



# ST. LAWRENCE STRING QUARTET

This press book contains (in order):

- Artist bio
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## ST. LAWRENCE STRING QUARTET

<http://www.slsq.com>

Geoff Nuttall, violin

Owen Dalby, violin

Lesley Robertson, viola

Christopher Costanza, cello

**“A sound that has just about everything one wants from a quartet, most notably precision, warmth and an electricity that conveys the excitement of playing whatever is on their stands at the moment.”**

– *The New York Times*

Established in 1989, the St. Lawrence String Quartet earned international recognition within a few years, winning both the Banff Quartet Competition and the Young Concert Artists audition in 1992. The group has since developed an undisputed reputation as a truly world class chamber ensemble. Called “witty, buoyant, and wickedly attentive (*The Gazette*, Montreal), with a “peerless” sense of ensemble (*Financial Times*, London), the quartet is celebrated for its “smoldering intensity” (*Washington Post*), and “flexibility, dramatic fire and... hint of rock 'n' roll energy” (*LA Times*). SLSQ performs internationally and has served as Ensemble in Residence at Stanford University since 1998.

The St. Lawrence continues to build its reputation for imaginative and spontaneous music-making through an energetic commitment to the great established quartet literature, as well as the championing of new works by such composers as John Adams, Osvaldo Golijov, Ezequiel Vinao, and Jonathan Berger. Of their collaborations with Adams, the *Washington Post* asserted “If good relationships are built on trust, the bond between the St. Lawrence String Quartet and composer John Adams is a marriage made in chamber music heaven.”

In late summer 2015, the quartet will tour Europe with the San Francisco Symphony, performing Adams’ “Absolute Jest” under the baton of conductor Michael Tilson Thomas for audiences in the UK, Germany, Romania and Switzerland. Later in the season, SLSQ will perform at Carnegie Hall in New York; in Vancouver and Toronto; Madison, WI; Worcester, MA; Eugene, OR; and East Lansing, MI. Two spring highlights include a residency at the University of Maryland and a special Haydn-themed performance at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y in New York. During the summer season, SLSQ is proud to continue its long association with the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, SC.

In recent seasons, SLSQ has been highlighting first violinist Geoff Nuttall’s admiration for Franz Josef Haydn with a series of concerts in which the foursome explores and unpacks the composer’s string quartets from various perspectives and then performs the works in their entirety. Nuttall, hailed as “the Jon Stewart of chamber music” (*New York Times*), explains, “to be really devastated by the genius of Haydn’s music, the performers and audiences have to be connected...exploring the material in a really active way.” The quartet will continue to offer these “Haydn Discovery” programs at least through the 2016-17 season.

The Quartet’s residency at Stanford includes working with music students, as well as extensive collaborations with other faculty and departments, using music to explore myriad topics. Recent collaborations have involved the School of Medicine, School of Education, and the Law School. In addition to their appointment at Stanford, the SLSQ are visiting artists at the University of Toronto. The foursome's

passion for opening up musical arenas to players and listeners alike is evident in their annual summer chamber music seminar at Stanford.

Lesley Robertson and Geoff Nuttall are founding members of the group, and hail from Edmonton, Alberta, and London, Ontario, respectively. Christopher Costanza is from Utica, NY, and joined the group in 2003. Owen Dalby, from the San Francisco Bay area, joined in 2015. All four members of the quartet live and teach at Stanford University in California.

*September, 2015— please destroy any previously or undated versions.*

## The St. Lawrence String Quartet – Press Excerpts

(NOTE: When searching for suitable pull-quotes, be sure to check through the “Full reviews” section. The “Press excerpts” are not comprehensive, and do not necessarily display all the best selections.)

“It's a modern string quartet that brings flexibility, dramatic fire and...a hint of rock 'n' roll energy...”

***Los Angeles Times***

“The players irrepressibly tore into Beethoven's Quartet in E-Flat, Opus 127....The fast movements in both Haydn and Beethoven began to approach jazz.... Enthrallingly inward-searching. The quartet...digs for emotion at all costs.”

***Los Angeles Times***

“An ensemble that [projects] an irresistible exuberance in performances, and [links] that sense of joy with artistry of subtlety and finesse....who would prefer bland polish over this group's style of vital risk-taking?”

***The Boston Globe***

“Brilliant...the performance showed not only virtuosity, intelligence and imagination but also extraordinary passion.”

***The New York Times***

“A rare gift for combining interpretive spontaneity and fierce musical commitment.”

***The New York Times***

“Impassioned performances full of operatic lyricism and structural insight”

***The New Yorker***

“These are fearless musicians whose spontaneity stretches past conventional interpretation and probes the music's imaginative limits.”

***The Washington Post***

“An almost disturbing intensity that held the audience spellbound. The performance bristled with the electricity the ensemble has become known for...This was an almost impeccable, powerful performance, with entrances coordinated with absolute precision, sharply etched phrases and carefully judged silences...remarkable.”

***The New York Times***

“Superb...enthralling and terrifying...an outstanding performance.”

***The Boston Globe***

“A sound that has just about everything one wants from a quartet, most notably precision, warmth and an electricity that conveys the excitement of playing whatever is on their stands at the moment.”

***The New York Times***

“A freshness and élan rich in the very lightness of being...the St. Lawrence Quartet made a convincing case for being the top quartet of the post-Emerson generation.”

***MusicalAmerica.com*** (Wes Blomster)

“Faultless, instantly compelling performances....Forget its "youth culture" image; if the St. Lawrence can build on this brilliant debut, a great future surely awaits.”

***BBC Music Magazine*** [Awarded 5 stars]

“Expressive tension was unrelenting, even in the still, shivering harmonics of the first movement. The performance had a dangerous, unchecked edge; I have never heard anything quite like it.”

***The New York Times***

“The St. Lawrence is first and foremost, I think, about risk taking: about playing on the emotional edge; about performing, not to ‘get it right,’ but because the music has something to tell us that we cannot live without; something that could make you change your life.”

***The Toronto Globe & Mail***

“This is what makes the SLSQ one of the great quartets of our time: their incandescent imagination; the graceful lucidity with which they reveal form; their intuitive ability to slip into the skin of their composers; their infectious sense of discovery and creation, even in performance.”

***The National Post (Canada)***

“The St. Lawrence String Quartet [play] with imagination, sensitivity, sensational physical abandon, and a complete lack of emotional inhibition.”

***The Boston Globe***

“Dazzling...beyond superlatives...it was like hearing this work [Dvorak’s ‘American’] for the first time.”

***The Salt Lake Tribune***

“Incendiary....The performance of the formidable Beethoven String Quartet in B-Flat Major (Op. 130) was revelatory, as if at every juncture to say, ‘Wow! Isn’t this amazing?’”

