‘Last Leaf’ refers to the last leaf of parchment in the Codex Runicus, a tome dating from around 1300 that contains one of the earliest pieces of Nordic legislation but also, on that final page, the secular song ‘Drømte mig en drøm’ (‘Dreamed me a dream’). This album is arranged as a sort of codex in itself: a heartfelt, thoroughly researched and exquisitely performed journey through that and other Nordic folk songs, dances and hymns from the past five centuries that ends with the single piece that inspired it.

That piece, ‘one of the most beautiful Danish hymns we know of’, according to the Danish Quartet, is ‘Now Found is the Fairest of Roses’, in which the theologian HA Brorson laid his yuletide text over a Lutheran funeral chorale. It is played here with the combination of focused lightness and floating tension that the DSQ might deploy in a Beethoven slow movement. In the end, it slips away – the most saddening but smile-inducing moment in an album that traverses simple emotions but taps something deep at the same time.

Indeed, the quartet pose a parallel question in the booklet: ‘Can a rustic folk dance conjure up feelings of melancholy and contemplation?’ The ensemble’s considered arrangements provide an answer as much as their performances. Repetition presents an opportunity to layer, weave, darken and question. Never do any of the arrangements drift into the schmaltzy (we hear a double bass, a harmonium, a piano and a glockenspiel in addition to the four strings of the ensemble). When presented with unusual material, as in the arrangements the ensemble has discovered by the 18th-century Danish fiddler Rasmus Storm, the performances mine its unusual qualities. There are three original works by cellist Frederik Sjölin, the best of them Naja’s Waltz, which moves from a light pizzicato to a deep-throated song.

‘In the old days’, continues the quartet’s own booklet note, ‘you were considered a good fiddler if you knew a lot of tunes, you could play loudly for a very long time and most importantly, you kept the beat.’ They certainly do the latter. But they also invest this music with the sort of ensemble precision, subtlety of colour and well-timed abandon that they do Shostakovich and the rest of them. The best album of folk ditties from a string quartet you’ll ever hear? Probably.
Danish String Quartet

“The Danish are remarkable, as ever - capable of intense blend, extreme dynamic variation (in which they seem glued together), perfect intonation even on harmonics, and constant vitality and flow.”

- Gramophone
Embodying the quintessential elements of a fine chamber music ensemble, the Danish String Quartet has established a reputation for their integrated sound, impeccable intonation and judicious balance. With their technical and interpretive talents matched by an infectious joy for music-making and “rampaging energy” (*The New Yorker*), the quartet is in demand worldwide by concert and festival presenters alike. Since making their debut in 2002 at the Copenhagen Festival, the musical friends have demonstrated a passion for Scandinavian composers, who they frequently incorporate into adventurous contemporary programs, while also giving skilled and profound interpretations of the classical masters. *The New York Times* selected the quartet’s concerts as highlights of 2012 and 2015, praising “one of the most powerful renditions of Beethoven’s Opus 132 String Quartet that I’ve heard live or on a recording,” and “the adventurous young members of the Danish String Quartet play almost everything excitingly.”

The Danish String Quartet received the 2016 Borletti Buitoni Trust provided to support outstanding young artists in their international endeavors, joining a small, illustrious roster of past recipients since the Trust’s founding in 2003.

The Danish String Quartet’s expansive 2017-2018 North American season includes more than 30 performances across 17 states. The ensemble gives debut performances at numerous renowned venues, such as the Interlochen Center for the Arts, Bravo! Vail and Ravinia summer festivals, Cleveland Chamber Music Society, Ensemble Music Society Indianapolis, Santa Fe Pro Musica, Oregon Bach Festival, and San Francisco Performances, among others. Further season highlights include returns to the Mostly Mozart Festival, UW World Series at Meany Hall in Seattle, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and the Philadelphia and Buffalo Chamber Music Societies. This season, the Quartet features a richly satisfying array of diverse repertoire which includes both giants of the string quartet canon - Bartok, Beethoven, Brahms, Haydn, and Mozart- with lesser-performed works by Sibelius, Schnittke, and Jörg Widmann. Additionally, the ensemble joins the outstanding Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen to perform the Shostakovich Piano Quintet at Ravinia and the Brahms Piano Quintet at CMS Lincoln Center’s residency at Saratoga Performing Arts Center, where they also collaborate with cellist Jakob Koranyi for the
Schubert Cello Quintet. Overseas, they tour extensively throughout Europe in their native Denmark, Norway, Germany, Luxembourg, and Holland as well as Australia and the Far East. The Danish String Quartet continues to expand upon their deep affinity for Scandinavian folk music with several performances of their own arrangements of traditional Nordic music, and with the release of their newest recording, *Last Leaf*, on ECM Records in fall 2017.

After their highly successful 2016-2017 season, which included debuts at the Tanglewood, Caramoor and Edinburgh Festivals, the Danish String Quartet debuted at Carnegie Hall’s Zankel Hall performing Shostakovich String Quartet in E-flat minor as well as Schubert Cello Quintet with eminent Swedish cellist Torleif Thedéen, in a performance described by *New York Magazine* as “a raw kind of splendor.” In addition to their New York engagement, the quartet’s robust North American schedule took them to Salt Lake City, Stanford, Ashland and Portland (OR), Vancouver, Kansas City (MO), Corpus Christi, San Antonio, Chicago, Boston, Orono, Dartmouth, Washington DC, Rochester, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Kalamazoo, Detroit, St. Paul, and Denver, as well as a teaching residency at Dartmouth College. Internationally, they performed throughout Israel, South America, Germany, the United Kingdom, Poland, and their home country, Denmark. As champions of contemporary music from Scandinavian composers, the Quartet premiered a new work by Rolf Wallin titled *Swans Kissing* based on the 1914 series of paintings, “The Swan,” by Swedish painter Hilma af Klint. This work was commissioned by the Quartet for its world premiere in London’s Wigmore Hall.

