friends of chamber music

2026/2027

79th SEASON

Friends of Chamber Music present the Escher String Quartet in concert at the Vancouver Playhouse, Tuesday, December 1, 2026, at 7:30 pm

Adam Barnett-Hart, violin

Bryan Lee, violin

Pierre Lapointe, viola

Brook Speltz, cello



The Escher String Quartet has received acclaim for its profound musical insight and rare tonal beauty. A former BBC New Generation Artist and recipient of the Avery Fisher Career Grant, the quartet has performed at the BBC Proms at Cadogan Hall and is a regular guest at Wigmore Hall.

The Escher Quartet has made a distinctive impression throughout Europe, with recent debuts including the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Berlin Konzerthaus, London's Kings Place, Slovenian Philharmonic Hall, Les Grands Interprètes Geneva, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and Auditorium du Louvre. The group has appeared at festivals such as the Heidelberg Spring Festival, Budapest's Franz Liszt Academy, Dublin's Great Music in Irish Houses, the Risør Chamber Music Festival in Norway, the Hong Kong International Chamber Music Festival, and the Perth International Arts Festival in Australia.

Alongside its growing European profile, the Escher Quartet continues to flourish in its home country, performing at the Aspen Music Festival, Bravo! Vail, Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, Bowdoin Music Festival, Toronto Summer Music, Cape Cod Chamber Music Festival, OKM Festival, Chamber Music San Francisco, Music@Menlo, and the Ravinia and Caramoor festivals.

The Escher Quartet received critical acclaim last season for their performances of the entire cycle of six string quartets by Bela Bartok in single concert format, both at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival. Alex Ross wrote a substantial report in the New Yorker about their Bartok project.

The Escher String Quartet has successfully released multiple albums, including one of string quartets by Pierre Jalbert, the two Janacek quartets along with Pavel Haas' Quartet No. 2 with multi-award-winning percussionist

Colin Currie, all on BIS. The group has also recorded the complete Mendelssohn quartets, as well as beloved romantic quartets composed by Dvořák, Borodin, and Tchaikovsky, also released on BIS. These recordings received great critical acclaim, with comments such as "...eloquent, full-blooded playing... The four players offer a beautiful blend of individuality and accord" (BBC Music Magazine). In 2019, the Escher made DANCE, an enthusiastically received album of quintets recorded with Grammy award-winning guitarist Jason Vieaux. In 2021, the Escher's recording of the quartets of Charles Ives coupled with the Barber quartet generated equal excitement, with comments including "A fascinating snapshot of American quartets, with a recording that is brilliantly detailed, this is a first-rate release all around" (Strad Magazine). Back in 2013 and 2014, the quartet recorded all of Zemlinsky's string quartets on two CDs for Naxos.

Beyond the concert hall, the Escher String Quartet has created a new non-profit, ESQYRE (Escher String Quartet Youth Residency Education). ESQYRE's mission as a non-profit classical music organization is to provide a comprehensive educational program through music performance and instruction for people of all ages. In addition to their non-profit work, the quartet has also held faculty positions at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX, and the Univerity of Akron, OH.

Within months of its inception in 2005, the ensemble came to the attention of key musical figures worldwide. Championed by the Emerson Quartet, the Escher String Quartet was invited by Pinchas Zukerman and to be Quartet in Residence at the Young Artists Program (a summer festival) at the National Arts Centre, Ottawa, ON. Itzhak Perlman invited the Escher to be Quartet in Residence at the Perlman Chamber Music Program (another summer festival) on Shelter Island, NY.

The Escher String Quartet takes its name from the Dutch graphic artist M.C. Escher. The musicians are inspired by Escher's method of interplay between individual components working together to form a fascinating whole.

The Escher String Quartet appears by arrangement with the Arts Management Group, Inc.

PROGRAMME – "Music from the time of World War II"

String Quartet No. 2 in F major, Opus 92 ***Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)***

Allegro sostenuto
Adagio
Allegro

1941 was a year of contrasts for Prokofiev. His second marriage provided him a devoted wife who tried to shield him from unnecessary interruptions even as a vast German army advanced upon Moscow – the Eastern Front of the European Theatre in World War II. The Soviet government evacuated Prokofiev and other leading artists to Nalchik, a remote area in the northern Caucasus. There, he was introduced to the little known Kabardino-Balkarian folk music of the area and was inspired to combine some its virtually untouched melodies with the classical form of the string quartet. This he did to wonderful effect in the String Quartet No. 2 which, in September 1942, was the first of his wartime compositions to be performed. This quartet was an immediate success.

The String Quartet is based almost entirely on folk melodies, often accompanied by harsh sounding chords with multiple layers of fifths (at the very opening) providing a polytonal effect. The harmonies underline the severity and primitive power of the Kabardinian music, which drives the first movement on almost relentlessly in a march-like, heavy pace. This is followed by a repeated two note back and forth figure which introduces a sharply marked round dance tune. The development section, harsh and grotesque at times, is a kaleidoscope of brilliant sonorities and tonal effects.

Total contrast is provided by the Adagio, a slow flowing serene elegy of great beauty. After a few bars the cello sings the melody of a Kabardian love song, *Syniyklik Zhir,* against a murmured oriental-style background. The charming lighthearted middle section brilliantly transformed the motif of a folk dance, *Islambey,* into the

accompaniment, imitating the sound of a native Caucasian instrument - the kemange. The melody here is a light, spirited alteration of the original love song.