***The Kansas City Star***

## St. Lawrence String Quartet Current Discography

John Adams: Absolute Jest and Grand Pianola Music San Francisco Symphony/SLSQ	SFS Media
John Adams: Son of a Chamber Symphony / String Quartet San Francisco Symphony/SLSQ	Nonesuch 523014-2
Haydn and Dvorak	Artistshare.com
Shostakovich: String Quartets Nos. 3, 7, 8	EMI Classics 3 59956 2
Christos Hatzis: "Awakening" String Quartets No 1 ("Awakening") and 2 ("Gathering")	EMI Classics 5 58038 2
Oswaldo Golijov: "Yiddishbbuk" (including <i>Yiddishbbuk</i> , <i>The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind</i> , <i>Last Round</i> , <i>Lullaby</i> and <i>Doina</i> ) With Todd Palmer, clarinets (Received two Grammy nominations)	EMI Classics 5 57356 2
Tchaikovsky: String Quartets Nos. 1 & 3	EMI Classics 5 57144 2
Schumann: String Quartets Nos. 1 & 3	EMI Classics 5 56797 2
Jonathan Berger: "Miracles and Mud"	Naxos 8.559342

# Full house enjoys return of St. Lawrence String Quartet to Calgary



*KENNETH DELONG, CALGARY HERALD*

[More from Kenneth DeLong, Calgary Herald \(HTTP://CALGARYHERALD.COM/AUTHOR/KENNETH-DELONG-CALGARY-HERALD\)](http://CALGARYHERALD.COM/AUTHOR/KENNETH-DELONG-CALGARY-HERALD)

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The St. Lawrence String Quartet. *LEONARDO MASCARO / -*

Although they have long lived in the United States and travel widely, there is some sense, perhaps only felt locally, that the St. Lawrence String Quartet is “our” quartet. Probably this feeling comes from their long connection with Banff, the Banff Centre, the Banff International String Quartet Competition, their winning of the competitions, violinist Geoff Nuttall’s presence as a recent juror for the competition, and Barry Schiffman, the director of the competition, who was the original second violinist of the quartet.

The return of the quartet to the Calgary Pro Musica’s 40th season program was greeted with a full house Sunday evening as the group presented a fascinating program of music by Haydn, Janacek, and Mendelssohn.

As indicated in the program and mentioned on stage, The St. Lawrence String Quartet is in the process of preparing a recording of all of Haydn’s Op. 20 string quartets, the first fully mature quartets by the composer. Less played than many of his later works, these works of early maturity are nonetheless particularly interesting for the variety of ideas they contain and for experiments in texture and style—all elements to which the quartet is particularly alive.

Their dedication to Haydn was fully evident in the vividly conceived account of the C Major String Quartet, Op. 20, No. 2, performed on this occasion. This was a fully modern performance of the work, one in which the spirit of early performance practice was not particularly the focus. Rather, this was a full-blooded account of the work, in which the characterization of theme and an awareness of quartet texture were the striking elements.

This was a virile performance, one that recalls conductor Sir Thomas Beecham’s not so politically correct remark that when he conducted Haydn, he used to place his feet just a little farther apart than usual. In their performance, the quartet did not back off from the forte marking, or pull their punches regarding tempos or phrasing. They evident believe in the force and directness of this music, and it was presented in this way. No dainty Haydn for these folks.

These same values persisted throughout the concert, which included a truly remarkable performance of Janacek’s “Kreutzer” String Quartet. The programmatic aspect of the work was entertainingly presented before the performance, and the performance was, as was indicated, much like an opera without words. The programmatic spirit of the themes was strongly rendered, with a fine attention to texture and to musical and verbal images. This was the

finest performance of this quartet I have heard live, and will long remain in my memory.

Mendelssohn is comfortable ground for many quartets, but there is always a challenge both to energize the music but not to over-energize. This performance was on the upper edge of this scale, but so musical was the playing, so full of vividly projected themes, that one could only be swept away by the fervour of the playing. The framing movements were filled with passion and energy, but there was also beauty of melody in the wonderfully reflective slow movement.

In response to the very strong applause, the Quartet performed the slow movement of the first of the Op. 20 Haydn string quartets, a movement filled with serene beauty, wonderful harmony, and a uniquely rich quartet texture. There was full value for money in this concert.

St. Lawrence String Quartet—Calgary Pro Musica Society

## Oberlin Artist Recital Series: St. Lawrence String Quartet (Nov. 11)

November 15, 2016

[Download article as PDF](#)

by Nicholas Jones



I walked into the St. Lawrence String Quartet concert at Oberlin's Finney Chapel on November 11 hoping for a respite from the tensions and anxieties of the week's events, and I was not disappointed. With total conviction and attentiveness, the St. Lawrence played music that soothed the nerves and stimulated the heart. I was expecting beauty, focus, and artistry. But I was not prepared for a further impact: the powerful message of *how* the St. Lawrence plays.

In some quartets, the individuality of the players almost disappears under a uniform style — a wonderful achievement — making the music sound seamless, voices blending in a common effort. But the St. Lawrence plays with commitment to difference, not uniformity: each player sounds unapologetically and unalike her or himself.

Cellist Christopher Costanza plays with an assertive and forthright presence. Violist Lesley Robertson engages the inner lines of the score with a combination of driving rhythmic energy and plangent melodicism. Owen Dalby plays the second violin parts with lyricism and a clarity of tone. And first violinist Geoff Nuttall, half rising out of his chair with enthusiasm, plays the sound with fearless exuberance and an almost frightening love of fast, exposed, and fibusting passages.

The results on Friday were electrifying: the ear bounced from one player to another, constantly surprised by difference and delighted by individuality. In this week of national divisions, it was a big uplift to experience this kind of intimate, masterful connection among four obviously different players. Out of all that came stunning, collective performances.

This was no program of light classics, to say the least: opening with Haydn's intense *Quartet* Op. 20, No. 5, following up with John Adams's highly crafted *Second String Quartet* (2015, written for the St. Lawrence), and concluding with Beethoven's incomparably strange and enthralling minor quartet, Op. 132.

Especially captivating in the Haydn — one of the staples of the St. Lawrence repertoire — is the slow movement, in which a melodic dance tune is interwoven with high, intricate complexity in the first violin, tender and edgy lines that ornament but become far more than merely decorative, as delicate and sure as a spider's thread. The final movement is a thrilling double fugue that begins in a whispery pianissimo, its latent passion revealed only in flashes.

Written with a deep respect for the quartet medium and its origins in the classical style, the Adams quartet complemented its neighbors in the program. Though often labelled a minimalist, Adams filled this piece with motivic development reminiscent of the sonata forms that Haydn loved and Beethoven inherited (and rebelled against). As in the Haydn, the slow section that opens Adams's second movement is especially powerful: the fierce, Beethovenesque furor of the first movement's Allegro molto gives way to a gentler, more contemplative Andantino that has an almost titanic sense of ebb and flow. The final section, appropriately marked "Energico," is a high-octane wake-up call, full of intensity and action.

The Beethoven Op. 132 is the second of his late quartets, works of difficulty and innovation for their time, and still so today. In the opening Allegro, the St. Lawrence gave us crisp, brief and apparently snippets of sound that demand — and received — full attention as they are repeated and varied. Moments of melody occur, but they seem to come to us strained through filters of these interwoven motifs. A wild coda leads into the second movement, a strangely fragmented minuet with a central section in which the first violin imitates a bagpipe stretched to the limits of range and complication.

The core of the quartet is the long and profound third movement, added to the original form of the work in May of 1825 when Beethoven recovered from a long and serious illness. This "Song of Thanksgiving to the Deity from a Convalescent" is set in the Lydian mode, one of the ancient liturgical scales. Out of a tentative, searching counterpoint comes the hymn of the

which is punctuated by passages of leaping joy. That music of renewal takes the quartet through two more movements — a short, energetic march and a complex and exuberant finale.

