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Shanghai Quartet: "Love and Fireworks"

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The Modlin Center for the Arts presents

Shanghai Quartet

Weigang Li, violin
Yi-Wen Jiang, violin
Honggang Li, viola
Nicholas Tzavaras, cello

“Love and Fireworks”

Exclusive Management:
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The Shanghai Quartet proudly endorses Thomastik-Infeld Strings.
Tonight's Program

String Quartet in G minor, Op. 27 .................................................... Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)
I.  *Un Poco Andante–Allegro Molto ed Agitato*
II.  *Romanze–Andantino*
III.  *Intermezzo–Allegro Molto*
IV.  *Finale–Lento–Presto al Saltarello*

—Intermission—

"Shepherd Song" from *Chinasong* .................................................... Yi-Wen Jiang, arr.

*La oración del torero* ("The Bullfighter's Prayer"), Op. 34 ............. Joaquín Turina (1882-1949)

*Crisantemi* ............................................................................. Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)

Two Waltzes for Strings, B. 105, Op. 54, Nos. 1 and 4............ Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)
No. 1: *Moderato in A major*
No. 4: *Allegro vivace in D flat major*

*Romanze* from Quartet in C minor, Op. 51, No. 1..................... Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

*Italian Serenade* ....................................................................... Hugo Wolf (1860-1903)

*Cavatina* from String Quartet No. 13 in B-flat, Op. 130 ....Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

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Shanghai Quartet

"The whole performance was superb," says The New York Times. Originally formed in Shanghai more than 20 years ago, this versatile ensemble is known for their passionate musicality, impressive technique, and multicultural innovations. The Quartet's elegant style of melding the delicacy of Eastern music with Western repertoire allows them to travel the genres, from traditional Chinese folk music to Brahms, Shubert, and new commissions by Lowell Lieberman and Bright Sheng, among others.

The Shanghai Quartet has performed on the world's most prominent concert stages, and regularly tours the great music centers of Europe, North and South America, and Asia. Recent seasons have included tours of Japan, China, Australia, New Zealand and Europe. As part of their 20th Anniversary tour, the Quartet performed the "Beethoven Project: East Meets West;" the complete Beethoven string quartets in six concerts around the world. This tour included the first performance ever in China of the complete Beethoven quartet cycle.

The Shanghai Quartet has a long history of championing new music. Projects include a commission with Chamber Music America, and a premiere of Lowell Lieberman's Quartet in honor of the National Federation of Music Clubs' 100th Anniversary. Among others, they commissioned a new work from Bright Sheng for the University of Richmond and the Freer Gallery to celebrate their 10th Anniversary.

This season the Quartet will appear at Carnegie Hall, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, among many other prestigious engagements on
three continents. The Quartet’s repertoire will span Eastern and Western sounds, and will range from contemporary works by Ligeti, Bright Sheng, and Zhou Long (“Poems from Tang”) to traditional works by Schubert, Brahms and Mozart. They will perform the complete Beethoven cycle at the new Kassar Theater at Montclair State University in New Jersey, and premiere a commission by the young American Composer, Takuma Itoh, with the New York Youth Symphony at Carnegie Hall.

Recording for several labels, the Quartet has built an extensive discography that now totals 20 recordings. Recently, the Quartet released two discs: Mendelssohn Octet (Camerata), and Zhou Long’s “Poems from Tang” Quartet and Orchestra (BIS). In 2003, The Quartet released its most popular disc to date: A 24-track collection of Chinese folk songs, titled ChinaSong, featuring music arranged by Yi-Wen Jiang reflecting childhood memories of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Their current project includes the recording of the complete Beethoven string quartets to be released during their 25th Anniversary season. The Shanghai Quartet performed the Bartok Quartet No. 4 on screen and for the soundtrack recording in the Woody Allen film, Melinda and Melinda, which was released in the spring of 2005.

The Quartet has a distinguished teaching record. They serve as the Quartet-in-Residence at Montclair State University in New Jersey. They also serve as visiting professors at the Shanghai Conservatory and the Central Conservatory in China. The Quartet has made regular appearances at Carnegie Hall, and also served as ensemble-in-residence at the Tanglewood and Ravinia Festivals. They have made appearances at Lincoln Center’s Mostly Mozart Festival and on PBS’s Great Performers television series. The Quartet also appears regularly on National Public Radio.