The Quartet’s recent debut recording on ECM Records features works of Danish composers Hans Abrahamsen and Per Nørgård and English composer Thomas Adés and received five stars from *The Guardian*, praised as “an exacting program requiring grace, grit and clarity and the Danish players sound terrific...It’s a sophisticated performance.” The recording debuted at #16 on the Billboard Classical Chart and continues to earn international acclaim. They also recently presented the US premiere of Danish composer Thomas Agerfeldt Olesen's Quartet No. 7 "The Extinguishable" at the University of Chicago. In addition to their commitment to highlighting Scandinavian composers, the Danish String Quartet derive great pleasure in traditional Nordic folk music. Their subsequent recording, *Last Leaf*, was released in September 2017 and has since been listed as one of the top classical albums of the year by NPR, WQXR, *The New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, and Spotify.
Since winning the Danish Radio P2 Chamber Music Competition in 2004, the quartet has been greatly admired throughout Denmark and in October 2016 they presented their tenth annual DSQ Festival, a four-day event held in Copenhagen that brings together musical friends the Quartet has met on its travels. Additionally, in 2016 the Quartet curated a new music festival, Series of Four, where they served as both performers and artistic directors, bringing world-renowned artists to the intimate series of concerts in Copenhagen. In 2009 the Danish String Quartet won First Prize in the 11th London International String Quartet Competition, as well as four additional prizes from the same jury. This competition is now called the Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition and the Danish String Quartet has performed at the famed hall on several occasions, including their final concert of the 2015-2016 season performing a program of Beethoven, Janáček and Neilsen.

The Danish String Quartet’s talents have secured them numerous awards and coveted appointments including the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center’s CMS Two Program, the BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artists program. They were awarded First Prize in the Vagn Holmboe String Quartet Competition and the Charles Hennen International Chamber Music Competition in Holland as well as the Audience Prize in the Trondheim International String Quartet Competition in 2005. They were the recipients of the 2010 NORDMETALL-Ensemble Prize at the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Festival in Germany and, in 2011, received the prestigious Carl Nielsen Prize.

In 2006, the Danish String Quartet was Danish Radio’s Artist-in-Residence, giving them the opportunity to record all of Carl Nielsen’s string quartets in the Danish Radio Concert Hall, subsequently released to critical acclaim on the Dacapo label in 2007 and 2008. The New York Times extolled, “These Danish players have excelled in performances of works by Brahms, Mozart and Bartok in New York in recent years. But they play Nielsen’s quartets as if they owned them.” In 2012 the Danish String Quartet released an acclaimed recording of Haydn and Brahms quartets on the German AVI-music label, about which The New York Times proclaimed: “What makes the performance special is the maturity and calm of the playing, even during virtuosic passages that whisk by. This is music making of wonderful ease and naturalness.” They recorded works by Brahms and Fuchs with award-winning clarinettist Sebastian Manz at the Bayerische Rundfunk in Munich, released by AVI-music in 2014, and are currently signed with ECM Records.
Violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard met as children at a music summer camp where they played both soccer and music together, eventually making the transition into a serious string quartet in their teens and studying at Copenhagen’s Royal Academy of Music. In 2008 the three Danes were joined by Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin. The Danish String Quartet was primarily taught and mentored by Professor Tim Frederiksen and have participated in master classes with the Tokyo and Emerson String Quartets, Alasdair Tait, Paul Katz, Hugh Maguire, Levon Chilingirian and Gábor Takács-Nagy. www.danishquartet.com

“They could be grounded in their tone or mystical. They allowed time to stand still, and they could assume the pose of excitingly aggressive rockers. They did it all.”
 -The Los Angeles Times

"They bring a freshness and energy plus a level of sheer accomplishment that I don't ever remember hearing in these works."
 -Gramophone

JANUARY 2018 - PLEASE DESTROY ALL PREVIOUSLY DATED MATERIALS
Danish String Quartet  
Individual Biographies  
2014-2015 Season

**ASBJØRN NØRGAARD** (b. 1984) has established himself as one of the most sought after viola players in Denmark and is the recipient of multiple accolades, including Jacob Gade’s large music grant and Sonnings Music Scholarship. First and foremost, Asbjørn Nørgaard is a vivid chamber musician and has founded The Danish String Quartet as well as Inviolata, a viola-accordion duo. With these two ensembles, he is prize winner in several national and international competitions and has recorded a plethora of cd’s, the latest being a recording of all J.S. Bach’s Viola da Gamba Sonatas. On the side of this, Asbjørn Nørgaard is an experienced orchestral player, and has led the viola sections of the Copenhagen Philharmonic and the Danish National Chamber Orchestra.

Asbjørn Nørgaard has studied in Copenhagen, Stockholm and Berlin. He graduated from the soloist scheme at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in 2013 performing Mozart’s Sinfonia Concertante at the Radio Hall in Copenhagen. At the moment Asbjørn is learning to speak Portuguese and his favorite writer is Thomas Mann. He is a huge fan of encyclopedias and is always reading something about everything.