Obviously appreciating the audience's loud ovations, the St. Lawrence played an encore: a slow movement, this time from Haydn's Op. 20, No. 1. It was appropriately marked *affettuoso sostenuto* — emotional and sustained. The whole evening was just that, and much needed

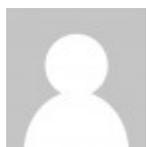
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Filed Under: Reviews

Tagged With: Christopher Costanza, Geoff Nuttall, Lesley Robertson, Oberlin Artist Recital Series, C Dalby, St. Lawrence String Quartet



### About Nicholas Jones

Nicholas Jones is Professor of English at Oberlin College, where he teaches courses on Shakespeare, Milton, and British Romantic Literature. In recent years, he has pioneered courses that link Oberlin's College of Arts and Sciences with the Oberlin Conservatory Music and the Allen Memorial Art Museum. Nick is an avid amateur musician, currently studying baroque recorder and viola da gamba as well as playing violin and viola. He has sung in a number of choruses and participated in workshops at Amherst Early Music, Oberlin's Baroque Performance Institute, and Eastern Music Week at Pinewoods. Nick grew up in the Cleveland area and still remembers George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra playing Beethoven's Seventh Symphony at Severance Hall. He also remembers the Beatles singing at Lakefront Stadium, but because of the screaming, he couldn't hear a note.

# TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

## Music Review: St. Lawrence String Quartet sparkles at HC

By Jonathan Blumhofer - Telegram & Gazette Reviewer

Feb 20, 2016

WORCESTER - In a little over 25 years, the St. Lawrence String Quartet has emerged from the crowded ranks of such ensembles and made a name for itself as one of the most adventurous, lively, and satisfying quartets on the scene today. The group's performance at Brooks Hall at the College of the Holy Cross on Friday night, courtesy of Music Worcester, largely demonstrated just why that's the case.

Each piece on Friday's program manifested currents of electricity. In Haydn's famous "Emperor" Quartet, the most striking – indeed, impressive – moments were the quietest ones. I've never heard the well-known second-movement variations, for instance, sounding as logical, convincing or unpredictable as they did in this concert, so focused was the group's playing. That same concentration was evident in the St. Lawrence's interpretation of the last half of the third movement's trio section.

In its livelier moments, the ensemble brought a breathy energy to the music, which suited it well. Cellist Christopher Costanza and first violinist Geoff Nuttall played their cadenza-like passages with impelling verve and the consistency of violist Lesley Robertson's tone in her several solos was nothing short of marvelous.

The Haydn, which opened Friday's concert, was prefaced by a smart, substantial introduction curated by Nuttall. Billed as "Haydn Discovery," the discussion offered a cursory breakdown of the piece, explicating the different "weapons in Haydn's arsenal," as Nuttall called them, and featuring the ensemble demonstrating some of the ways in which Haydn employed them.

Nuttall's easy, conversational way with Friday's audience nicely broke down many of the barriers between audience, ensemble, and music that often, unfortunately, marks chamber music concerts: They should be personal, intimate, and involved on both sides of the stage, after all.

Also beneficial to this process was having composer Osvaldo Golijov in the house to introduce his "Qohelet." "Qohelet" draws its name from the Book of Ecclesiastes, though its content doesn't much reflect that source (at least according to its composer). It was written in 2011 and premiered by the St. Lawrence's at Stanford University, where the group is based.

The first of its two movements is largely static – "like two slow river currents," in Golijov's words – marked by frequent sul ponticello tremolo patterns and descending, fragmented melodies (often played in the intense, highest reaches of the instruments' lowest strings) passed through the ensemble. In the second, a long-breathed, slow melody emerges in the first violin; underneath, bustling rhythms attempt to keep it from floating away, like a long string anchoring a balloon. The movement ends on a quizzical, dissonant chord, "suspended in midair," as Golijov describes it.

“Qohelet” is, if not the weightiest of contemporary quartets, then certainly among the most beautiful. Its finale, especially, haunts and, like the most interesting of Golijov’s previous works for strings (“Last Round” and “Azul,” in particular), the whole piece convincingly draws unexpected sounds from the instruments and juxtaposes contrasting musical materials in a compelling manner.

The quartet, which has a history with Golijov dating back to the early 1990s, gave a finely etched performance of “Qohelet,” one that seethed and sparkled by turns. Golijov, who teaches at Holy Cross, was on hand to bask in the warm ovation that followed.

To close the evening, the quartet tackled Camille Saint-Saëns’ String Quartet no. 1. It’s a piece that has its moments – a random fugue in the middle of the grab-bag first movement; a buzzing, syncopated theme in the second; strange dissonances marking the slow third; lots of high-wire, virtuosic flashes in the finale – but it doesn’t really add up to more than the sum of its parts.

Still, the group played it with abandon. There was a jam session-like quality to violinists Nuttall and Owen Dalby’s many exchanges and the low strings anchored the performance with rich color and tonal warmth.

For an encore, the quartet offered the slow movement from Haydn’s String Quartet op. 20, no. 1. Here they shifted back into the same, direct expression that marked the slow movement of their “Emperor” Quartet: concentrated, meditative and packed with expectation. It was a reminder not only of the difference between good and great music but also a demonstration of the very qualities that turn a good ensemble into a great one.

# SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN [SantaFeNewMexican.com](http://SantaFeNewMexican.com)

February 12, 2016

## Pasa Review: St. Lawrence String Quartet, Feb. 7

James M. Keller

St. Lawrence String Quartet, Feb. 7, St. Francis Auditorium

In its 27-year history, the St. Lawrence String Quartet has staked its place as not just the leading foursome of Canadian origins (though its members reside principally in California) but indeed as one of the most notable in the world. One cannot escape feeling that every note, rest, bow stroke, breath, and phrase has been poked, prodded, worried about, argued over, and not yet put to rest — without sacrificing the sense of spontaneity in performance. The group imposes its strong personality on the music. The distinctive character comes most obviously from first violinist Geoff Nuttall, who adheres to a take-no-prisoners philosophy of music-making. But the spirit also resides in the musical tension between him and the marvelous cellist Christopher Constanza, and in the balance they achieve with the finely honed inner voices of violist Lesley Robertson (along with Nuttall a charter member) and second violinist Owen Dalby (who joined the ensemble this past June).

Do they overinterpret the music? I don't think so, although they regularly make their way to the very brink of classical decorum. Aspiring for mere respectability is clearly not these players' objective. They want to put listeners on the edge of their seats, and this they did often in their concert this past Sunday, sponsored by Santa Fe Pro Musica. Haydn is one of their specialties. They view him not as an amiable jokester but rather as a daring avant-gardist. His F-minor Quartet (Op. 20, No. 5) proved custom-made for their approach, inviting hyper-drama in many of its Sturm und Drang contours. In the Menuet, the players bent phrases to their will, yet one was convinced of their musical purpose in doing so. The elaborate embroideries of the slow movement became affecting rather than just decorative. Here the idea of phrasing encompassed many elements of music-making simultaneously — melodic contour, rhythm, articulation, tone — and a complete change of ensemble timbre for the homophonic coda proved both startling and satisfying. In the finale, the famous "Fugue on Two Subjects," the quartet maintained hushed secrecy until its moment to explode into forte.