A native of Shanghai, Weigang Li has been a featured soloist with the Asian Youth Orchestra, the Shanghai Symphony, the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the BBC Scottish Symphony. Mr. Li began studying the violin with his parents at the age of five and went on to attend the Shanghai Conservatory at age 14. He then came to the United States in 1981 to study at the San Francisco Conservatory through an exchange program between the sister cities of San Francisco and Shanghai. Upon graduating from the Shanghai Conservatory in 1985, Mr. Li was appointed assistant professor of violin at the school. Shortly thereafter he left China to continue his education at the Northern Illinois University. From 1987-1989, Mr. Li studied and taught at the Juilliard School as teaching assistant to the Juilliard Quartet. His other teachers have included Shmuel Ashkenasi, Pierre Menard, Shu-Chen Tan, and Isadore Tinkleman. Mr. Li was featured in the film From Mao to Mozart: Isaac Stern in China.

Born in Beijing, Yi-Wen Jiang (violin) has appeared as a soloist with the Victoria Symphony and the Montreal Symphony. He has also performed for NBC and PBS television specials, National Public Radio, CPB in Beijing, WQXR in New York and KFuo in St. Louis. Beginning his violin studies with
his father at age six, he made his concerto debut with the Central Opera House Orchestra in Beijing when he was 17. In 1981, after winning a top prize at the First China Youth Violin Competition, Mr. Jiang was accepted into the class of professor Han Li at the Central Conservatory of Music. In 1985 he came to the United States on a full scholarship to the St. Louis Conservatory, where his teachers included Taras Gabora, Jaime Laredo and Michael Tree. He also spent two summers in Dallas, participating in master classes with Pinchas Zukerman. In 1990, with the support of the Ken Boxley Foundation, he went to Rutgers University to work with Arnold Steinhardt of the Guarneri Quartet.

A prizewinner at the Mae M. Whitaker and Montreal competitions, Mr. Jiang has appeared at many international music festivals, collaborating with such prominent artists as Alexander Schneider, Michael Tree, Jaime Laredo and Lynn Harrell. He has recorded for the Record Corporation of China.

Honggang Li (viola) began his musical training studying the violin with his parents at the same time as his brother, Weigang. When the Beijing Conservatory reopened in 1977 after the Cultural Revolution, Mr. Li was selected to attend from a group of over 500 applicants. He continued his training at the Shanghai Conservatory and was appointed a faculty member there in 1984. Mr. Li has also served as a teaching assistant at the Juilliard School and has appeared as soloist with the Shanghai Philharmonic and the Shanghai Conservatory Orchestra. In 1987 he won a violin as a special prize given by Elisa Pegreffi of Quartetto Italiano at the Paolo Borciani competition in Italy.

Nicholas Tzavaras (cello) has been an active soloist and chamber musician throughout the United States. He has made solo appearances with the Tanglewood Festival Orchestra, the National Repertory Orchestra, the SUNY Stonybrook Symphony and the East Iowa Symphony, as well as at Fiddelfest at Carnegie Hall and at the Tonhalle in Zurich. Mr. Tzavaras has previously appeared at the Isaac Stern International Chamber Music Encounters in Jerusalem, and also at the Marlboro, Tanglewood, Taos, Sarasota and Musicorda music festivals. Mr. Tzavaras holds a Bachelor of Music degree from the New England Conservatory, and a Master of Music degree from the State University of New York at Stony Brook and has studied with Laurence Lesser and Timothy Eddy. In addition to his performing schedule, he is active in music outreach and education. Mr. Tzavaras has taught at many different music schools including the Opus 118 Music Center in East Harlem, where his mother, Roberta Guaspari, is the artistic director. Mr. Tzavaras' family was portrayed in the movie Music of the Heart, which starred Meryl Streep.
String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 27 ................................................... Edvard Grieg  
(Born June 15, 1843, in Bergen, Norway; died there September 4, 1907)

Edvard Grieg, Norway's most renowned composer, began his piano study with his mother and started composing when he was only nine years old. At the age of fifteen, he was sent off to the Leipzig Conservatory where he found the curriculum unsatisfactory because it looked backward to the principles of Mendelssohn, who had founded the school in the year of Grieg's birth. Rather than learning traditional composition techniques, Grieg had interest in the progressive idea of writing a new kind of music that would not only be Scandinavian but specifically Norwegian in character. A few other artists shared his nationalist ambitions, but the prosperous Scandinavian middle-class, like its American counterpart at the time, insisted that Germany was the only source of music of any value. Eventually Grieg succeeded in establishing a new style that had both personal and national characteristics, and as he matured, he broadened it in a way that made him an internationally popular figure.

