



Catalyst and Harlem Quartets

September 23, 2022, Christ Church Grosse Pointe

September 24, 2022, Flagstar Strand Theatre

PROGRAM NOTES

Support for the program notes is generously provided by Roberta Viviano.

CQ Minute

The Catalyst Quartet writes this about CQ Minute:

“The Catalyst Quartet is a string quartet driven by the belief that music has the power to open minds and create a positive social impact. So, when we hit our milestone 10th anniversary in 2020, we wanted to create a project that would celebrate memories of our first 10 years, but that would also look ahead, ... speak to the age we live in, and reflect how we see music and art continuing to thrive.

“The genesis of our project stemmed from a YouTube performance video we posted of Phillip Glass’ Mishima Closing from his Third String Quartet. Of the many performance videos the Catalyst Quartet posted over the years, this Mishima video had a “viral” effect that reached out through the metaphorical cyberspace to reach almost a million people, most of whom had no previous connection to the Catalyst Quartet: many who expressed deep feelings of belonging, healing, and gratitude in their comments. One viewer shared that our Mishima video helped them get through their struggles with cancer. Many other personal stories and communications were touching to read, and striking in revelation — that technology had allowed us to break down the invisible wall between performers and audiences in an entirely different way that can empower us all with a sense of community and belonging.

“We may never know all the reasons and ways in which that particular video was so impactful for so many, but the quartet’s main takeaway was that we wanted to embrace the same amazing connective possibilities that video and online technology offer, but do it in an even grander way.

“Instead of reaching out to the cyberverses via one composer, what if we cast a much bigger net: a net that would be representative of the amazing contributions of the women, Black, Asian, Latinx, and LGBTQI+ composers of all ages whose music really spoke to us over the past ten years. What if we asked each of these incredible

composers to write brand new pieces that would speak to where we've been, but also to where we will all go?

“So here we are in 2022, with 9 miniature pieces from our favorite world-changing composers and 2 pieces from new, emerging composers selected through a competition, ready to be turned into miniature art films. These pieces exist as incredible stand-alone works, but will also exist together as a video album and live performance programs, to celebrate art's place in the age of the digital minute: to be a force of perspective, reflection, and connection in a world that increasingly loses the time to perceive, reflect, and truly connect.

“*CQ Minute* was made possible with the help and generosity of a consortium of presenters: Chamber Music Monterey Bay, Chamber Music Detroit, Town Hall Seattle, and Electric Earth Concerts, and an anonymous donor.”

CHICK COREA

(CHELSEA, MA, 1941–TAMPA BAY, FL, 2021)

***The Adventures of Hippocrates* (2004)**

The Adventures of Hippocrates is the only string quartet composed by jazz pianist Chick Corea, as well as the only large-scale composition he wrote for an ensemble in which he was not a performer. Corea offers captivating remarks about composing for a string quartet and his inspiration for the piece: “This quartet was written by a relatively inexperienced writer for strings (me) so, technically, my notation may be unorthodox (or standardly wrong). But I find that most string quartet players, knowing that, will go ahead and make the proper adjustments themselves. This is better than trying to alter the musical concept to fit the correct technical point. Hippocrates is the name of a little robot in a science fiction series by L. Ron Hubbard. There are 7 stories in the 2 volume set entitled *Ole Doc Methuselah*.”

Approaching the traditional string quartet structure as a sort of pun, Corea's starting point is the literal meaning of **movement** as motion and activity. He explores a contrasting rhythmic character for each of the work's five individual **movements**, the smaller sections that comprise a large-scale composition. The piece kicks off with “Quasi Tango,” which is infused with sensual melodic contours, and even a musical quotation from Astor Piazzolla's *Libertango*. Percussive accents on the cello strings, as well as those created by the first violinist tapping his bow on his music stand, heighten the intensity. Lyrical soloistic outpourings float over modal harmonies in the slow “Quasi Waltz” and “Ballad” movements. Driving rhythms and funky bass lines return in “Rock Feel,” and lead into the “Quasi Fugue” finale, which thrives on contrapuntal energy as angular lines catapult through the quartet.