John Adams wrote his Second String Quartet for this group, which premiered it just over a year ago. Much though I admire many of Adams' works, I have been an agnostic about his chamber music and have failed to be seduced by his First Quartet, which has now been recorded twice. The Second Quartet, however, proved thrilling. It comes across as the manic spawn of Beethoven, Copland, and Bernard Herrmann. (Is that even possible?) From a thematic point of view, much of it is derived from phrases in late works of Beethoven — mostly motifs from his Piano Sonata No. 31 (Op. 110), but, in its concluding section, also venturing into the Diabelli Variations. Adams' original treatment of these ideas seems inspired less by these late masterpieces per se than by Beethoven's preparatory work for them. It is as if he picked up one of Beethoven's sketchbooks and added extra pages, wrestling with the motifs (rather as Beethoven did) in uncensored exploration, sometimes stuttering, often elated, always energetic, before concluding in a kindly consonance.

The foursome also invested great passion in its rendition of Schumann's Quartet No. 3. Hard-driving up-bows lent power to phrase-ends in the first movement, and in the third, Dalby briefly achieved a timbre resembling a zither, a weird and wonderful accompaniment to the swelling lyricism that surrounded him. In an encore, the long lines and distilled purity of the slow movement from Haydn's Quartet in E-flat major (Op. 20, No. 1) invited listeners to decompress after **a concert of exceptional dynamism.**

# The Gazette (Montreal, Canada)

LEV BRATISHENKO, SPECIAL TO MONTREAL GAZETTE

Published on: February 1, 2015

We returned to the Maison symphonique for chamber music — the St. Lawrence String Quartet and pianist Serhiy Salov.

The evening included the Montreal première of John Adams's Second Quartet, his most recent composition for the St. Lawrence, but the program was different in an interesting way from the recent San Francisco première. Both concerts began with Haydn's crepuscular Quartet in F minor, Op. 20, No. 5, but the San Francisco première included Beethoven as well. Adams's Second Quartet is derived from themes from Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 31 and the "Diabelli" Variations that it masticates for 20 fascinating minutes. Some critics in San Francisco wondered whether playing the real thing and Adams's self-described "obsessive" reflections in proximity was such a good idea, but we didn't get the chance to compare. Beethoven's String Quartet, Opus 131, was replaced by Brahms's Piano Quintet Op. 34 in F minor, with Salov.

By themselves for the Adams and Haydn, the St. Lawrence were witty, buoyant, and wickedly attentive. The Haydn was superb. The violin embellishments in the Adagio flew past like skipped stones, and the fugal Finale was a lesson in generosity — they are simply a joy to hear. The Adams is in two parts, and I found the growling Allegro left most of the impression. In it, the cello seems to struggle against a swarm of six-note patterns raining down like blows from the rest. In general, the Second Quartet is gripping, but somehow emotionally vacant.

The addition of Salov for the Brahms was challenging at first. The piano added a heaviness that felt at odds with the wiry callisthenics of the St. Lawrence, but it ended up gloriously romantic. The quintet is a masterpiece in the same minor key as the Haydn quartet, so its delicious theme sounded like an answer to the anxious questions of the first piece. Though Salov never quite matched the quartet's hush, they played an entrancing Andante together. Our neighbour in the loge started headbanging to the Scherzo and had to be thrown out.

# Financial Times (London, UK)

January 20, 2015

## St Lawrence String Quartet, Bing Concert Hall, Stanford, California - review

By Allan Ulrich

John Adams introduced this premiere of his rapturous new Second Quartet St Lawrence String Quartet

Fortunate are those composers who can depend on sympathetic interpreters to communicate their message to the world. For most of the past decade, the St Lawrence String Quartet has served John Adams whenever he has produced chamber music for strings. The relationship reached its zenith on Sunday evening when the group premiered the composer's Second Quartet. It is a rapturous 22-minute effusion that acknowledges the past while enlivening the present. Fresh from leading the San Francisco Symphony in his Grand Pianola Music, the composer was on hand to introduce the piece.

Adams has admitted his hesitancy in the intricacies of string writing (he grew up playing the clarinet). The almost laboratory relationship with the St Lawrence (long in residence on the Stanford University campus) yielded two earlier compositions, both eminently listenable but neither felt quite as natural nor sounded quite as economical as the latest piece, which glowed in the acoustics of two-year-old Bing Hall.

In the two-part Second Quartet, as in its predecessors, Adams seems determined to position himself within the central western chamber music tradition. His guiding inspiration (explicit or not) is Beethoven. Here, in the Second Quartet, Adams finds aesthetic nourishment in two phrases from the Op. 110 piano sonata and later, from the briefest of the Diabelli Variations. He uses them as connective tissue in a densely harmonised, rhythmically buoyant and gratifyingly lucid essay that, for all its feverish energy, ultimately deserts Beethoven and melts into one of those lyric passages that have distinguished Adams' writing in recent years.

The St Lawrence invested the work with tremendous authority, uncommon clarity and empathy to its hushed final pages. The foursome, whose sense of ensemble is peerless, sandwiched Adams between two masterpieces. Haydn's Op. 20, No. 5 quartet is a rare, minor-key effusion that came off with a dour majesty, down to the melancholic scherzo. At the end the group climbed the peak of Beethoven's Op. 131 with a speedy and coherent traversal that left the listener entirely satisfied.

# theStrad

ESSENTIAL READING FOR THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

## ⊕ Edinburgh

David Kettle chooses his pick of the string events from this year's Edinburgh International Festival and Fringe

Equally forthright in their playing – first violinist Geoff Nuttall in particular – were the members of the **St Lawrence Quartet**, in town for two concerts and something of a focus on John Adams. At the Queen's Hall they gave an enormously energetic performance of his First Quartet (25 August), putting their breathtakingly clear articulation and propulsive power at the service of hugely charismatic, exuberant playing that never lost sight of the composer's sense of sonic fantasy. And over at the Usher Hall, they joined the San Francisco Symphony under Michael Tilson Thomas (27 August) for an equally ebullient account of Adams's wry Beethoven tribute *Absolute Jest*, bringing exceptional focus to the sometimes dense quartet-meets-orchestra textures, even if they occasionally came down on the serious side of Adams's mischievous humour. The years they've spent working with the composer were evident in their assured, authoritative playing.



ST LAWRENCE PHOTO LEONARDO MASCARDI

# Washington Post

January 25, 2015

## St. Lawrence String Quartet at the Library of Congress

By Tom Huizenga

If good relationships are built on trust, the bond between the St. Lawrence String Quartet and composer John Adams is a marriage made in chamber music heaven. Adams has written three pieces for the group, which gave the world premiere of his Second Quartet Jan. 18 at Stanford University and played it for the second time at the Library of Congress on Friday.

The St. Lawrence players aren't the only friends Adams relied on for his new quartet: An old ally named Beethoven returns for a big role. In "Absolute Jest," the composer's previous collaboration with the group, Adams borrowed fragments from Beethoven's string quartets. With this work, he's at it again, this time obsessing on shards from Beethoven's Piano Sonata, Op. 110.

"They're little, very potent germs that I throw into a petri dish and let them grow in whatever way they want," Adams said, introducing the 20-minute piece. Those "germs" have grown into something of a dense, dark and monstrous strain, bravely contained by the St. Lawrence musicians — violinists Geoff Nuttall and Mark Fewer, violist Lesley Robertson and cellist Christopher Costanza.