The mature Grieg rarely felt tempted to compose chamber music in the classical forms. When he began to write this string quartet in 1877, it probably functioned as a welcome relief from his work on his famous composition based on national themes, the incidental music to Henrik Ibsen's play, Peer Gynt. Grieg finished that assignment in 1876, assessing it to have been much more trouble than it was worth. Nevertheless, sometime in the course of the year, he also set six Ibsen poems to music as short and simple songs, Op. 25. The first of them, The Minstrel, a ballad of disappointment in love, must have had some special significance for the composer, as he seems to have been obsessed by it when he turned to the composition of this quartet.

Grieg was, of course, more than a gifted melodist, but the extended development of musical ideas did not come easily to him, and he began the quartet with great seriousness of purpose, striving, he said, "to soar and to sound," and to avoid any trace of triviality. The result, a powerfully dramatic composition, is not just a suite of four lyrical pieces, but an intense work bound tightly together by the recurring statement and intense exploitation of the first melodic phrase from The Minstrel.

Transformed from the song's quiet major-key opening, the motive from The Minstrel begins the quartet with a powerful, minor-key declaration, Un poco andante, and in the main section of the movement, Allegro molto ed agitato, becomes its second subject. The second movement sounds almost like a song itself, a Romance, Andantino, with a stormy central section, Allegro agitato, in which The Minstrel again appears. The third movement, a brief Intermezzo, Allegro molto marcato, at first is syncopated but waltz-like, and in its central section it picks up the rhythm of a halling, a Norwegian folk dance in duple meter. The finale starts Lento but soon switches to a leaping Presto al saltarello that brings the quartet to a brilliant G-major close.
“Shepherd’s Song” from Chinasong ................................. Yi-Wen Jiang, arr.

Some years ago I developed the idea of arranging a few sets of Chinese folk songs along with popular music by various Chinese composers. I grew up with many of these pieces, and played some as solo works for violin and piano during the difficult days of the Cultural Revolution.

These works are short and diverse, some based upon traditional folk songs, and others composed recently. Although their musical style is not structured or sophisticated, the pieces seem to be accessible and enjoyable for a general audience. The themes speak to the individual listener because they are expressive, direct and easily absorbed and understood. I asked myself, “Why not arrange them for string quartet, which is the form I love the most? That way I can play beautiful Chinese music again and also bring it to a wider audience with my group, the Shanghai Quartet.”

I sifted through many songs and began arranging them for string quartet or small ensemble. Some of the folk songs are usually performed by a singer, violin, or piano; or by Chinese traditional instruments such as the pipa, erhu or uona (a double-reed wind instrument, almost like an oboe), and Bamboo flute. But, I didn’t want simply to imitate traditional Chinese instruments when we play those pieces. I tried to make the harmony and the structure closer to traditional western styles. The idea is that Chinese music can be played on western instruments and thus can be enjoyed internationally.

“Shepherd’s Song” is a popular folk song stemming from the Chinese autonomous region of Inner Mongolia. It was often played on a traditional two-stringed Mongolian instrument called a “Horse-Head Qin,” because there is a hand carved horse’s head on the top of the Qin instead of a scroll. There are several versions of this piece, including one by the famous Chinese composer Han-Kun Sha, who arranged “Shepherd’s Song” for violin solo with piano accompaniment. As the shepherd puts his cattle out to graze, the surroundings inspire him to express his love of nature and his feelings of nostalgia for his homeland. He sings, “White clouds are floating in the blue sky. Under the clouds there is a flock of snow white sheep.” The lyrical melody brims with deep emotion. The free rhythm and Dvorakian harmony in the lower strings’ arpeggio figures create a quiet, misty atmosphere, suggesting patches of soft clouds floating over meadows. The music reaches a passionate climax before subsiding again into an atmosphere of tranquility and peace. We in the Shanghai Quartet were very honored that Mr. Han-Kun Sha was in the audience for our performance of this piece in Shanghai in November 2001. He was deeply moved and happy to hear his piece in a brand new form.

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La oración del torero ("The Bullfighter’s Prayer"), Op. 34...........Joaquín Turina
(Born December 9, 1882, Seville; died January 14, 1949, in Madrid)

Joaquín Turina flavored his compositions with the folk music of his native region of Spain, Andalusia. He first studied piano and composition in Seville, then enrolled in the Madrid Conservatory, and from 1905 to 1914, he lived in Paris, where he studied with the composer Vincent d’Indy and Moszkowski, the latter a friend of Debussy and Ravel. Turina was a fine pianist and conductor, an important educator and a serious critic.

