

## PROGRAM INFORMATION

Sponsor: **Edmonton Chamber Music Society**

Concert Date: **April 20, 2024**

Artist: **Isidore String Quartet**

**Phoenix Avalon**, violin (*first on Bach and Wijeratne*)

**Devin Moore**, viola

**Adrian Steele**, violin (*first on Shirazi and Beethoven*)

**Joshua McClendon**, cello

Program credits: The Isidore String Quartet appears by arrangement with David Rowe Artists  
[www.davidroweartists.com](http://www.davidroweartists.com)

Selections from "The Art of Fugue"  
*Contrapuncti 1-4*

Johann Sebastian Bach  
1685-1750

"umbra" (2017)

Aida Shirazi  
b.1987

"The Disappearance of Lisa Gherardini" (2022)

Dinuk Wijeratne  
b. 1978

-intermission-

String Quartet No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132 (1825)

Ludwig van Beethoven  
1770-1827

Assai sostenuto - Allegro  
Allegro ma non tanto  
Molto adagio - Andante ("Heiliger Dankgesang...")  
Alla marcia, assai vivace  
Allegro appassionato

## Isidore String Quartet

**Adrian Steele** and **Phoenix Avalon**, violins

**Devin Moore**, viola

**Joshua McClendon**, cello

Winners of a 2023 Avery Fisher Career Grant, and the 14th Banff International String Quartet Competition in 2022, the New York City-based Isidore String Quartet was formed in 2019 with a vision to revisit, rediscover, and reinvigorate the repertoire. The quartet is heavily influenced by the Juilliard String Quartet and the idea of 'approaching the established as if it were brand new, and the new as if it were firmly established.'

The members of the quartet are violinists Adrian Steele and Phoenix Avalon, violist Devin Moore, and cellist Joshua McClendon. The four began as an ensemble at the Juilliard School, and following a break during the global pandemic reconvened at the Kneisel Hall Chamber Music Festival in the summer of 2021 under the tutelage of Joel Krosnick. In addition to Mr. Krosnick, the ISQ has coached with Joseph Lin, Astrid Schween, Laurie Smukler, Joseph Kalichstein, Roger Tapping, Misha Amory, Timothy Eddy, Donald Weilerstein, Atar Arad, Robert McDonald, Christoph Richter, Miriam Fried, and Paul Biss.

Their Banff triumph brings extensive tours of North America and Europe, a two-year appointment as the Peak Fellowship Ensemble-in-Residence at Southern Methodist University in Dallas beginning in 2023-24, plus a two-week residency at Banff Centre including a professionally produced recording, along with extensive ongoing coaching, career guidance, and mentorship.

The Isidore Quartet has appeared on major series in Chicago, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Durham, Washington (JFK Center), San Antonio, Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa, and has collaborated with a number of eminent performers including James Ehnes, Jeremy Denk, Shai Wosner, and Jon Nakamatsu. Their 23/24 season will feature appearances in Berkeley (Cal Performances), Boston (Celebrity Series), Washington DC (Phillips Collection), New York (92<sup>nd</sup> St. Y), Chicago, Baltimore, Ann Arbor, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, Tucson, Phoenix, Santa Fe, La Jolla, Aspen, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, and at Dartmouth College, and Spivey Hall in Georgia, among many others. European highlights include Edinburgh, Lucerne, Brussels, Amsterdam, Hanover, Frankfurt, and Hamburg's ElbPhilharmonie.

Outside the concert hall the quartet has worked with *PROJECT: MUSIC HEALS US* providing encouragement, education, and healing to marginalized communities - including elderly, disabled, rehabilitating incarcerated and homeless populations - who otherwise have limited access to high-quality live music performance. They have also been resident ensemble for the Contemporary Alexander School/Alexander Alliance International. In conjunction with those well-versed in the world of Alexander Technique, as well as other performers, the ISQ explores the vast landscape of body awareness, mental preparation, and performance practice.