The first of the quartet's two movements is fueled largely by a mere seven notes of Beethoven — a nervous, tapping motif that under Adams's microscope squirms and spins off in endless aggressive, pulsating patterns. The second movement Adams described as "emotionally bi-polar." Another Beethoven fragment seesaws wistfully and devolves — a reminder of Adams's minimalist roots — giving way to sudden flashes of lyrical ardor. Speed and intensity soar in a schizophrenic finale, leaving Beethoven far behind, revealing his powerful admirer.

The St. Lawrence Quartet surrounded the Adams with two old-world masters. Haydn's Op. 20 Quartet in E-flat ("The Joke") was robust but could have shined brighter with more care. In Dvorak's Quartet No. 11, however, the St. Lawrence delivered a supremely polished performance, building crescendos, as in the opening Allegro where the first theme gets a running start and blasts off in flight, and staging intimate scenes, such as the slow movement in which Nuttall spun silvery threads of tone in an operatic mezza-voce.

Huizenga is a freelance writer.

# St. Lawrence Quartet thrills in Haydn

## Orange County Register

February 20, 2014

BY TIMOTHY MANGAN / CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

In the popular imagination, string quartet concerts are the stuffiest, most elitist of affairs. What could be more boring, more erudite? I wish the popular imagination could have been in Samueli Theater on Wednesday night.

The St. Lawrence String Quartet was once again in town. For my money, the group is **the most exciting string quartet working today. It plays with vim and vigor and amplitude of feeling and sound and keen intelligence. It “brings it,” as some people say.**

The program skipped the 19th century. It started and ended with quartets by the father of the genre, Haydn, the two works written 25 years apart. It also featured the world premiere of a new string quartet by the Brooklyn-based composer James Matheson – commissioned for the Segerstrom Center’s chamber music series by Orange Countians Justus and Elizabeth Schlichting – and the rarely played String Quartet No. 3 by Erich Wolfgang Korngold, written in 1945.

Matheson’s String Quartet is an impressive piece of work. Thirty-two minutes long, it is brimming with ideas; the richness of their number is palpable. It is also composed in an accessible style, but not a dumbed-down one. The composer’s intention of accessibility is nicely summed up by the movement titles, which Matheson (he was in attendance) told us he came up with just that day. They are: “All leap and no faith”; “Y ‘heart’ X”; and “Pure chocolate energy.” This isn’t Pierre Boulez.

Matheson, who recently composed a violin concerto for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, obviously has a talent for writing for strings. The String Quartet is, perhaps first and foremost, beautifully orchestrated, the combination of instruments used to create one wondrous color after another. Motor rhythms and repeated patterns juice forward progress; these ideas move through tonal progressions, reaching plateaus of more static material (at least in the first two movements) – meditative, starry-skied, rapt. The quick finale is a syncopated romp.

The St. Lawrence seemed to play it for all its worth. The ensemble has a new second violinist, Mark Fewer, as of last month. He fits in perfectly. Of a quieter disposition than lead violinist Geoff Nuttall, who is wild and fiery, Fewer nevertheless manages to match him, jab for jab, in a deadpan way.

The group played the two Haydn quartets (the early Op. 20, No. 1 and the late Op. 76, No. 3, “Emperor”) as if they had been written yesterday. There was little daintiness here, no politeness. All was rugged and fierce, hard-driven. If one missed a bit of the grace in these works, one got a better sense of Haydn’s cleverness, his wit and his muscular powers of invention. These are intricate and complex pieces, not (merely) pretty ones.

How is it that the St. Lawrence Quartet doesn't overdo it? Time and again the listener is slammed into the back of his seat, the group pressing the pedal to the metal. Nuttall squirms, turns, slouches, rises and kicks his legs while playing, in communion with the music. **But his playing and that of the entire group is never forced beyond beauty of sound, and precision never suffers. These musicians fill the phrases to the brim, but never more. What's more, spontaneity and flexibility remain in the game; the players react to the expression in the music, and to each other, in the moment.**

Korngold's fascinating quartet fit nicely into the program. It combined elements of modernity heard in the Matheson with the Classical forms of Haydn. The style is late Romantic Viennese, highly chromatic and also, surprisingly, quite acerbic. The Third Quartet was the first concert work by Korngold after many years of writing film music for Hollywood, and it uses some of the music from those movies ("The Sea Wolf," "Between Two Worlds" and "Devotion") but you'd hardly know it, so seamlessly amalgamated are they into the quartet fabric.

The piece is a pip and should enter the repertoire. The St. Lawrencers rolled up their sleeves and dug into it with abandon, especially the snazzy, syncopated finale, which sounds like late Beethoven on steroids.

At the end of the concert, the applause was hearty, an encore was offered, and we finally stepped into the 19th century. The slow movement of Verdi's String Quartet, an aria for strings in the composer's best manner, supplied the perfect sorbet after the meaty meal.

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# Los Angeles Times

## Music review: St. Lawrence String Quartet brings edge to Wallis

**St. Lawrence String Quartet gives the swank Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills an energetic classical inauguration.**

By Mark Swed, Los Angeles Times Music Critic

January 16, 2014, 4:50 p.m.



St. Lawrence Quartet members Geoff Nuttall, left, Mark Fewer, Christopher Costanza and Lesley Robertson. Photo Credit: Vince Bucci (Vince Bucci / January 16, 2014)

So *that's* what the Wallis sounds like.

It's been more than two months since Beverly Hills opened its swank Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts. But until Wednesday night the multipurpose Bram Goldsmith Theater in the transformed historic post office building had yet to be purposed for unamplified music (with the exception of a few minutes of a tony gala). The St. Lawrence String Quartet did the honors by inaugurating the Wallis' classical music series.

A hall with many uses — music of all sorts, theater, dance, opera and children's shows —

can be an acoustician's riskiest assignment. Amplified music, amplified voice, unamplified music, unamplified voice all require different degrees of reverberation. Music genres and the number of performers make a difference.

The size of the hall matters too, and at 499 seats, the Wallis should work for chamber music without too many problems. But this theater happens to be a sizable 499-seat venue, with a vast stage, roomy seats and generally lots of space. This is, don't forget, Beverly Hills, 90210.

The Wallis works. But first impressions must remain first impressions.

The St. Lawrence is not sumptuous. The players go in for a tight, slight vibrato. The ensemble tone is wiry, shimmering, electric. It's a modern string quartet that brings flexibility, dramatic fire and, on Wednesday's program, a hint of rock 'n' roll energy to Haydn and Beethoven and an effective heart-on-sleeve approach to Korngold's Hollywood-inspired Third Quartet.

The Wallis' acoustic, designed by the firm Jaffe Holden, is characterized by equally modern, clean, clear and uncolored sonic lines. If on the dry side (the typical compromise for multipurpose), it is not uncomfortably so, no extreme Santa Ana acoustical condition. There is just enough warmth.

From where I sat, on an aisle mid-hall, the St. Lawrence's crackling electrical energy was evenly distributed from the violins' top notes to the cello's bottom. Others, seated elsewhere, could have a different experience. I stayed put, but a friend said moving across an aisle made a slight difference in sonic warmth.

The Wallis may not actively draw a listener in, but it doesn't get in the way. Nothing distracted from the St. Lawrence.