**RUNE TONSGAARD SØRENSEN** (b. 1983) started playing violin at the age of 5 after a failed attempt of learning the accordion. Now he is the concert master of Copenhagen Philharmonic, teacher at the Royal Danish Academy of Music, violinist in the Danish String Quartet and a well known soloist in Denmark. In 2008 Rune was the only Danish semi finalist at the international Carl Nielsen Competition in Odense and he also received a prize for best performance of the danish pieces in the competition. Rune has always been a curious musician. He has been playing folk music most of his life, he is educated in organ and church music and he always likes a good jam session.

**FREDRIK SCHØYEN SJÖLIN** (b. 1982) has the honor of being the only Norwegian member of The Danish String Quartet. However (and this is often pointed out during rehearsals), as Norway was effectually a tributary to Denmark until 1814, Fredrik is actually sort of Danish. Fredrik grew up in Trondheim, where he had his first cello lessons as a 6-year old at the local music school. After finishing high school, he moved to Stockholm where to study with Torlief Thedéen. In
2007 he graduated from the diploma-programme and subsequently won a place in the prestigious two-year "intro klassisk"-scheme, run by "Concerts Norway". In 1996 Frederik won Norway’s national competition for young string players, and two years later he won the second prize in "EMCY"’s international competition. He has performed as soloist with several of the Norwegian orchestras including: The Norwegian Radio Orchestra, Stavanger Symphony Orchestra, Trondheim Symphony Orchesra and the Bergen Philharmonic.

**FREDERIK ØLAND** (b. 1984) was educated by Serguei Azizian in Copenhagen and Ulf Wallin in Berlin. In 2009 at the age of 23 he won the position as concert master at Copenhagen Philharmonic Orchestra. The same year he was also employed as a teacher of violin and chamber music at The Royal Danish Academy of Music. Frederik Øland has been awarded various Danish prizes such as grants from Jacob Gade Foundation, Victor Borge Foundation and Léonie Sonning Foundation. He has appeared several times as a soloist, most recently with his colleagues in Copenhagen Philharmonic Orchestra. In his spare time Frederik relaxes in his apartment in the Vesterbro-borough in central Copenhagen.

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**MAY 2015 - PLEASE DESTROY ALL PREVIOUSLY DATED MATERIALS.**
The Danish String Quartet
Critical Acclaim

“What they do know is how to be an exceptional quartet, whatever repertory they play.”

Anthony Tommasini, The New York Times

“Most of the music in this concert was of the kind that makes its musical points when performed with ultra refinement, pliancy of phrasing and tone, and a sense of reflection. In music of this type, the Danish Quartet has no peer.”

Kenneth Delong, Calgary Herald

“The Danish are remarkable, as ever – capable of intense blend, extreme dynamic variation (in which they seem glued together), perfect intonation even on harmonics, and constant vitality and flow.”

Andrew Mellor, Gramophone

“The Nielsen seldom appears in our concert halls, but proved a brilliant, dramatic work in the Beethovenian tradition, and was projected by these players with vividness and ardour.”

Paul Driver, The London Times

“A concert that was as comprehensively rewarding as any chamber-music performance in recent memory… Do not lose track of this group: Even by today’s high standards, it offers something very special.”

David Weininger, The Boston Globe

"...One of the most powerful performances of Opus 132 I’ve heard live or on disc. The musicians, acutely attuned to one another, didn’t appear to be on autopilot for even a millisecond, with every nuance, phrase and gesture beautifully wrought."

Vivien Schweitzer, The New York Times

“I can’t imagine a more involving performance.”

Anthony Tommasini, The New York Times

“They could be grounded in their tone or mystical. They allowed time to stand still, and they could assume the pose of excitingly aggressive rockers. They did it all.”

Mark Swed, The Los Angeles Times

“This is one of the best quartets before the public today.”

“The Danish String Quartet is in a different league altogether, and one that should be attended every time they're in town.”

Christina Strynatka, Examiner.com

"They bring a freshness and energy plus a level of sheer accomplishment that I don’t ever remember hearing in these works."

David Fanning, Gramophone

“…It was good to encounter the rampaging energy of the Danish Quartet, at the Scandinavia House, on Park Avenue. Whether in Mozart’s D-Minor Quartet, Ligeti’s First, or Nielsen’s Fourth, these shaggy-haired Danes, who look as though they could be manning some inscrutable boutique in deepest Brooklyn, seemed to sing, dance, strut, and glide their way through the music. For the Dacapo label, they’ve recorded a superb survey of the Nielsen quartets; in zest and twang, it out-does even vintage accounts by the Koppel Quartet, which had links to the composer.”

Alex Ross, The New Yorker

“[The Danish String Quartet] plays with an urgency that can feel dangerous, and with a unity of intention that makes familiar material stand out in bold relief, as if it were brand new territory… This is a group that makes you listen.”

San Jose Mercury

“…A suitably dramatic and rhythmic performance which caught one's attention from the start… [a] lively and fresh-sounding ensemble.”

Seen and Heard International

"My introduction to this group was as dramatic as one could have. It was in the absolutely inhuman and unforgiving scenario of the audition, where they came all the way over from Copenhagen to audition at Lincoln Center. When somebody comes from overseas at their own expense to do an audition, you feel bad for them already. And we had this panel of judges sitting there, all incredible musicians; been through it all. And these guys walked out to play, and they looked like Scandinavian bandits or Old West bandits. They were wearing vests and white shirts, and they had this wild, spiky blond hair. We looked at them and thought, 'Wow, this is really off the wall.' And they sat down, and they started to play. I think they started with Haydn and then they went to Beethoven Op. 127, the slow movement, one of the most profound pieces. And they started to play it, and I looked down the length of this long table of judges; there wasn't a pencil moving. They were all just sitting there, transfixed; one of the most beautiful things I've ever heard. I think they have really a profound effect on people who hear them play. I'm just so excited that they're coming."

