Jasper Arts Center
January 17, 2026 at 7:30 PM

JASPER ARTS | JASPER ARTS CENTER

Jason Neukom, violin **Andrew Giordano, violin**
Gabe Bolkosky, viola **Ryan Ash, cello**

Performance Program

"The Art of Fugue" — Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 - 1750)
Select Contrapuncti

String Quartet No. 3 “Mishima” — Philip Glass (b. 1937)
1957-Award Montage
November 25-Ichigaya
1934-Grandmother and Kimitake
1962-Body Building
Blood Oath
Mishima/Closing

String Quartet in G minor, Opus 10 — Claude Debussy (1862 - 1918)
Animé et très décide
Assez vif et bien rythmé
Andantino, doucement expressif
Très modéré

— Intermission —

String Quartet No. 9 in C major, Opus 59
"Razumovsky," No. 3 (1806)
Introduzione. Andante con moto - Allegro vivace
Andante con moto quasi allegretto
Menuetto grazioso
Allegro molto — Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 - 1827)

The Beo String Quartet appears by arrangement with Lisa Sapinkopf Artists, www.chambermuse.com

Program Notes

BACH:
Of the six or so major works Bach composed in his last ten years (including The Well-Tempered Clavier, Goldberg Variations, Mass in B minor, etc.) one could make the case that The Art of Fugue really is the hardest to swallow out of these famous pieces. Fourteen fugues, four canons, all in the same key, all based on the same melodic material, all in a row . . . would that not be a bit much for an unsuspecting concertgoer?

But The Art of Fugue isn't like other works. It's lifetime music. I've been getting to know it little by little, year after year, and it's always still around when I'm ready to learn a little more. It doesn't suffer when we experience it in short bursts; in fact my colleagues and I find performing just a few of the fugues as a set to be very attractive. You'll be hearing one of those sets today.

There's lots of brainy, technical genius packed into The Art of Fugue that the professional (and the curious) can find. But despite the intellectual rigor (and all the alarming sameness mentioned above), each fugue is alive with its own mood, character, and personality—more than enough for the concert stage!

There's another reason we're tackling these pieces. Fugue is a type of music wherein each musical line is equally independent and interesting on its own, yet all the parts must work together to weave the whole sound. Should you find such a balance between four independent individuals, you just might have yourself a string quartet. Happy listening!
—Ryan Ash

GLASS:
Philip Glass's third string quartet is from the music that Glass wrote for the biographical film about the life of the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima, directed by Paul Schrader. Mishima committed suicide on November 25, 1970.

The quartet, which does not sound at all Japanese, is in six movements:The first movement surely sounds familiar enough if you've heard almost anything else from Glass. It's atmospheric, melancholic, minor-key, with its undulating figures and sudden (but still subtle) shifting rhythms and meters. It's also the longest of the quartet, making up about a quarter of the playing time. It's easy to appreciate how the music swells and recedes, building to moments of more power, such as when the cello underpins the ensemble with its motion in the lower register, or when all the members lock into step for a few gestures.

The second movement is the shortest, and it's very much in the same melancholic, pensive space as what came before, but without the energy. It's almost mournful, but with the same repetitive figures as a backbone. It's almost an interlude, a single extended exhalation.

What follows this musical sigh is a spirited opening, one of the most outwardly intense moments of this small quartet, and the rest of the movement rests mostly on a very tense build to a few other climaxes similar to the opening, but largely it's more articulated, aggressive, with more crunch, and some excellent use of dissonance and color. It's like a train coasting over the tracks below on its way to an important destination, but it abruptly dies away and leads to the fourth movement, another very short gesture.

GLASS Cont'd:
It's not somber like the second movement, instead sounding determined, with another great commanding gesture or two and rhythmic intensity. This is classic Glass.

Strangely, though, the fifth movement, titled "Blood Oath," the one you would thus think to be most violent or cataclysmic, inexplicably is the most optimistic of all. It has a similar rhythmic drive, but with a spring its step we haven't heard yet.