Founded in 1989 and long in residence at Stanford University, the quartet has its admirers and detractors. Either you find first violinist Geoff Nuttall's highly expressive body language a turn-on or a turnoff. He is like an operatic

character in his approach, a dancer and a rock star.

He is also an exceptional player, and while the other members — violinist Mark Fewer, violist Lesley Robertson and cellist Christopher Costanza — are less theatrical, they are on the same musical wavelength.

And on that wavelength, Haydn's trickery in his "[Emperor](#)" Quartet, his surprising twists and turns, proved riotously effective if also made perhaps overly obvious. Every moment was alive, the rhythmic propulsive astonishing.

Korngold's quartet has a local connection, which is the kind of thing the Wallis seems keen on emphasizing. Written in Hollywood in 1945 by the Austrian émigré composer who did much to create symphonic film scoring, this was Korngold's first attempt in some years to separate himself from the movie business, which he thought had become unsympathetic to serious composition.

Even so, he couldn't escape his cinematic glories. Troubled chromatic passages turn romantic. The slow movement is based on his score for the Edward G. Robinson 1941 epic, "The Sea Wolf." Material from the last movement found its way into Korngold's next (and next-to-last) picture, "[Deception](#)" (1946), starring Bette Davis as a music teacher and Claude Rains as a pompous composer.

Take this quartet too seriously and it too sits somewhere on the pomp to treacle spectrum. Play it for all its worthy, dramatically and rhythmically, as the St. Lawrence did, and it does Hollywood fine justice.

The final work was Beethoven's last "Razumovsky" String Quartet, Op. 59, No. 3, which the Emerson Quartet happened to perform in Costa Mesa last weekend. Where the Emerson was serious and understated, the St. Lawrence was playful and theatrical. The Canadians gave Beethoven the hard sell for modern audiences. They danced through the furious fugue at the end spectacularly, although no more quickly

than the Emerson's. The timing was, to the second, the same: 5:50.

Even so, music in Beverly may be a harder sell than \$100,000 watches. The audience made too quick an exit for an encore. It was the coolest reception I've seen for any performer in a long while. Maybe, those acoustics will need to be warmed up after all. Or at least the air conditioning turned off.

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<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-lawrence-wallis-review-2-20140117,0,4073273.story#ixzz2r2jVLZX>

# San Jose Mercury News

## Review: St. Lawrence Quartet debuts Samuel Carl Adams By RICHARD SCHEININ

rscheinin@bayareanewsgroup.com PUBLISHED: October 14, 2013 at 5:04 am | UPDATED: August 12, 2016 at 11:47 am

The St. Lawrence String Quartet has enjoyed long love affairs with Haydn and Beethoven, and both lodged squarely in the group's first program of the season Sunday at Stanford University's Bing Concert Hall. But sandwiched between them was a persuasive new voice, that of composer Samuel Carl Adams, who is only 27.

In case you haven't yet heard his story, he was born and raised in the East Bay, the son of composer John Adams and photographer Deborah O'Grady. He studied composition at Stanford as an undergraduate, at Yale as a graduate student. He lives in Brooklyn. Last year, Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony premiered his "Drift and Providence," a deftly orchestrated work, full of jangling textures and moody atmospherics, with Claude Debussy and jazz arranger Gil Evans among its points of reference.

But most notable about "Drift" was Adams' ability to summon his own sound world beyond his influences. He has done it again with String Quartet in Five Movements, which was composed for the St. Lawrence, who premiered it in June at the Spoleto Festival USA in Charleston, S.C., and gave the piece its West Coast debut Sunday at Bing. It's an absorbing work, matching fine-spun sound with the richness of silence and creating for the listener — at least this listener — the sense of being at the edge of a dream-state.

Before the Stanford Live performance, Adams — appearing on a large projection screen, via Skype — spoke from New Hampshire about the work, his first string quartet. Until the St. Lawrence suggested the project, he said, the thought of composing for string quartet had intimidated him, because the format includes many of his favorite works by master composers. His way around the quandary, he said, was to aim for a sense of "levity and weightlessness" with his own piece — doing an end run around the weightiness of the genre.

The first movement, titled "Old Music," references François Couperin: lilting gestures for fiddle, like distant echoes or fragments of the Baroque; lone percussively struck cello notes, sounding almost like a frame drum, out of the pre-Baroque; and a general sense of mellow melodicism that plunges toward

dark modes and moods, everything balanced at a tipping point before trailing off in a playful vapor.

It all seemed extracted from the memory of something larger. So did the second movement, "Quiet, Rocking with Sad Cello Solo," which set the cello's melody against the hazy drone of the three other players. Tender — somewhat in the manner of Shostakovich, but without the irony — it evoked rich solitude: time spent in a quiet cottage, shot through with light at mid-day.

The performance by the St. Lawrence — violinists Geoff Nuttall and Scott St. John, violist Lesley Robertson, cellist Christopher Costanza — was as fine-spun as the 20-minute work. Its fourth movement, "Minuet and Trio, Sometimes in 5," drew out its murmured and whistled effects for too long a stretch. But this is a significant work, overall, confident in its craftsmanship, evocative with its diaphanous textures, its long-lined spaciousness, its use of space and silence as essential materials. Quietly powerful and with its own vocabulary (i.e. no pulsing minimalism), it focuses the listener: The finale, "Hymn, Vanishing," seems to arrive from some mysterious epoch.

That hymn helped the St. Lawrence to bridge the distance between Haydn, who opened the program (with the String Quartet in D major, Op. 71, No. 2, one of the "Salomon" Quartets), and Beethoven, who closed it (with the late String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132). The St. Lawrence just about always plays Haydn with bounce and charm. Sunday, the Adagio cantabile stood out: sweet and yearning, with the three other voices braiding around Costanza's cello. Beethoven's incomparable work was as balanced, slow-turning and wondrous as one would hope. St. John, who will leave the quartet at the end of 2013 (he is relocating to Canada with his family), led the "Hymn of Thanksgiving" with precision, tenderness and power.

# The Boston Musical Intelligencer

NOVEMBER 26, 2012

## Vividity from SLSQ

by BRIAN SCHUTH



The St. Lawrence String Quartet brought vivid interpretive imagination to pieces by Haydn, Golijov and Beethoven Sunday afternoon at the Concord Academy Performing Arts Center as part of the Concord Chamber Music series. The quartet has been playing for twenty years; its current personnel are Geoff Nuttall and Scott St. John, violins; Lesley Robertson, viola; and Christopher Costanza, cello.

One of my most memorable concert experiences was hearing the St. Lawrence play in New York several years back, when they also played a piece of Golijov's, *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind*. I was struck by the force of the players' collective personality and dynamism. I was anticipating seeing them again this weekend, and they did not disappoint. **This is what live classical performance should be — a display of passion, conviction and intelligence.** It was also *interesting*. The program opened with Haydn's Op. 76, No. 2, which carries the subtitle "Fifths". The Op. 76 quartets are among Haydn's last works, written after the composer had escaped the provincial Esterhazy court and become a prominent figure in London and Vienna. The piece is astonishingly inventive — the first movement uses its simple initial material (a pair of descending fifths in D minor) to create an unorthodox sonata form that is both closely argued and filled with almost perverse variety. All of the movements share a tendency to surprise; there are sudden outbursts in the second movement's theme and variations, and the fourth movement decides nearly at the last minute to finish in D major. The third movement's scherzo is a two-voice strict canon (!).

