# The Viano String Quartet

Wednesday, March 23, 2022 | Muttart Hall, Alberta College Campus MacEwan University

*Program notes by Morgan Luethe*

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**Jessie Montgomery** (b. 1981)
*Strum: Music for Strings* (2008, rev. 2012)

New York violinist and composer Jessie Montgomery interweaves classical influence with elements of vernacular music and improvisation to create works that inhabit an engaging and refreshingly modern sound world. *Strum*, writes Montgomery, salutes "American folk idioms and the spirit of dance and movement." The work's title refers to the guitar-like plucking of the stringed instruments – a pervasive textural feature of the piece that lends authenticity to its evocation of folk music and dance traditions of the United States. Pizzicato strumming underpins with attractive rhythmic punctuation as melodic ideas are interspersed and unwound over several minutes, culminating in a frenetic, celebratory exclamation.

**Sergei Prokofiev** (1891–1953)
String Quartet No. 2 in F Major, Op. 92, "on Karbadinian themes" (1941)

I. *Allegro sostenuto*

II. *Adagio*

III. *Allegro*

Provokfiev's turbulent second string quartet emerges out of a period of significant personal upheaval in the life of its composer. Following the 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union, Prokofiev evacuated to the Kabardinian town of Nalchik, near European Russia's border with Georgia. At the prompting of a local government official, Prokofiev undertook to write a quartet drawing on features of the traditional Kabardino-Balkar folk music of the region. Traditional dance rhythms, harmonies, and instrumental textures feature heavily throughout the work that expertly absorbs these influences into Prokofiev's unapologetically brusque and angular compositional style. Like the late piano sonatas and the ambitious opera *War and Peace*, the second string quartet is one of many works Prokofiev produced surrounded by the sustained chaos of the Second World War.

Conceived in three movements, the work opens with music characterized by a powerful rhythmic drive and full-bodied blend of quartet instruments. Vigorous and refreshing to reflect the rural setting that inspired it, the quartet's *Allegro sostenuto* movement indulges in dance-like melodies that are easy to latch on to. The following *Adagio* movement centres around a plaintive, folklike passage that rests a simple melody atop pizzicato accompaniment in delicate contrast to the tenser outer sections. The fresh air of the countryside returns in the energetic finale. Drawing inspiration from the lively mountain dances of the area, the closing *Allegro* is a fiery and skilled exploration of the ethnic themes upon which the work is built.

**Alberto Ginastera** (1916–1983)
String Quartet No. 1, Op. 20 (1948)

*I.* *Allegro violento ed agitato*

*II.* *Vivacissimo*

Alberto Ginastera was catapulted to prominence as the foremost composer of distinctively nationalistic music that evokes the landscape and culture of his native Argentina. The terse Opus 20 string quartet is assigned to the stage in the composer's musical development which he referred to as *subjective nationalism*, characterized by works that incorporate rhythmic and thematic aspects of Argentinian folk-music while advancing toward a rigorous, dissonant, and varied musical vocabulary. The violent first movement sketches images related to the "gaucho" tradition of the pampas lowlands, while the propulsive *Vivacissimo* second movement features technically intricate string effects and textures that suggest broader cosmopolitan musical influences are also present.

**Alexander Borodin** (1833–1887)
String Quartet No. 2 in D Major (1881)

I. *Allegro moderato*

II. *Scherzo*

III. *Notturno*

IV. *Finale*

Dedicated to his wife, possibly as an anniversary gift, Borodin's second string quartet owes its endurance outside of Russia to the fame of its *Notturno* slow movement. While undeniably the most memorable moment of the entire quartet, the popularity of the *Notturno* tends to overshadow the movements that surround it, to the extent that it's most often recorded as a stand-alone piece. However, full performances of the work reveal that, if it is not an undisputed masterpiece, Borodin's unique melodic gift and facility for counterpoint make it an enjoyable, solidly-built contribution to the string quartet genre.

The sustained warmth of the first movement is established immediately by a genial, somewhat dreamy melody in the cello's upper register. Rather than pursuing dramatic tension through an opposition of contrasting themes, Borodin seeks development through contrapuntal subtlety and lyricism. After a short Mendelssohnian *Scherzo* characterized by sprightly agility and a witty interplay of themes, the beloved night music of the *Notturno* unfurls with a sentimental glow reminiscent of the quartet's opening movement. Closing with a restatement of its aching main theme in canon, the slow movement makes way for a return of Borodin's penchant for contrapuntal dialogue between the instruments. Drawing its movement from the skillful development of related "question-answer" motifs, the *Finale* hurls forward to a poised conclusion in the home key.