David Finckel, Artistic Director, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center
‘LAST LEAF’ Danish String Quartet (ECM New Series). It is wonderful to hear these superb players let their collective hair down in this collection of (mostly) Scandinavian folk tunes and original material composed in like fashion. This should warm the heart of every fan of fiddling, whether bluegrass, Celtic or Bachian.

– James R. Oestreich
The 50 Best Albums Of 2017

15. Danish String Quartet

Last Leaf

You don't have to be a Scandinavian musicologist to fall in love with Last Leaf, the Danish String Quartet’s new album of Nordic folk songs and dances. The fact that the atmospheric "Drømte mig en drøm" (I Dreamed a Dream) is over 700 years old and the rollicking "Stædelil" is based on a Faroese medieval ballad later reworked by Beethoven is not as important as the fluency and grace that infuses these blithesome performances. In the quartet's eloquent, but not overworked, arrangements, you can hear the shuffling feet of dancers and wheezy bagpipes. "Æ Rømeser," from the Danish island of Fanø, mesmerizes, as the whirl of a polka meets a wistful melody. The band stays busy playing Brahms and Haydn — and even contemporary composers like Thomas Adès and Hans Abrahamsen, featured on a superb album released last year. But when it comes to the simple idea of a classical string quartet performing folk tunes, the Danish musicians have exceeded all expectations. —Tom Huizenga
22. Danish String Quartet
"Æ Rømeser"

When they aren’t playing Beethoven or Brahms, Danish String Quartet's musicians like to hole up in an vintage farmhouse and craft arrangements of old Nordic folk songs. The 18th-century tune 'Æ Rømeser,' from the band's pleasing album Last Leaf, offers both melancholy and a polka-like meter for dancing, unique to the village of Sønderho. Emerging through a murky introduction, a lone fiddle slowly unfolds the meandering theme, touched with heartache as it gathers speed and blossoms. In the quartet’s elegant, idiomatic arrangement you can hear feet shuffling on a sawdusted dance floor and the drone of an old squeezebox. —Tom Huizenga
This String Quartet Has a Line of Craft Beer

By David Allen

October 23, 2016

Back in 2012 and 2013, the members of the Danish String Quartet, who appear at Carnegie Hall on Wednesday, Oct. 26, had an unusual traveler accompany them on a tour through Denmark and England: a phenomenologist named Simon Hoffding. Then a doctoral researcher at the University of Copenhagen, he was troubled by a philosophical question: “What kind of self is present when the musician is deeply into his music?”

Being asked to think about how they think was no easy task, the violist Asbjorn Norgaard, 31, said over lunch at Tanglewood this past summer: Playing, after all, takes place “on such a subconscious level.” Even so, in his dissertation, Mr. Hoffding used interviews with the quartet’s players to come up with a taxonomy of how top musicians experience their performances.

There’s “standard playing,” which any amateur might aspire to. Rarely, for professionals, there’s “absent-minded playing.” Occasionally musicians are under stress — say, from an audience interruption — and labor to return to normality.

And, most rare and interesting, there’s “deep absorption,” when players enter a kind of trance, a state of “euphoric joy” in which they have complete control and yet feel almost disembodied. Think of it as the equivalent of how an athlete gets “in the zone.”

Perhaps, at a less exalted level, there is an analog for listeners, too, when the world beyond a performance dissolves and we are carried along by sound. That’s a feeling that these three young Danes (Frederik Oland and Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen on violins and Mr. Norgaard on viola) and their Norwegian...
cellist (Fredrik Schoyen Sjolin) are especially susceptible to creating. In a golden age for young string quartets – think JACK, Ébène, Escher, Attacca, Doric, Chiara, Spektral, Calidor, and many, many more — the Danish String Quartet has drawn almost unanimous critical praise, particularly for its performances of Nielsen, Beethoven and others with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. On record, it has set down rogue Haydn and poised Brahms, as well as Scandinavian folk music, a Da Capo release called “Wood Works,” and an outstanding survey of first quartets by Thomas Adès, Per Norgard and Hans Abrahamsen, on ECM.

Theirs is playing of unusual, and unusually effective, liberty. When at their best, their tone throbs with joy. “All Scandinavians feel like they have a bit of an anarchist inside them,” Mr. Norgaard said. “If someone tells us what to do, or what to wear, we go, like, ‘That’s dictatorship.’ We don’t feel boxed in by playing this old music that everyone else is playing. It’s just a canvas that we can work on. That being said, I don’t think that we are crazy. We are respectful.”

The starting point for any of their interpretations, Mr. Sorensen, 33, said, “is to try to have as much freedom as possible.” But, added Mr. Oland, 32, who shares duties in the first violin chair, “you can’t be free if you haven’t prepared well on a technical level. The main structure of it doesn’t change — maybe a little bit, but it’s not completely free. Freedom comes from being in control, in a way.”

It also comes from trust, in this case built over many years. The three Danes — and their cellist at the time, Carl-Oscar Osterlind — met at a summer camp, for all ages and most abilities, run by the Danish Amateur Orchestra Association. “It’s not like this American summer camp stuff,” Mr. Oland said. “You play in two different orchestras during the day, and at night you play chamber music until you faint. We met there when we were something like 13, 14. We grew up there together, had our first beers there together, played a lot of soccer, played a lot of music, just formed a friendship that we have today.”