The St. Lawrence violinists alternate playing the first and second parts; Nuttall took the lead in the Haydn; St. John played first in the other two pieces. Nuttall is the most physically demonstrative member of the quartet, and he made excellent use of both his playing and his movement to bring to life each twist and turn of the score. His feet left the floor with regularity, as his center of gravity moved in sympathy with the shifts of mood and texture (as he chose to wear red shoes, with red plaid socks, making his feet unavoidable, I have to interpret his footwork as an integral part of his performance; I thought he did an excellent job). The foursome did not shy away from strong choices: repeated passages of double-stopped quarter notes in the trio got a little heavier and draggier and grittier each time we encountered them, as if the sheer sonic weight of those sounds were so enjoyable to conjure that it was worth wallowing in them a little; the final figure in the fourth movement had a "snap" glissando put into it which smacked just a little of Texas competition fiddling. Mr. Nuttall made a virtue of variety in dynamic, attack, phrasing and tone, opting for a particularly aggressive sound in the outer movements, but finding a rich, roundness to start the second. There were other choices I wasn't so sure about — the minuet went so quickly

that the oddness of the canon was elided, for example — but even those choices were interesting.

Osvaldo Golijov should be familiar to readers of this publication. Having lived in the area for some time, he is currently teaching at Holy Cross, and has been the subject of no little attention in the last decade with recordings on Deutsche Grammophon and Nonesuch. His music frequently combines Jewish themes (both musical and extra-musical) with a primarily tonal language that draws from musics of many cultures. The composer was present, and gave a brief but entertaining introduction to the second piece on the program, his *Qoholet*, Hebrew for *Ecclesiastes*. Golijov called nameless author “the Jerusalem Thoreau Golijov called but a little less optimistic.” The piece is in two movements, ostensibly about “what stays, and what changes.” The first gives the first violin an aria of sorts to play against a motoric rhythmic accompaniment; the second is a meditation that the composer likened to the flowing water of a river, with tone-painting in tremolos, sustained notes and antiphonic pulsing that successfully conveyed its aquatic imagery without becoming intrusive. The piece was attractive enough, but did not make a strong impression. The excellent program notes by Steven Ledbetter state that “there was talk of a three-movement work, but as it stands now, it contains two movements”; it does sound as if it is awaiting further development.

After intermission the Quartet played Beethoven’s first Razumovsky quartet, Op. 59, No. 1. While as full of surprises as the Haydn, it is certainly a structurally more ambitious piece, and the interpretation was suitably different, emphasizing the architecture of the first and third movements especially, while not losing any detail of dynamic or attack. St. John’s leadership was more nuanced, perhaps a little less risky (he wears *black* shoes). The Adagio of the Beethoven was a respite. In a program filled with tension and intensity, I found myself needing the moments of repose afforded here. **This was monumental Beethoven, impressively scaled.**

The quartet offered an encore after the Beethoven, the Scherzo from Dvořák’s Op. 105. It was an excellent summary of the afternoon the rhythmic opening sharp and opinionated, the trio a moment of repose — that is, until that moment where the lines are suddenly independent, a moment I had not really noticed before, but which here was an exciting and unexpected moment of controlled chaos.

There are certainly some compromises made by the St. Lawrence to afford their kind of interpretive freedom. The sound can occasionally be harsh, and there were moments where pitch was a little uncertain. The acoustics of the Concord Performing Arts Center did not do the Quartet a lot of favors in this regard. It is small enough that no notes were lost and projection was not an issue, but the sound is unreverberant and upper harmonics almost non-existent, giving very little cushion to the sound. But for me, these are quibbles. **I crave the enthusiasm and engagement the St. Lawrence provides. You can argue over this music.**

# Boston Globe

April 3, 2012

## St. Lawrence quartet romps through works old, new

By Jeremy Eichler

ROCKPORT - The schlockiest concert I've seen in a long time came last summer courtesy of the Rockport Chamber Music Festival. It was the British Baroque music outfit known as Red Priest, who brought to town a program about musical piracy, gleefully punning on their subject by dressing up as pirates, prancing around the stage, shouting inanities while playing. It must be said, though, that many in the audience seemed to love watching classical musicians cutting loose, daring to have fun in such a serious business.

I hope some of the festival subscribers present for Red Priest also made it back to the Shalin Liu Performance Center on Sunday to see the St. Lawrence String Quartet perform works by Haydn, Beethoven, and Osvaldo Golijov. Here is an ensemble that doesn't need costumes or canned zaniness to **project an irresistible exuberance in performances, and to link that sense of joy with artistry of subtlety and finesse. If you are curious why so many young string players these days want to build careers in chamber music, these four players - in residence at Stanford University - make it abundantly clear.**

St. Lawrence violinists Scott St. John and Geoff Nuttall trade off on first violin and project completely different personal styles. St. John appears more buttoned-down onstage but is nonetheless a fluid, dynamic, and musically impeccable player. Nuttall, who wore his long hair drawn back with a headband on Sunday, exudes a devil-may-care vitality in his playing. From a technical perspective, he's also one of the most enjoyably unconventional quartet violinists you will meet, often giving the impression of devising his phrasings, fingerings, and bowings completely on the fly, like a virtuosic folk musician who's stumbled into a string quartet. Cellist Christopher Costanza anchors and drives the group from below, and the violist Lesley Robertson provides the kind of unflappable inner voice work that keeps a combustible brew from actually combusting.

What a pleasure to hear this foursome romp through Haydn's "Fifths" Quartet (Op. 76, No. 2) and then bring out such a multivalent blend of heroism and pathos in Beethoven's Quartet (Op. 59, No. 1). The real news on this program, however, was the first local airing of music from Golijov's "Kohelet," whose title is the Hebrew name of the book of Ecclesiastes, with its meditations on impermanence that were the prime inspiration for the new work.

It's hard to use the word premiere for Sunday's "Kohelet" performance since, speaking from the stage on Sunday, the composer described it as a work in progress, and Nuttall added that Golijov had been making changes to the score as recently as that very morning. (This piece was also swept into the unfortunate controversy surrounding the composer's orchestral work "Sidereus," after a Brazilian journalist reportedly heard in "Kohelet" a popular Brazilian melody that had not been attributed. Golijov told the Globe last month that he then changed the music because he had wanted the Brazilian melody to be transfigured and not easily recognizable.)

The version of the first movement aired on Sunday featured appealing high-flown violin lines lost in thought over a bumpy, stutter-stepping rhythmic groove. The darker second movement, full of tense tremolo figures that give way to sudden moments of repose, felt at times like an imagined meeting of Piazzolla and Janacek. Golijov called it music "still finding itself." One looks forward to hearing its final form.

The St. Lawrence offered the Menuetto from Haydn's Quartet (Op. 74, No. 1) as an encore to this meaty program. Sure, one heard the occasional rough edge on Sunday, but **who would prefer bland polish over this group's style of vital risk-taking?**

# theStrad

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**An authoritative account  
of John Adams's latest  
contribution to the  
quartet medium**



John Adams has made a number of excursions into the string quartet medium, but this 2008 work is the first to carry the name unadorned. It was written for the St Lawrence Quartet, which has played it over 50 times, giving this first recording an unmatched authority. Nor will another recording be needed: the performance of this half-hour work is astonishing from first to last.