The final movement picks up a bit of that bounce, but it's overshadowed by a breathtaking, beautiful kind of heaving sigh from the violin(s). It's sentimental, not sorrowful, but nostalgic. There's similar delightful rhythmic interest, but primarily, above it all, a softness. Like the fourth movement, and like the first and second quartets, the tick-tocking of the rhythms, shifting meters, like gears quietly whizzing away, suddenly just comes to a slow stop, as if someone had unplugged it all. —Adapted from a note on the Fugue for Thought website

DEBUSSY:
It is often said that the era of modern music began in 1894 with a single work: Claude Debussy's Prelude à l'après-midi d'un faune for orchestra. Before Schoenberg, Stravinsky or Bartók, Debussy was the first major composer to radically break from the continuous evolution of 19th century Romantic music from Beethoven to Wagner. As if from another world, Debussy appeared, bearing his magical music, novel in nearly every dimension. Reacting against the dominant influence of Germanic music with its logical rigors of form and development, he sought a new music of color, sensation, fleeting mood and relaxed form that would be distinctively French, as well as distinctively his own.

DEBUSSY Cont'd:
Debussy established a new style known as "Impressionism" (a term he disliked) and, more than any of his previous countrymen, a new, internationally recognized school of modern French music. His subsequent influence was immense, both on classical and popular music.

In 1893, Debussy composed his first important work, the String Quartet in G minor, Opus 10. It was his only work to which he attached an opus number or a key, and it was his only work in a conventional form. Outwardly, the quartet assumes the mold of a traditional string quartet comprising four movements: a first movement sonata, a rhythmic scherzo, a slow, lyrical movement and an energetic finale. But within this unremarkable template, the music sounds completely new. Debussy expanded the sound of the string quartet with a variety of novel textures and tonal effects ranging from delicate subtlety to ravishing grandeur. With exotic scales, unconventional chords, progressions and key changes, the music's melodies and harmonies were unique for their time.

Especially striking are the quartet's rhythmic vitality and its wealth of dazzling figurations, cross-rhythms and shimmering or hovering pulsations.

The work is equally fascinating for its cyclic design. Debussy uses his initial theme to generate a diversity of music that clearly derives from it. The first and second movements together contain at least seven variations. The last movement supplies its own new variations as well as a cyclic reprisal of the previous movements in reverse order, leading the quartet right back to the beginning. That such an apparently rigid thematic unity is unobtrusively disguised within a rich variety of music is testament to Debussy's remarkable imagination and skill as a composer.

DEBUSSY Cont'd:
Initial reactions to his quartet ranged from praise to bewilderment and scorn, including such wonderfully revealing sneers as "orgies of modulation" and "rotten with talent." Debussy shortly set to work on another quartet, but abandoned the project, turning instead to the orchestra, a more potent vehicle for his visionary music. Debussy wrote very little additional chamber music, returning to the genre only at the end of his life to complete three of six planned sonatas. It is amazing to consider the many first rate composers who labored over numerous string quartets, destroyed early works or cautiously approached the genre for the first time as mature artists, while Debussy, merely thirty-one, wrote a single quartet, a brilliant work of stunning originality, now a masterwork secure in the chamber music repertory.
—Kai Christiansen

BEETHOVEN:
In 1802, Beethoven directly confronted the severity of his hearing loss for the first time. In October, he penned the Heiligenstadt Testament, a heartbreaking confession of his struggles that mentions, but rejects, the option of suicide. Through an act of will, he transcended the most profound challenge one could imagine for his unique disposition. Shortly thereafter, Beethoven entered his so-called middle period, emerging as the heroic artist that revolutionized every musical genre he touched. The middle period is characterized by bold new works on a grand scale including the opera Fidelio, the Waldstein and Appassionata piano sonatas, and the Third Symphony (Eroica). Between 1805 and 1806, Beethoven seized upon a commission by Count Razumovsky, a Russian diplomat who spent many years of his life in Vienna, channeling his newly restored life force into the supreme genre of chamber music to create perhaps the most revolutionary works of the his middle period: the epic set of three string quartets, Opus 59.

BEETHOVEN Cont'd:

The String Quartet in C Major, Opus 59, No. 3 has acquired the nickname Eroica because of its glorious, triumphant finale. Initially, it was the most well received of the three quartets and probably remains the most frequently performed. It is one of the most radiant works Beethoven ever composed. Its beginning is as noteworthy as its ending, no doubt one of several places in which the Razumovsky quartets confounded its first listeners. Like Mozart's Dissonance quartet (also in C major), a work that Beethoven greatly admired, it begins in obscurity: a brooding series of diminished chords whose destination grows ever more obscure as the outer voices, treble and bass, progressively diverge in a wedge shape. Any sense of motion fairly disintegrates. A clipped two-chord progression glances off C and stops, followed by a slow windup of tentative meanderings that finally, like a slingshot, launches full force into the blazing confirmation of C major. Fully engaged in the bliss of wavelike harmonic motion, one barely notices the absence of a single distinctive theme. The entire movement features only a prominent two-note motive (that first, glancing step) and the "simple" flowing lines of scales and arpeggiated chords. These musical lines spread and weave across the span of four independent instruments to become elegant, mellifluous ribbons of light, simple motions turned to golden honey. This quality pervades most of the quartet.