Turina, along with fellow countrymen Isaac Albéniz, Enrique Granados, and Manuel de Falla, aimed to create a Spanish national school of composition, and although each composed music replete with features of traditional Spanish music, each also maintained his own distinct style. Turina, of the four of them, was most attracted to conventional European forms and combined them with nationalistic Spanish elements in his music.

One of Turina’s most popular compositions, La oración del torero joins Spanish and European styles in a short, delicate and sensitive tone poem. In it, he alternates sections of lively accompaniments with sections of introspection. Impressionistic techniques motivate the harmonies Turina uses.

In 1925, Turina originally set this composition for a quartet of lutes. In 1926, he published this string quartet version, which he then later expanded into a version for string orchestra. The winsome music of this brief work, imbued with a lush Andalusian atmosphere, eloquently expresses the sequence of emotions in the bullfighter’s heart and mind as he awaits the beginning of a match. It is marked by contrasts of both mood and color. After its quiet beginning, it progresses to shifting moods of impulsive mood and character, and then an expansive melody emerges that dominates the work.

Crisantemi.................................................................Giacomo Puccini
(Born December 22, 1858 in Lucca; died November 29, 1924 in Brussels)

One does not usually associate the name of Puccini with chamber music, yet the famed opera composer did write a few works for string quartet. The elegiac work Crisantemi and the three Minuets that follow it are early Puccini, the only chamber music he ever wrote.

The very moving and melancholy Crisantemi was published in March 1890. According to a letter Puccini wrote to his brother, Michele, on February 6, 1890, it was composed in one night and dedicated to the memory of Prince Amadeo di Savoia, Duca d’Aosta and King of Spain, who died in mid-January of that year. It was first performed by the Campanari Quartet at the Milan Conservatory and in Brescia, and was well received on both those occasions, yet Puccini seems to have abandoned the string quartet after these early works. Nevertheless, he was able to return to this music in a different form: some of the most poignant moments in Acts III and IV of Manon are based on themes from Crisantemi.
Crisantemi (The Chrysanthemums) actually does retain the contours of a serious operatic interlude while it also doubles as a successful string quartet. Throughout its one continuous movement, it is rhapsodic in structure.

Two Waltzes for Strings, B. 105, Op. 54, Nos. 1 and 4 ................. Antonín Dvořák
(Born September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves; died May 1, 1904, in Prague)

In January 1880, Dvořák completed a set of eight waltzes for piano, and shortly afterward he arranged two of them, Nos. 1 and 4, for string quartet. At the same time, he added an optional double bass part so that the waltzes could be played by a quintet or by string orchestra. They are simple and charming little pieces; No. 1 is written in A and No. 4 in D. Although the piano version of the waltzes appeared in print soon after its completion, the string arrangement remained unpublished until 1911.

Romanza from Quartet in C minor, Op. 51, No. 1 ..................Johannes Brahms
(Born May 7, 1883, in Hamburg; died April 3, 1897, in Vienna)

Brahms’s views about the importance of the string quartet as the ultimate expression of the composer’s craft may help to account for why he may have written twenty or more quartets over two decades before he allowed his first two quartets to be published. The long delay had two causes. One was the burden Brahms felt in following Beethoven. The other was that Brahms needed a way to deal with the complex polyphony that was an inherent part of his musical thought, so that his work could make the impression he wanted with only four instruments. The larger grouping of the sextet in the 1860’s had given him a satisfactory medium, but he had trouble with a quintet. Finally, in the 1870’s he felt, at last, that he knew what to do with four players; his Quartets, Op. 51 are works in which fullness of expression is not diminished by economy of means.

Brahms completed his Op. 51 quartets in 1873 during his vacation in the countryside not far from Munich. Musician friends came from the city to visit, and they played the two quartets, the Haydn Variations and several songs. When the summer was over, Brahms delivered the music to his publisher, and in September, Clara Schumann, his musical confidante and trusted friend, wrote him, “I am delighted that you are getting such a good fee for your quartets. Now be careful how you invest your money. It is better to have a low interest rate and safety [of capital].” The Hellmesberger Quartet gave the first public performance of this quartet in Vienna on December 11, 1873.