In 2001, when Mr. Sorensen entered the Royal Danish Academy of Music, they began lessons with Tim Frederiksen,
whom the quartet refers to as “the godfather” of Danish chamber music: Once a violist in an incarnation of a different Danish String Quartet, he has also trained, among others, the superb all-female Nightingale Quartet.

Mr. Frederiksen focused the quartet’s repertoire, starting with Haydn’s “Emperor” and Shostakovich’s Eighth Quartet, began lessons that could last four or five hours at a time and insisted on throwing them into the public eye as early as possible. Opportunities opened up to play in front of chamber music societies across Denmark, particularly after the group won the Danish Broadcasting Corporation’s Chamber Music Competition in 2004, as the Young Danish String Quartet.

After recording committed accounts of the complete Nielsen quartets for Dacapo, the quartet took a year off. In the process, its original cellist chose a solo career, and Mr. Sjolin, 34, then a student in Stockholm, joined the remnants. He blended in quickly, as the new foursome, having dropped the “Young” adjective, prepared for and then won the London International String Quartet Competition in 2009.

“Often you read about quartets changing a member,” Mr. Sorensen said, “and it takes like a year to try out different people. But from the first day, it just worked out.”

Since then, the quartet has been helped by rising-star programs like the BBC’s New Generation Artists initiative and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center’s CMS Two. They essay a balanced repertoire, with a healthy smattering of new music — including, this season, a new quartet, “Swans Kissing,” by Rolf Wallin — among a diet of Haydn, Shostakovich and predominantly late Beethoven, scotching the notion that Beethoven is something that must be approached cautiously, especially by artists who might be considered less mature.

How do they choose their repertoire? “Sit down with a lot of beers, and a list,” Mr. Oland said.

Mr. Norgaard said they approached some notorious challenges without particular concern. “We would do all the late Beethovens first,” he said, “which was a no-go for any other quartet. It came very naturally.”

If their late Beethoven is perhaps unexpected, they have surprising gaps, too. Ravel haunts them, though their Debussy is exquisite. Mozart was tried early on but has disappeared from their repertoire.

“I’m a little bit scared of Mozart, actually,” Mr. Sjolin confided. “Scared is not the word. Every time, for some reason, it’s very, very difficult. It’s always two tempi, and either both of them work or none of them work.”

“The opening of the ‘Dissonance,’” Mr. Sorensen said. “We never really nailed that one.”

What they have nailed is a particular style, in demeanor if not in playing. The reputation of their beards precedes them, though that facial hair is more kempt than it once was. Their fashion is hipsterish, without irony or a sense of being mere appliqué. In Copenhagen, one of their concert series has its own line of craft beer, brewed by the Frederiksberg Bryghus. At their own DSQ Festival, they invite friends to play with them, do the vacuuming and turn the lights out at the end of the night.

“We found a perfect little spot,” Mr. Sorensen said, “which is an old girls’ school from the late 19th century, a beautiful place with room for about 150. There’s a soul in this place. This is a very lo-fi thing we have going on.”

There is no admission fee, Mr. Norgaard said, but there is a tip jar. “We have very pretentious programming, with an actor doing monologues from Tolstoy with Janacek quartets,” he said. “But it is a concert situation where people realize
who is sending out the concert. It’s not some organization with a voice that tells you to shut off your cellphone. You go into our living room, and we want to play some music for you.”
The classical music field is, they agreed, often too eager to change things up simply to attract new audiences. “It’s healthy to try out new things,” Mr. Sorensen said. But “you can smell if something is just packaging.” So their approach is refreshingly unapologetic. “When I enjoy musicians playing concerts,” Mr. Norgaard said, to murmurs of approval from his fellow musicians, “it’s when they’re very honest. We experiment a lot, and you can say that we are breaking down barriers, blah, blah, blah. But at the same time, we don’t do anything. We actually leave the music alone.
“What we’re saying, is that you can be easygoing, that you can have fun, and be very serious and deep at the same time. There’s no conflict there. You can have very funny rehearsals about sad pieces of music. It’s easier to be deep and serious, if you just have fun.”
Meet The Great Danes: Chamber Music With A Scandinavian Twist

By Michael Levin

“Our guiding principle for choosing repertoire has always been pretty simple,” said Asbjørn Nørgaard, viola player for Danish String Quartet. “We only perform music we like.”

“This sounds obvious,” he continued, “but sometimes as a classical music student you find yourself playing music that might be part of the canon but that you are not actually enjoying. At the end of the day, the only thing that matters to us is that we like the music we are performing.”

To listeners, that enjoyment is palpable. Whether they are interpreting late Beethoven or a contemporary Scandinavian composer, or playing traditional Nordic folk music, Danish String Quartet has mesmerized audiences worldwide with its flawless intonation, infectious energy, and masterly poise. They play at New England Conservatory’s Jordan Hall in Boston on January 28th at 8pm as part of the Celebrity Series of Boston.

The group’s performances and recordings display a distinctive joy in music making, which has resulted in part from long-standing friendships. Now in their 30s, three members of the quartet—violist Nørgaard and violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tønsgaard Sørensen—met when they were in their early teens at summer camp in the Danish countryside for enthusiastic amateur musicians.

“For us, friendship and music making has always been inseparable,” Nørgaard said. “As a quartet, you have to spend extreme amounts of time together. Many hours in the rehearsal room and traveling, plus all the high-pressure performances. Our friendship has allowed us to enjoy life as a string quartet quite a bit, and we believe that music thrives when musicians are happy, confident, and enjoying each other’s company on and off the stage.”