The quartet is in two movements of which the first, substantially the longer, effectively includes a slow movement. Adams's familiar propulsive motor rhythms are here at the start, and fragments of melody emerge and swirl away from them; there are

sudden outbursts of pizzicato and sequences of emphatic repeated notes, before the pace slows and the music becomes introspective, with passages of unaccompanied recitative and complex, restless counterpoint. It is here that the players' mastery shows most,

in the plasticity of line and shifting emphases within the coruscating, subtle textures, and in the myriad points of perfectly caught detail. The second movement, rapid, constantly pressing forward as if in search of resolution, is performed with emotional

power and tremendous technical finesse. The other work here, Son of Chamber Symphony, is a high-spirited virtuoso delight, brilliantly played by the International Contemporary Ensemble. The recorded sound is superb.  
TIM HOMFRAY



# Los Angeles Times

April 22, 2013

## Review: St. Lawrence String Quartet conjures Golijovian magic

Who knows if composer Osvaldo Golijov is done tinkering with 'Qohelet,' but the piece as played by the quartet at the Barclay is remarkable.

By Mark Swed, Los Angeles Times Music Critic

Eleven minutes and 22 seconds of what was once expected to be a major half-hour string quartet is not, quite yet, a comeback. But a little more than 11 minutes of very good music by a wonderful composer, loved by audiences and performers alike and simply one of the great musical forces of our time, is a start. What's to be done about Osvaldo Golijov other than wait? Probably nothing.

His "Qohelet," which the St. Lawrence String Quartet played at Irvine Barclay Theatre on Sunday afternoon, had its first performance at Stanford University in 2011. The score was different then. This is a short piece with a long story. A decade ago the Argentine-born composer seemed to be the hottest thing in American music, with such works as "La Pasión según San Marcos" and his Lorca opera "Ainadamar." But he began to suffer writer's block after his 2004 song cycle, "Ayre." Since then he has mainly written smaller works (including a couple of gems) and not-memorable scores for little-seen Francis Ford Coppola films. He has missed important deadlines, including a Los Angeles Philharmonic commission for a violin concerto. The block has been exasperated by a supposed exposé of plagiarism for an orchestra score, "Sidereus," that is based on a melody written by a collaborator. The plagiarism charge surfaced again with the premiere of "Qohelet," which used a Brazilian song in its first movement.

These charges are not clear-cut. The sociable Golijov defies the normal model of a composer creating alone, locked away in a lonely room. He interacts with performers when he writes, often driving them crazy making last-minute changes and treating his scores as works in progress. Moreover, he gathers music from a great many sources and cultures. Sometimes he changes very little, sometimes a lot. But that dash of Golijovian magic, when he finds it, can make all the difference in bringing foreign or even dead music to life.

All of the above apply to the new quartet. The piece takes its inspiration from Ecclesiastes, which is Greek for the Hebrew Qohelet or Koheleth, meaning "gatherer." Meaning, of course, Golijov. So it is hardly surprising that Golijov has been messing with "Qohelet." Because of the plagiarism talk, he reworked the score for the New York premiere in February, removing the Brazilian song. But he didn't stop there. He reversed the order of the two movements, now beginning with a slow one and ending with a fast one and wrote a new transitional section connecting them.

St. Lawrence Quartet violinist Geoff Nuttall sounded slightly exasperated when he introduced "Qohelet" to the Barclay audience. Describing Golijov as a dear friend with whom he's worked for two decades, Nuttall also let it be known that he wasn't sure the inconclusive ending of the quartet as it now is, worked. "When you think it's not over," he said, "it might be over."

Then again, knowing Golijov, it might not be over. The St. Lawrence could find itself with a few more pages of music the night before the next performance.

Be that as it may, "Qohelet" as it exists at this moment is a lovely, searching piece. The first movement is a mournful song, almost like a prayer heard from far away. Nuttall's metaphor for the transition to the second movement was that of a motorcycle chugging away in the lower strings, while a solo violinist soared, the driver as a free spirit. Once he had said that, it became hard for a listener not to soar along.

Momentum builds from the point on, and by the end Golijov is practically reaching for the moon. But his new ending leaves the "Qohelet" suspended in mid-air like, the composer writes in his program note, Don Quixote's sword. I heard that ending as an intriguing, unanswered question.

The St. Lawrence is an avid quartet that has become more avid through its relationship with Golijov, and I suspect that relationship affected how the ensemble approached Haydn's Quartet in D, Opus 71, No. 2 at the beginning of the afternoon and how **the players irrepressibly tore into Beethoven's Quartet in E-Flat, Opus 127** at the end.

Nuttall is the quartet's most exaggerated member (the others are violinist Scott St. John, violist Lesley Robertson and cellist Christopher Costanza), but the St. Lawrence does seem to get increasingly dynamic with each passing year. **The fast movements in both Haydn and Beethoven began to approach jazz.**

The slow movements proved, on the other hand, **enthralingly inward-searching**. The quartet was once more polished. Now it digs for emotion at all costs.

Haydn and Beethoven may not need all the help they can get, but they got it here anyway, and that was gratifying. Golijov does, these days, need the support, and his getting it was even more gratifying.

# St. Paul Pioneer Press

October 16, 2011

## Review: Music in the Park opens on transcendent note with St. Lawrence String Quartet

By Rob Hubbard  
Special to the Pioneer Press

The members of the St. Lawrence String Quartet can sound supernaturally simpatico. Whatever they're performing, they sharpen their shared interpretations until they pierce through pretenses and academic arguments and sound like something direct from the composer's heart.

That was the feeling filling the sanctuary of St. Paul's St. Anthony Park United Church of Christ on Sunday afternoon when the group opened the Music in the Park Series season. The quartet tapped into three diffuse musical visions and made a passionate case for each. Be it the spirited playfulness of Joseph Haydn, the heart-melting romanticism of Antonin Dvorak or the heady modernism of Osvaldo Golijov, it's **a foursome that gets to the essence of the music.**

All three works presented caught the composers at their most advanced, displaying the mastery they'd achieved after decades at their craft. To call them "mature" works doesn't sound quite right, for Joseph Haydn had a schoolboy's taste for trickery that lasted throughout his life. That came through in the 57th of his 68 string quartets, which the St. Lawrence musicians often gave a puckish frivolity, its controlled hysteria coming through clearly on its furious fugues.

But the main attraction was something fresh from the pen of one of the world's hottest composers, Argentina's Osvaldo Golijov. He has many a major orchestra and opera company queuing up with commissions, but among those who have been his artists of choice for years now (along with St. Paul Chamber Orchestra artistic partner Dawn Upshaw) is the St. Lawrence String Quartet. They performed a new work by him called "Qoheleth," inspired by the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, and called it a "preview," so as not to steal the thunder of next week's official premiere in California.

The short piece sounded considerably more under the influence of Philip Glass and John Adams than much of Golijov's past work. Upon a foundation of repeated rhythms and rough-edged tones, first violinist Scott St. John soared skyward, as if achieving a transcendence of the earthy lines of the others.

But the most transporting performance came on Dvorak's 14th and final string quartet, which eloquently expressed the composer's mastery of melody and his rhythmic roots in Eastern European folk dance. Both muscular and lovely, the performance brought out all the bittersweet romance in Dvorak's farewell to the form.