The name *Isidore* recognizes the ensemble's musical connection to the Juilliard Quartet: one of that group's early members was legendary violinist Isidore Cohen. Additionally, it acknowledges a shared affection for a certain libation - legend has it a Greek monk named Isidore concocted the first genuine vodka recipe for the Grand Duchy of Moscow!

September, 2023. *Please discard any previously or undated versions.*

## Program Notes

### **JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH**

Born in Eisenach, Germany, March 31, 1685; died in Leipzig, July 28, 1750

*The Art of the Fugue, Contrapunctus I-IV (1745-50)*

Johann Sebastian Bach is an essential figure to the past, present, and future of the Isidore String Quartet. Every rehearsal or soundcheck begins with a substantial amount of his chorales, both for technical and musical implications. Not only are we able to isolate various “quartet techniques” that deserve constant revitalization - balance, timbre, bow control, intonation - we can work towards a uniquely irreplicable sense of oneness that his music encourages, and even fosters. Bach, for the ISQ, is the ground on which we explore endless possibilities, challenge worldly perceptions, and flourish as one instrument, one voice, one being.

Left unfinished at the composer’s death, Bach’s *Die Kunst der Fuge* (“*The Art of the Fugue*”) BWV 1080 remains one of the most prolific works in classical music. Bach delved into this project around 1745 and would nearly complete the 14 fugues and 4 canons in D minor before his eventual death on July 28, 1750.

A possible premonition of his fate, the composer’s musical signature -B-A-C-H- is located at the end of the almost completed final fugue, insinuating an intended fulfillment of the work at Fugue 14, his numerical equivalent (B-A-C-H; 2+1+3+8=14). Though originally composed in open score, this collection is inferred to have been intended for keyboard instrument (harpsichord, piano, etc.). However, the nature of the work and the pervading universality of Bach’s compositional manifestations provide a basis for transcription for various ensembles - in this case, the string quartet. Due to the restrictions in tessitura of the inner voices of the quartet in particular, few minor alterations are made in Werner Icking’s edition to accommodate those boundaries while preserving the majority of the original composition.

The first four fugues in the work —*Contrapunctus I-IV*— find each of the four voices introducing the 12-note principal subject (*III* and *IV* in inversion). Though referred to as the *simple fugues*, *Contrapunctus I-IV* not only establish a foundational framework for the inevitable complexity of the remaining fugues, but also provide the opportunity to exhibit a multitude of characters, musical concepts, and soundworlds. The juxtaposition of the inherently somber, almost melancholic first statement of the viola in *Contrapunctus III* and the determined, swift nature of the first violin entrance with *Contrapunctus IV*, despite being composed of the same subject material, illuminates the endless possibilities at the disposal of the artist that chooses to embark on the timeless journey of *The Art of Fugue*.

— *Note by Devin Moore*

### **AIDA SHIRAZI (b. 1987)**

*“Umbra” (2017)*

"umbra is a process, in which musical events unfold glacially. It is an introvert that reveals and expresses itself with reservedness. In umbra, simple harmonies and melodic lines intensify as a result of rhythmic conflicts between the parts, microtonal fluctuations, and constant changes of the bow position along the strings of each instrument. Writing this piece, I sought to create a shadow-like quality; a sonic umbra. The work emerges from a dark and quiet state and after several dynamic and textural swells and contractions fades into the void."

—*Note by Aida Shirazi*

## **DINUK WIJERATNE (b. 1978)**

*The Disappearance of Lisa Gherardini (2022)*

*This work was commissioned by Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in part with funds from Dr. Gail Andrew and R.S. Williams & Sons for the 2022 Banff International String Quartet Competition.*

This virtuoso musical escapade for string quartet is inspired by the audacious, real-life theft of Leonardo a Vinci's Mona Lisa from the Louvre Museum in 1911.

The most famous painting in the world began its life very unassumingly. In 1503, it was created by Leonardo for the Florentine silk merchant Francesco del Giocondo, who commissioned the portrait of his wife, Lisa Gherardini. The occasion marked the birth of their second son – especially significant given the tragically high levels of maternal and infant mortality in those days.