KENJI BUNCH

(PORTLAND, OR, 1973)

***the still, small voice* (2020)**

Composer and violist Kenji Bunch studied at The Juilliard School and currently

resides in Portland, Oregon. Bunch's compositions reflect his varied intellectual interests—"history, philosophy, and intergenerational and cross-cultural sharing of the arts"—and reference an array of musical styles from bluegrass to hip hop. In his note below, the composer explains the political and musical background of *the still, small voice*:

"Presented with the opportunity to respond musically to Walt Whitman's poem "Election Day, November 1884" I studied the poem and was struck immediately by the contrast between Whitman's grandiose imagery of our country's monuments and natural wonders with the very personal and almost spiritual description of the act of voting ("*the still, small voice* vibrating"). Through the lens of our current state of affairs, as well as with an awareness of recent reckonings of his own attitudes on race, Whitman's cheerleading enthusiasm feels possibly out of time and place today. Indeed, many of those natural landscapes he references are now suffering the dire consequences of environmental mismanagement, and the agency he offers on "America's choosing day" didn't extend to every American. And yet in a poem describing so much motion and action, it is ironically this still, small voice that feels alive and fluid today and just as powerful and precious a commodity as it was 136 years ago.

"To highlight both this contrast as well as the continuing potency of our "voice" in the voting process, I reimagined this phrase as the text for a gospel-tinged protest song, and then organized my new work as a kind of fantasy on my imaginary gospel march. My string writing in this work honors the modal vocabulary of the blues as well as string-specific gestures and sonorities from the heyday of Motown recordings from the 1960s. At various moments in the work, I call for finger snapping and humming to further underscore my interest in the human element found in Whitman's words, rather than the geography it also name-checks.

"This work was commissioned by the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society for the Catalyst and Harlem String Quartets. The commission was made possible by the Chamber Music America Classical Commissioning Program, with generous funding provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Chamber Music America Endowment Fund. I humbly dedicate this work to the Catalyst and Harlem Quartets, and to all Americans, regardless of their beliefs, who engage in the process of voting during this election cycle."

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

(HAMBURG, 1809–LEIPZIG, 1847)

String Octet in E-Flat Major, Op. 20 (1825)

Felix Mendelssohn and his sister Fanny were child prodigies in Berlin. Often compared to the Mozart siblings, but much more well off thanks to their father's success in banking, the children lived a life of privilege, receiving the best musical and humanistic training available in Germany, and enjoying and participating in high-caliber weekly performances in their home, the location of one of the most important musical salons in the city. Their grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, was

the most prominent German-Jewish philosopher during the Enlightenment. Despite his rationalization of religious tolerance and advocacy for legislation to grant Jews rights to better assimilate into German society, his son Abraham's four children, including Felix and Fanny, converted to Protestantism in 1816, followed by their parents in 1822. By the time Felix completed the Octet in 1825, he had already composed a large number of vocal and instrumental works, including several *Singspiele* (comic operas in German), choral works, five concertos, and thirteen string symphonies. However, prior to his composition of the Octet at age 16, his style emulated older Austro-Germanic music, especially embracing the compositional techniques of Bach, Handel and Mozart. In the Octet, Mendelssohn begins to respond to more contemporary trends, like Carl Maria von Weber's whimsical Romantic soundscapes and Beethoven's bold chromatic harmony. The Octet prefigured many imaginative explorations in Mendelssohn's mature output, which, as one of Europe's most sought-after conductors in the 1830s, was also influenced by his exposure to a wider variety of current composers and national styles.

Mendelssohn's Octet is a seminal chamber work for both its sonic and structural qualities. It dashes from soloistic virtuosity to lyrical duets to orchestral textures because it was crafted as a true eight-voice composition, as opposed to earlier precedents which are typically classified as double string quartets in which two quartets maintain their traditional voicings and are treated antiphonally. Building on Beethoven's groundbreaking works which defy the listener's expectations, with the Fifth Symphony's organicism serving as one pertinent model for the Octet, Mendelssohn brings unexpected attributes into the piece, such as nods to the solo concerto genre with the *concertante* passages in the first violin part, composed for his friend Eduard Rietz, and a suggestion that program music can be assimilated into the hallowed domain of absolute music, as Fanny reports that the Octet's third movement is an evocation of the *Walpurgisnacht's* Dream episode from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust*. Mendelssohn's signature "fairy music," which he will return to more famously in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture, requires speed combined with what Fanny describes as "feather-like lightness" to portray a bustling elfin wonderland.

Even more consequential for Mendelssohn's Romantic peers and the piece's overall trajectory is his creation of a piece of chamber music in cyclic form. The finale, which contains a stunning eight-part fugato, an allusion to the finale of Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony, goes on to recall the themes of the previous movements as a means to unify the work by illustrating that thematic "memories" motivate the conclusion's grandeur, an illustration of how the past continually shapes the present. Scholars like Benedict Taylor have proposed that this may be one of Mendelssohn's most contemplative works as he offers a musical depiction of the philosophical idea of a circular journey as discussed in the writings of Goethe and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, two of Mendelssohn's acquaintances and intellectual heroes.

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