The second movement is the cool point of contrast in the quartet, a delicate yet ponderous movement veiled with melancholy. It is another sonata movement but with a curious form: the development section is relatively unpronounced and smoothly merged between the exposition and the recapitulation, the later reprising the themes in reverse order. The effect is that of a rondo where the gentle hope of a second theme surfaces between waves of mysterious sorrow.

BEETHOVEN Cont'd:
The third movement is not the wild scherzo so associated with Beethoven, but rather, a Menuetto marked Grazioso. Moderate and suave, it shares a noteworthy trait with the first movement: rather than distinctive themes, it returns to washes of essential motion, gentle scales in the minuet that sharpen into heroic arpeggios in the trio. Both middle movements have a relaxed quality so different than the middle movements of the other two Razumovsky quartets; they seem poised and reserved if not curiously hesitant. The Menuetto even fails to properly conclude. An unresolved bridge-like coda connects it seamlessly to the finale, an interim passage wherein the minuet's clear major tonality clouds into the minor, pauses on the dominant, and waits with baited breath.

The finale is one of Beethoven's grandest conceptions. Much like the function of the dissonant beginning in the first movement, the minuet's coda provides a dark tension out of which the bright energy of the last movement emerges like the sun. The first violin establishes a light, driving motion that is perpetually sustained. Its long undulating theme is taken up by each of the other instruments in turn, thickening the texture with the apparent beginning of a mighty fugue. But as in many great contrapuntal wonders of the Classical era, the fugue (technically a canon) is really a short lived fugato, a primary theme whose character is the evocation of a fugue, a theme of brilliant distinction within a tapestry of contrasting material that fills the space between fugal episodes like gold surrounds the setting of a few precious gems. The fugato briefly recurs with a new urgency in the development and then crowns the recapitulation, elongated with a crystal clear countersubject for a conclusion of truly heroic impact.

BEETHOVEN Cont'd:
The waves of shining ribbons swell and distinctly diverge, the treble rising, the base dropping: here Beethoven completes a mighty symmetry across the whole quartet by reprising the opening wedge of dissonance transformed with resolute harmony, a brilliant cadential coda in C major.

All three of the Razumovsky quartets are conceived on larger scale that even the most noteworthy of their predecessors from any composer. Beethoven's genius enabled him to do this while, at the same time, strengthening a sense of unity across the greater expanse. Perhaps the three quartets function like a gigantic three movement work, with a broad and complex first movement in F major, a tense contrasting movement in e minor, and a bright, exultant finale in C major. In this larger context, the third quartet acquires a further triumphal radiance. The scholar Leonard Ratner suggests that all of Beethoven's quartets may even form a kind of mega-work, a single great narrative that stands apart from all other music in history.
—Kai Christiansen

Beo String Quartet Bio
Founded in 2015 by the Mexican-American brothers Sean and Jason Neukom, the Beo String Quartet has created a niche for itself as a daring, genre-defying ensemble. Beo has toured extensively in the USA, South America, and Europe. Beo's performances of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Shostakovich have been compared to those of the best among 21st century international string quartets, and they are equally champions of contemporary composers including Gabriela Ortiz (Mexico) and Missy Mazzoli (USA), not to mention their own violist, Sean Neukom.

Beo String Quartet Bio Cont'd:

Critics have been raving: "FIVE STARS. [Their Beethoven is] nothing short of breathtaking . . . no-holds-barred . . . a joy from start to finish" and "compelling, thought-provoking, and musically satisfying."—Fanfare "Skill, passion, and strength . . . sheer expressive force . . . thrilling." —New York Classical Review. And the New York Concert Review had this to say:

"'Beo' means: to bless, make happy, gladden, and delight. Based on this one introductory hearing, I believe the Beo String Quartet is poised to do just that . . . [They have] two areas of perfection—1) absolute purity of intonation, and . . . 2) that supernatural one-ness of interpretive intent that animates the best quartets."

With 140 concert works played worldwide, including an astonishing 65 world premieres, the Beo Sring Quartet does what it loves best: performing, teaching, outreaching, composing, recording, and having fun with music from the iconic (Beethoven) to today's most exciting composers.