The extraordinary true story of the theft of the Mona Lisa reads like the plot of some sensational Hollywood movie. An inconspicuous Italian handyman named Vincenzo Peruggia hid overnight in one of the Louvre closets and chose exactly the right moment to emerge and lift the painting off the wall. As a former museum employee, he was familiar with the rhythm of the guards. The whole thing was, as they say, an inside job.

The music of this piece is fueled by the knowledge that it was, in fact, a high profile theft (and a subsequent two-year disappearance) that skyrocketed the Mona Lisa from relatively unknown artwork into legend.

Unfolding in three sections, the piece is built upon two main themes representing 'Lisa' and 'the heist,' respectively. In the first section, as we imagine a young lady with an enigmatic smile posing for her portrait, Lisa's theme is introduced on the cello as the violins evoke gentle brushstrokes. The second section is announced by a restless and slightly 'wonky' cello pizzicato groove – the heist is underway. As the perpetrators reach their mark, Lisa's theme makes a rushed and unsettled reappearance as her portrait is whisked away. The music reaches a chaotic climax immediately after the violins imitate police sirens, and then collapses. The third section jump-cuts to present-day Paris. Lisa is back at her rightful place at the museum, elevated in stature, status, and celebrity.

We tend to forget that Lisa was a real person. As I worked on this music, I thought less about the masterly technique and artistry of the portrait than I did about Lisa herself. I imagined her as a character who moved through time – from humble obscurity, through a sudden and mysterious disappearance, to the kind of over-hyped fame that attracts 30,000 visitors daily. I can't help but wonder whether Lisa would have wanted all this attention, not to mention from all the selfie-takers.

In the last few seconds of the piece, the heist theme makes a brief appearance. Could Lisa be taken from us again? And might she actually prefer to disappear altogether?

*-Note by Dinuk Wijeratne*

## **LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN**

Born in Bonn, Germany, baptized December 17, 1770; died in Vienna, Austria, March 26, 1827

*String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132 (1824-5)*

The five string quartets and *Grosse Fuge* that Beethoven composed during the last five years of his life mark the pinnacle of his chamber music. Ideas from one spill over to the next. The A minor quartet was the second of the sequence to be completed and was originally laid out in four movements. Then, in the spring of 1825,

Beethoven fell seriously ill, with a variety of debilitating diseases. Towards the end of May, he began to recover and the change in his physical well-being had a profound impact on the quartet.

A central slow movement was the immediate result. Beethoven marked it 'Sacred Song of Thanksgiving to the Deity from a Convalescent, in the Lydian Mode' (*Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart*). It is one of the most sublime pieces of music ever written – and one of the longest quartet movements at almost half the length of the quartet itself. Its contemplative stillness is enhanced by the conscious use of an old church mode known as the Lydian mode. Beethoven mentions it in the score, as if to remind us that the old church modes, with their spiritual, often mystical and tonally ambiguous connotations, were a deep source of inspiration in his late works. The slow movement's successive alternations of *Adagio* and *Andante* bring new expressions of relief from the composer. These are noted in the margin of his score as 'Feeling new strength' and 'You returned my strength to find me in the evening' and, in the final section, 'With the most intimate feeling.' Because of the generally dark character of much of the quartet, this transcendental slow movement seems to radiate inner release from outward suffering.

Beethoven made this slow movement the centerpiece of a vast, arch-like structure. The quartet opens with an *Allegro*, built around two contrasting themes, and presenting a thread of unresolved contradictions. The movement departs from conventional form as does the substantial scherzo, which follows. Its central pastoral episode, nominally a trio section, begins with a musette-like theme high on the first violin. It continues with a *ländler* theme which Beethoven wrote down in his sketchbook when he first went to Vienna many years earlier. After the sublime, heavenly slow movement, the mood is abruptly broken by a march – which brings us back to earth with a bump. As in the Ninth Symphony, an instrumental recitative leads to the finale. Its impassioned, waltz-like theme, which gives way to an unequivocal feeling of joy, was, in fact, originally designed to be the finale of the Ninth before Beethoven decided on a choral ending for this work. Both works end with a feeling of transcendence and triumph.

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