Since 2001, the group has performed under the tutelage of Tim Frederiksen, a third generation chamber musician at Copenhagen’s Royal Danish Academy of Music.

“Tim gave us a way of working, a way of approaching chamber music that has been the perfect foundation for us to build on,” Nørgaard said, going on to explain Frederiksen’s remarkable attention to detail: “He will spend three hours on twenty bars of a Haydn quartet. When you go to a lesson with Tim, it feels like you enter a room with a jungle in your hands and leave with a nice Renaissance garden where everything is in balance and order.”
In 2008, the three Danish musicians were joined by Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin—“We found him hidden away in a castle outside Stockholm,” says the group’s website—and the current incarnation of Danish String Quartet was born.

When they are putting together new repertoire, Nørgaard says it happens “in bursts of long rehearsal days” in their rehearsal room, a basement enclave at the Royal Danish Academy of Music.

“There is more craftsmanship than artistry in this part of the process, so we are spending lots of time on basics like intonation and pulse. We leave most artistic decisions rather open and are not talking much—normally things start to settle by themselves without us having to verbalize every single thing we are doing. We are drinking lots of coffee, and as all of us are of a rather lazy nature, there is a lot of procrastination going on.”

Besides classical, what other music genres do the members of Danish String Quartet enjoy?

“Some of us are obsessed with Wagner operas, all of us are into different kinds of folk music, someone likes straight up pop music, one is a jazz fan, another likes romantic symphonies and Pergolesi, all of us love Beethoven. We get inspiration from all music that we encounter.”

Their January 28th performance in Boston will exhibit the group’s eclectic inspirations. The evening’s program includes a quartet by Russian composer Alfred Schnittke along with three Beethoven pieces. The Schnittke quartet borrows from Beethoven’s Grosse fuge and 16th century composer Orlando de Lassus; Nørgaard says it combines Lassus’s Catholic faith and Beethoven’s anger—“almost shaking his fist to the sky”—with Schnittke “hovering in between, unsure. All the doubt of modern man is in [Schnittke’s] music and he is looking back to find some answers.”
The New York Times

December 9, 2015

The Best Classical Music of 2015

Above, the Danish String Quartet performing the Carl Nielsen Quartet Cycle at the Rose Studio.

Danish String Quartet The adventurous young members of the Danish String Quartet play almost everything excitingly. Naturally, they bring exceptional insight and character to the four quartets of Denmark's own Carl Nielsen. In November, the ensemble played them in order for a lucky audience at the very intimate Rose Studio in Lincoln Center.
THE YEAR IN CULTURE
Worth Hearing And Rehearing
By Vivien Schweitzer

Here are the performances that have stuck with me through the year:

DANISH STRING QUARTET I had read glowing reviews of this group and expected a high-level performance when I attended its concert at Scandinavia House in October. But I was still taken by surprise, in a hall half empty and off the beaten track, to enjoy one of the most powerful renditions of Beethoven’s Opus 132 String Quartet that I’ve heard live or on a recording.
May 14, 2016

The Danish String Quartet's Manifold Vision For Classical Music

The Danish String Quartet's new release features British and Danish composers. Violinist Frederik Øland is second from the left; violist Asbjørn Nørgaard is second from the right.

The Danish String Quartet is one of the most widely acclaimed chamber groups at the moment — although, in the interest of full disclosure, we should tell you that one member of the quartet is actually Norwegian. The group has a new record called Adès/Nørgard/Abrahamsen that features a program of Danish and British music. The composers highlighted on this release — Thomas Adès, Per Nørgard and Hans Abrahamsen — hold a special place in the story of The Danish String Quartet. Recently, two of the group’s members — violist Asbjørn Nørgaard and violinist Frederik Øland — spoke with NPR’s Scott Simon about how the recording, and the group itself, came
together. You can hear their conversation at the audio link, or read on for an edited version.

Scott Simon: The two of you, and violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, have known each other since before you were teenagers. How did that happen?
Frederik Øland: Well, the three of us — Rune, Asbjørn and I — we met at this music camp in Denmark. It's only a week every summer, and you go there with people of all ages to just play music for a week — orchestra stuff, and then chamber music throughout the night. And you don't sleep a lot, that's for sure. So we were just hanging out there, playing our first chamber music together, playing soccer — even having our first beers together, later on! This was a very nice place to grow up, because it's a place that's full of love for the music.

How did the composers Thomas Adès, Per Nørgard and Hans Abrahamsen wind up sharing space on your album?
Asbjørn Nørgaard: Well, this is a recording that we have been talking about for a long time, but it took a while to realize. The Abrahamsen was almost the first quartet we learned, almost 15 years ago. At this point, we were quite young; we were still teenagers. We had an idea that classical music was mostly Brahms, Mozart, Haydn — kind of nice stuff. And then our chamber music teacher back then, he put in front of us this piece by Abrahamsen. We had never heard about this guy. We started to play and it sounded really crazy. It sounded more like heavy metal than classical music!
We really, really enjoyed playing it, to use our instruments in a completely different way, and to experience that a string quartet can morph from something that's in a way very classical, very in-the-box, and then it can explode and morph into everything you can imagine. We always thought we would like to record that at some point.
A little bit later in our development, almost the same story happened with the Adès — his first string quartet, Arcadiana. This is classical music, but [one] particular movement, called "Tango Mortale," is very rough, very rhythmical, very aggressive kind of music. It also became a part of the story of our quartet. So then we had these two pieces that we really wanted to match on the recording.