Perhaps Brahms’s greatest accomplishment is evident in this tightly organized work; it is his development of a technique by which a complete composition can be generated from a single motive or group of motives. In this quartet and the other of the same opus, Brahms gives a clear and persuasive example of how he makes this idea work for him. The motives of the first movement pervade the whole quartet, and the close tonal relationships and integrated key structure of the four movements add to the coherence of the whole.

The Quartet in C minor has a somber but passionate feel. Brahms may have derived from one of his earlier discarded works the Allegro first movement.
theme in which a bold arpeggio over a throbbing accompaniment sets the heroic
tone. He refers to this opening theme in the *Romanza (Romance)*, the quartet's
second movement, where he transforms it into the principal subject of a calm
*Poco adagio*, a simple sounding three-part song of great beauty in the key of
A-flat. The character of this movement belies its complex and highly organized
structure.

**Italian Serenade** ................................................................. Hugo Wolf
(Born March 13, 1860, in Windischgraz; died February 22, 1903, in Vienna)

Posterity rightly treasures Hugo Wolf as a great master of German song, for
he composed around 300 Lieder in which music and poetry are more intimately
joined than they had been in the work of any composer since Schubert. Wolf
adored Wagner, detested Brahms, and was a close friend of his Conservatory
classmate, Mahler. Among his works are an opera, some other music for the the­
ater, a few choral compositions and a handful of instrumental pieces, of which
this quartet is the finest.

Wolf worked briefly as a conductor but found the labor uncongenial. For
a few years he was an influential and strongly partisan critic, but he consumed
himself with composition in a concentrated effort that produced, in a short time,
settings of 50 Goethe poems and 53 by Mörike. In 1897, in one of his spasmodic
outbursts of emotional energy, which until then had resulted in a fury of musi­
cal creation, he broke down completely and entered a mental hospital. Except
during a brief remission in his condition in 1898, he remained hospitalized for
the rest of his life.

In three days of May 1887, Wolf composed the work now known as his *Ital­
ian Serenade* for string quartet—a brilliant, sparkling movement that is really a
fragment of a larger composition that was never completed, an extended, devel­
oped instrumental work that refused to take shape as spontaneously as a song.
He worked on it over a period of years and even re-scored it in 1892 for small
orchestra with a prominent part for solo viola, but he could never get very far on
the two movements he wanted to add. Both the original quartet version and the
arrangement, edited by the composer Max Reger, were published posthumously
in 1903.

The *Serenade* is a supple, episodic, intricately written work, and it is very
demanding to play. It is an elegant evocation of guitars and of sad and glad songs
and stories that finally fade away into softness. The music is distantly related
to that of one of his song settings of a Joseph Eichendorff poem. Eichendorff
also wrote a short work of fiction in which an Italian serenade is an important
element of the plot. Wolf had originally intended to use this composition as the
first movement of an orchestral suite, but fragments of two other movements
were all he completed.
Cavatina from Quartet No. 13, in B-Flat, Op. 130———Ludwig van Beethoven
(Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn; died March 26, 1827, in Vienna)

Beethoven wrote the Quartet Op. 130 in 1825 and 1826 as the third in a group of three quartets (Opp. 127, 132 and 130) dedicated to his faithful supporter, Prince Nikolaus Galitzin, who had organized the first performance of the Missa Solemnis, Op. 123, in St. Petersburg a year earlier. Since then, Galitzin’s fortunes had begun to fail, and he paid for only one of the quartets. The interesting correspondence between Beethoven and Galitzin during this period tells us a great deal about their relationship. It was no ordinary thing in those days for a mighty Russian prince, even one on the decline, to address a commoner as this one did when he wrote to “Dear and Respected Monsieur van Beethoven.”

The Cavatina from this quartet, Adagio molto espressivo, is one of the most moving slow movements in the quartet literature. The title, Cavatina, refers to a kind of slow, expressive, operatic aria, and here the first violin is the soloist throughout, while the other instruments have an unobtrusive accompaniment to the solo line. Beethoven once said, referring perhaps to the middle section, which he described as beklemmt (“anguished” or “oppressed”), “My own music has never before made such an impression on me. Just thinking about it brings tears to my eyes.” Renowned Beethoven scholar Barry Cooper commented, “The melody, though seemingly simple, was so skilfully created and thoroughly sketched that it is actually highly original and almost entirely unpredictable, with subtle irregularities of phrase structure that neatly contrast with the rigidity of the preceding dance rhythms. Its broad, carefully arched lines seem filled with intense longing...”.

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