katerina. It is a love song, full of melodious and ardent yearning. The lyrical opening theme, played by the first violin, conveys the affection of two people deeply in love. It is followed by an equally ardent second theme with a different melodic contour. Towards the end of the movement, the ardour cools and the Largo ends in a quiet, pensive coda.

The final Vivace is a glorious dance which expresses the national idioms of Bohemia. In the midst of the gaiety there is a sudden silence. The music resumes with an ominous tremolo over which the first violin plays a piercing note at the top of its range. This represents the fateful ringing in Smetana's ears that heralded his deafness. A series of short repeated "quotes" from the early movements of the piece follow, which summarizes the quartet. Finally, a faint echo of the theme of the last movement is heard fading away into silence.

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Next Concerts, both at the Vancouver Playhouse:

Han Finckel Setzer Trio

Tuesday, February 18, 2025 – 7:30 pm

Haydn: Piano Trio in A Major, HOB XV:18

Beethoven: Piano Trio in G Major, Opus 1, No. 2

Dvořák: Piano Trio No. 4 in E Minor, Opus 90 “Dumky”

Notos Quartett

Sunday, March 2, 2025 – 3:00 pm

Mozart: Piano Quartet in E-flat Major, K 493

Walton: Piano Quartet in D Minor

Schumann: Piano Quartet in E-flat Major, Opus 47