What's the classical music audience like these days?
Nørgaard: That's a very complicated question. And actually, I think it's — if I might say so — almost a wrong question to ask, because we just think about ourselves as musicians, not as maybe classical musicians in the old way. I think today, if you train as a classical musician, you need to sustain a great degree of flexibility. You need to be able to be in a bar and perform and not be awkward. And in our experience, we do our own festival in Copenhagen, and we've built an audience here which is quite young, actually. So we don't share this kind of pessimism about the classical music audience that's "dying away," that you sometimes read about in the media.

Do you have a favorite composition on this release that you'd like to point us to?
Nørgaard: If there's one track on this album that will have a popular appeal, it's a specific movement of the Adès quartet [called "O Albion"]. A friend of mine said he thinks this sounds like Coldplay. It's a very beautiful slow movement, and it's just an example that classical music is many things: It can be aggressive, it can be beautiful, it can be simple, it can sound like it was written 500 years ago, and it could sound like it is being improvised in the moment. And that's the joy we have as a string quartet, and I think this album represented well. It can sound like Coldplay, it can sound like heavy metal and it can definitely also sound like classical music as you think it should sound.
DENMARK'S FAB FOUR

With their shaggy corn-silk hair and seafarer beards, the strapping members of the Danish String Quartet could be mistaken for 21st-century Vikings. But unlike their marauding forebears, this supremely gifted group of thirty-something Scandinavians—three Danes who met as schoolboys and a Norwegian cellist—is out to conquer the world through sheer musical charisma. Already hailed as one of the finest ensembles of their generation, and now in the middle of a three-year residency at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in New York City, the DSQ will continue to win over North American audiences this fall, with a tour that includes Chicago; St. Paul, Minnesota; Washington, D.C.; Vancouver; New York City; and La Jolla and Santa Barbara, California, Oct. 10–Nov. 18; danishquartet.com. —Peter Webster
Sørensen's violin is from the eighteenth century, on loan from the Goof Foundation. "Yeah, Goof," he said. "He was a dentist, and he started buying instruments." (Actually, Goof was a dentally inclined businessman.) Sørensen has shaggy hair and wore a T-shirt with an image of a man who had a birdcage for a head. "It's a rather feminine instrument, very light and slim. Before it, I played a Stradivarius."

That night, they were seeing the Cotton Club revue "After Midnight," on Broadway. They like jazz, and other genres—indie, folk, bluegrass—with one caveat.

Sølvin: "I hate the word 'crossover.'" "Like, Oh, my God, classical is boring—we have to fix it." Nørgaard said.

They do not find classical music boring. The three Danish met as boys, at an all-ages summer music camp, where long days spent playing violin and viola came with interludes of soccer and romance.

"It was the magic week of our year," Nørgaard said.

"The week after, so empty, the worst week of the year," Sørensen said.

"Everwhere else, you have to play perfectly, but there you'd pick the hardest thing you could, and just play." He shook his head, smiling. "You'd get kidnapped by some old dudes and play fifteen Beethoven string quartets."

"After Midnight" had a similar blend of discipline and joy. The group sat with Wu Han, the artistic director of the Chamber Music Society, and watched in amazement as the show unfolded—Fauré, tap dancing, feathers, red balloons, cardboard wheels, the Jazz at Lincoln Center All-Stars, "East St. Louis Toodle-oo."

At the curtain call, they clapped and helded. In the car, Wu Han said, "The way the girl used the vibrato was so sexy."

"It was a very sexy show in general," Sørensen said.

At the McKittrick, before the set, there was time to catch the end of "Sleep...
February 18, 2016

2016 Borletti-Buitoni Trust awards go to Danish String Quartet and violinist Alexandra Conunova

The grants, worth £20,000 and £30,000, are also awarded to Calidore String Quartet, violinist Maria Milstein and violist Eivind Holtsmark Ringstad

The Borletti-Buitoni Trust has named the recipients of its 2016 Awards and Fellowships, including a number of string players.

The Danish String Quartet (pictured) – winner of the 11th London International String Quartet Competition and a former BBC New Generation Artist – receives a BBT Award, worth £30,000.

BBT Fellowships, each worth £20,000, go to the multi award-winning Calidore String Quartet from the USA; 27-year-old violinist Alexandra Conunova from Moldova, winner of the Joseph Joachim Competition in Hannover; violinist Maria Milstein from Russia, a founder member of the Van Baerle Trio; and violist Eivind Holtsmark Ringstad from Norway, first prize winner at the 2012 EBU Eurovision Young Musician Competition in Vienna.

A BBT Special Chamber Music Prize, worth €25,000 and given in honour of Claudio Abbado, goes to Quartetto Lyskamm from Italy, formerly mentored by the Artemis Quartet.

The Borletti-Buitoni Trust helps outstanding young musicians to develop and sustain international careers with financial awards, guidance and contacts, as well as public relations exposure. Since 2003, BBT has provided support to 96 individuals and ensembles from 30 countries.
THE DANISH STRING QUARTET

Frederik Øland (violin): I've been listening a lot to Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 3 for a couple of reasons: we recently heard it performed in the States, and my girlfriend plays in a string quartet as well, and they have recorded a music video for the slow movement of it which is on YouTube. It's a piece that provokes so many pictures in your head, and whenever I hear it I think of something a little different. It has a huge impact on me.

Rune Sørensen (violin): I've been enjoying listening to The Way Out. I listen to so much classical music through the quartet, but in fact most of the time I listen to non-classical things when I'm not playing.

