

PORTSMOUTH
ATHENAEUM
Chamber Music

Presents

Rasa String Quartet

Maura Shawn Scanlin, violin

Kiyoshi Hayashi, violin

Emma Powell, viola

Mina Kim, 'cello

St. John's Church, Portsmouth, NH

18 September 2022 at 3 p.m.

Summa

Arvo Pärt

Strum

Jessie Montgomery

From "Last Leaf" a Nordic song collection

Danish Traditional Song

arr. Danish String Quartet

Æ Rømeser

Shine You No More

Carrot Revolution

Gabriella Smith

First Essay – Nimrod

Caroline Shaw

String Quartet, Op. 76 No. 2, "Fifths"

Joseph Haydn

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About the Performers...

Formed in 2019, the Boston-based **Rasa String Quartet** is quickly emerging as one of New England's finest ensembles. Rasa String Quartet is passionate about performing powerful, engaging, and unconventional programs that are inspired by a wide variety of traditions; they fuse multiple genres, highlight unknown composers, and make classical music culturally relevant. Rasa takes the relaxed atmosphere and banter of a folk or pop show and brings it to the classical concert experience in a way that is easily understandable, relatable, and entertaining. They seek to champion composers who are not widely known and present them in genre-defying programs where one might hear a Haydn string quartet, leading into a Taiwanese folk song, and mixed in with a Celtic fiddle tune. In Sanskrit, the term 'RASA' refers to the enchantingly indescribable power of any art form to evoke strong emotions in the reader or listener. Thus, our goal is to have audiences leave performances feeling moved and uplifted, with renewed inspiration to pursue their respective passions, and in contemplation of the more universal questions of life.

About the Music...

In 1994 Arvo Pärt said, "I have developed a highly formalised compositional system, which I have been using to write my music for twenty years. **Summa** is the most strict and enigmatic work in this series." The neutral title actually fits the content, as the work is based on the text of the Latin *Credo*. The great simplicity of the piece masks its complexity, while its deep structure possesses a core of stillness. Originally Pärt composed *Summa* for choir in 1978; he later arranged it for string quartet. The work reflects Pärt's tonal style which he has called "tinnabulation," inspired by Medieval chant: "Here, I am alone with silence. I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is beautifully played. This one note, or a silent beat, or a moment of silence, comforts me. The three notes of a triad are like bells. And that is why I call it tinnabulation." Arvo Pärt's *Summa* is an effective exploration of spiritual transcendence through music.

Violist, educator, and composer Jessie Montgomery grew up in Manhattan's Lower East Side in a time of artistic experimentation and community activism in which her jazz musician father and theater-artist mother were engaged. Montgomery was composing while in high school, but her initial aim was to be a classical violist. She studied at Juilliard and at NYU, pursuing a graduate degree in composition; she is now a graduate fellow in composition at Princeton. She was a founding member of PUBLIQuartet and Providence Quartet, and is now in the Catalyst Quartet. **Strum** is the last of several versions of a string quintet first written in 2006, then arranged for string quartet in 2008. Its voicing often spreads wide over the ensemble, giving the music an expansive sound. *Strum* utilizes layers of ostinati that form a matrix of sound for melodies to weave through, while strumming pizzicato is the primary rhythmic underpinning of the piece. Drawing on American folk idioms and the spirit of dance and movement, the piece has a kind of narrative that begins with fleeting nostalgia and transforms into ecstatic and joyful celebration.

Æ Rømeser is a traditional Danish tune whose title refers to the island of Rømø in the North Sea, off the western coast of Jutland. The song was arranged for string quartet by the Danish String Quartet, who included it in their 2017 album, "Last Leaf." Rømø is one of Denmark's more interesting islands; indeed, it boasts one of the most popular nudist beaches, patronized by tourists from all over the globe. Another popular beach activity here is kitebugging, where small vehicles are pulled by strong kites. **Shine you no more** is another short selection from the "Last Leaf" album of Nordic tunes; it shares an underlying wistful, affecting simplicity with *Æ Rømeser*, but adds a lithe, lilting dance into the mix: you might shed a tear while tapping your toes...

The composer, Gabriella Smith, writes: "I wrote **Carrot Revolution** in 2015 for my friends the Aizuri Quartet. It was commissioned by the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia for their exhibition *The Order of Things*, wherein they commissioned three visual artists and me to respond to Dr. Barnes' distinctive "ensembles," that is, the unique ways in which he juxtaposed his paintings along with metal objects, furniture, and pottery in ways that bring out their similarities and differences in shape, color, and texture. While walking around the Barnes, looking for inspiration, I suddenly remembered a Cézanne [mis-]quote I'd heard years ago: 'The day will come when a single, freshly observed carrot will start a revolution,' and I knew immediately that my piece would be called *Carrot Revolution*. I envisioned the piece as a celebration of fresh observation, prompting new ways of looking at old things such as the string quartet itself as well as some even older musical influences (e.g., Bach, Gregorian chant, Georgian folk songs, Celtic fiddle tunes). The piece is a patchwork of wildly contrasting influences, full of weird, unexpected juxtapositions and intersecting planes of sound, inspired by the way Barnes' "ensembles" show old works in new contexts and draw connections between things we don't think of as being related."

Have you ever fallen through a musical trap door? **First Essay (Nimrod)** contains a few of them, along with other compositional entanglements, according to its composer, the Pulitzer-winning Caroline Shaw. Part of her inspiration, she says, is the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, where God scattered the peoples and confused their languages. Here, Shaw's musical language begins with a sprightly tune, but soon splits off into "tumbling fragments and unexpected repetitive tunnels." No matter. While this eight-minute funhouse might be tricky to play, it's easy on the ears. As you move through the maze, look out for lyrical solos, feverish cresting waves, moments of shimmering repose and perhaps a nod to Beethoven. At the end, we find a raw, slippery chord that slides through yet one more trap door...

The six **String Quartets, Op. 76**, by Joseph Haydn were published in 1799, the last complete set of string quartets that he wrote. At the time of their composition, Haydn was employed at the court of Prince Esterhazy and was composing the oratorio *The Creation*, as well as a Mass. The Op. 76 quartets are among Haydn's most ambitious, deviating more than their predecessors from standard sonata form in their first movements; they emphasize their thematic continuity through seamless and continual exchanges of motifs between instruments. Haydn employs uncommon forms in other movements such as a canon, a fantasy and an alternative. He also plays with tempo markings, key signatures and many sections emphasizing the viola and cello. Haydn's friend Charles Burney wrote to him: "They are full of invention, fire, good taste, and new effects, and seem the production, not of a sublime genius who has written so much and so well already, but of one of highly-cultivated talents, who had expended none of his fire before." The second quartet, **Op. 76, No. 2, in D minor**, is known as the *Fifths* (or, in German, *Quinten*) quartet in a reference to the falling perfect fifths at its start. The falling fifths motif dominates the exposition section and is featured heavily in the development section using inversion, stretto and other devices.