A playful vigorous mountain dance, *Qetiqezhev Ogurbi,* opens and dominates the last movement. This is interrupted by a dramatic cadenza for the cello which leads to an excited development section.

The freshness and appeal of this composition lies in the ever-changing moods of the different folk melodies, and in the surprising new colours created in order to imitate the sounds of the primitive instruments of the region.

String Quartet No. 3 in F major, Opus 73 ***Dimitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)***

Allegretto
Moderato con moto
Allegro non troppo
Adagio
Moderato meno mosso - Adagio

Shostakovich's third quartet, written in 1946, is considered one of the finest of his 15-quartet cycle. It is remarkable for the expressive range of its idiom, for its determined quest for new means of expression, and masterly scoring. It is built on the principle of dramatic contrast.

The opening Allegretto, a bright movement written in sonata form, contrasts with the three subsequent movements and the gentle lilting finale, which are predominantly contemplative. Shostakovich's transmitting of a sense of suffering, so striking here, has at times an almost Mozartian poignancy and grace. Mozartian, too, is his feeling for the pathos of the major mode, and this is especially true of the finale, which fades wistfully.

The main theme of the first movement, a polka-like melody played by the first violin, is followed by a subdued second subject characterized by pauses. In the development the two themes are brilliantly interwoven in a double fugue. In the recapitulation the tempo increases and the movement ends with the cello and first violin playing the main theme fortisssimo.

The opening bars of the Moderato con moto are heavy and troubled. As the theme progresses it changes to become lyrical and gentle. The second theme is played staccato by all four instruments, after which the main and subordinate themes appear alternately. The music gradually becomes quieter and ends on an elegiac note.

The third movement, which begins with jarring violent chords, is a march cum scherzo. Grotesque and hard driven with rapid alternations of 2/4 and 3/4 rhythm, it is a type of movement new to the quartets, but one that recurs with increasing frequency, especially in the quartets Nos. 8 and 10.

The Adagio, considered by many critics to be the outstanding movement of the quartet, is a finely textured quasi passacaglia of great expressive power. The contrasting nature of the theme is expressed in six variations, in the last of which the viola plays the main melody, accompanied by the cello. The cello continues on to the next movement without interruption.

The finale, which commences Moderato meno mosso, is a rondo sonata form. At its climax, the passacaglia theme is recalled *fff* espressivo. The development is short. A recitative by the first violin ends the work with a deep lingering feeling of lamentation.

INTERMISSION

String Quartet No. 2 in C, Opus 36 ***Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)***

Allegro calmo, senza rigore
Vivace
Chacony: sostenuto

On November 21, 1945, the 250th anniversary of the death of English composer Henry Purcell, Britten's string quartet No. 2 was given its premier at London's Wigmore Hall. Britten's tribute to Purcell in this quartet is oblique given that he does not quote any music by Purcell. However, the last movement, which dominates the structure, makes use of a compositional technique that Britten associated with the earlier composer.

The first movement, centred on C major, is highly original. Rather than using the standard sonata form, which opposes and contrasts material, Britten built the opening allegro on three themes, all similar in structure, beginning with an upward leap of a tenth, and all announced in the first measures of the movement. The first statement of the theme begins on middle C, with each successive statement rising higher in the quartet's register. The exposition of these three themes becomes so complex that a clear division of the movement into development and recapitulation is lost, and at the climax, Britten makes all three themes coalesce into one simultaneous statement before the music falls away to a quiet close.

The Vivace, played with mutes throughout, is a brief, blistering scherzo in ternary form. The harmony moves to C minor in the outer sections where the music feels consciously nervous, skittering and driving constantly ahead. The central section, in F major, is based on a variant of the scherzo theme. It offers little relaxation, and the sense of nervous energy continues even in the major tonality.

The massive final movement is nearly as long as the first two movements combined. Britten very much admired Purcell's *Chaconne in G Minor*, and in tribute to the older composer, he wrote a chaconne (Chacony) as a finale for this string quartet. It is built on 21 repetitions of a nine-bar ground bass, which is presented in unison (in B-flat major) at the start of the movement. Britten grouped his variations imaginatively: the first six are followed by a cello cadenza, the next six by a viola cadenza, the next six by a violin cadenza, and the final three drive to a conclusion that ringingly affirms C major.

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Next concerts - both at the Vancouver Playhouse, 600 Hamilton Street, Vancouver, BC

Dudok Quartet (Netherlands)
Sunday, January 31, 2027 - 3:00 PM
"Self-Portrait" (inspired by Dutch painters from 3 epochs)
Dudok Quartet arrangements of polyphonic works by: Josquin des Prez, Johannes Ockeghem, and Guillaume de Machaut
Joey Roukens: "What Remains" (String Quartet No. 4)
Franz Schubert: String Quartet No. 15 in G Major Opus 161 D887

Sitkovetsky Trio (UK)
Tuesday, March 2, 2027 - 7:30 PM
Haydn: Piano Trio No. 36 in E-flat Major, Hob XV:22
Schumann: Piano Trio No. 3 in G Minor, Opus 25
Beethoven: Piano Trio in B-flat Major, Opus 97 "Archduke"

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