Asbjørn Nørgaard (viola): I have been watching the DVD of 'The Copenhagen Ring'. It's Wagner's Ring cycle from the Copenhagen production by Kasper Holten, who is now at the Royal Opera House. It's so cool. It's a modern production rather than a more traditional one so it almost looks like a movie. If people don't know it, I really think they should.

Fredrik Sjelin (cello): When I was 11 or 12, I started to look through my Dad's LPs, and that's when I found out about folk music and music other than what I played on my cello. I discovered a whole other world, including The Beatles and The Johnstons, an old Irish group who had a player called Paul Brady. I heard him again recently in concert in Copenhagen, and it was wonderful to hear him live. A singer I listen to a lot is Sinéad O'Connor. I started many years ago and have never stopped. He's a very interesting guy because his music changes so much all the time. He's a really open musician, and he plays so well.
Nordic folk

Three Danes and a Norwegian make up the Danish String Quartet and they have been making a splash ever since they won the Carl Nielsen Prize in 2011. Now they are releasing an album entirely devoted to folk music arrangements.

By Harry White

Two years on from Sarah Lund and those jumpers and it appears that the UK has still not had its fill of Nordic entertainment. It’s even been quipped that students from Denmark are now funding themselves through university by selling gritty detective series to Channel 4.

Imports from Scandinavia are just as popular in the classical music world, from trumpet sensation Tine Thing Helseth to the chamber ensemble Camerata Nordica, which debuted at the Proms last year. The Danish String Quartet (DSQ) is the latest to exploit our love of all things Nordic.

The group has a deep history, Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, Frederik Øland (violins) and Asbjørn Nørgaard (viola)
having met first as children at a summer music school. Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schoyen Sjölin joined later in 2008, and since then the group has grown from strength to strength. Relaxed, jovial and media-friendly, the DSQ is the very model of a young contemporary classical ensemble, and the players can be found speaking of their shared love of gaming, cooking, cars and drinking. Yet underestimate them at your peril; these are four seriously talented musicians.

Following acclaimed recordings of Carl Nielsen’s string quartets, the DSQ went on to win Denmark’s most significant cultural award, the Carl Nielsen Prize, in 2011, which acted as a catalyst for wider international recognition. In 2012 the quartet was accepted on the prestigious Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center Two programme and, more recently, was announced as BBC New Generation artists for 2013-15.

The DSQ’s latest album, Wood Works (for international release this month), has already created something of a media storm through both its inception as a successful example of crowd-funding and its content: it is comprised entirely of folk music arrangements. ‘It started some eight years ago,’ says violinist Sørensen. ‘We were playing a concert in the Danish Radio concert hall, and decided to arrange a folk tune to play as an encore. The response was unbelievable. We found out that playing traditional folk tunes as encores really gave something unexpected to the audience. Over the years we made more arrangements, and in 2012 we decided to record a full folk music album’.

Wood Works has been released, ingeniously, on both CD and vinyl, giving an ‘authenticity’ to a group whose digital presence is also keenly marketed. Has the group always had an affinity for the folk music of Scandinavia, or did it decide to pursue the cause as a way of creating a unique brand identity following the astounding success of its YouTube video of folk music with more than 50,000 views? ‘I have always had a big passion for this music,’ says Sørensen. ‘My parents brought me to dance evenings and folk festivals in Denmark and Sweden when I was a little boy. In Norway, Fredrik listened a lot to his father’s collection of folk albums from the seventies, but for Asbjørn and Frederik, folk is a fairly new thing. What we all share though, is a deep-felt fascination for this beautifully simple music’.

Is there a relation between folk and ‘art’ music in Denmark? ‘Danish folk music and ‘art music’ used to exist more or less independently,’ says violist Nørgaard. ‘Classical Danish composers would get their formal training in Germany and their music resembled whatever was in vogue down south in Europe. Then Carl Nielsen came along and completely changed the Danish music world. He created a Danish “sound” – a sound hugely inspired by Danish folk music. Lately, the Danish folk music scene has seen a huge revival. Classical musicians as well as rock/indie-musicians are increasingly interested in the Danish musical heritage. We don’t play this music to “bring it” anything – we play it simply because we love it.’

‘When we decided on recording the album, we also knew that we had to be 100% true to ourselves the whole way,’ says Øland. ‘That meant we had to be a part of every detail on the album and we really wanted to have the freedom to do that. It dawned on us that crowd-
funding the project would be perfect for us. It’s been such a great way to interact with fans throughout the world. Feeling the support of people motivates you greatly and it made it possible for us to sculpt this album together. In the end, it felt like the album was not only ours. All the supporters are just as much a part of it as we are and that feels wonderful!’

Is laying down an album of folk tunes different from recording classical music? ‘Most of our classical recordings have been recorded before,’ says cellist Sjölin. ‘Therefore, the expectations of what a classical string quartet should sound like very often leaves us with less space to experiment. In this case, we had to invent our sound, allowing our ideas to become the model of our product. We spent a lot of time with the sound engineer, making sure our imagination came through in the sound of the album’. Make no mistake, this is no spurious crossover experiment, but exciting playing full of vitality, imagination and, above all else, first-rate musicianship. Whether it’s a recording of Beethoven or of bucolic bridal dances, surely that’s all that matters.’
MUSICAL EVENTS

THE POWER OF FOUR

String quartets multiply across New York.

BY ALEX ROSS

Almost any day of the week, you can catch a string quartet performing in New York. In a three-day stretch in mid-January, I saw five concerts by four groups—the Juilliard Quartet, the Momenta Quartet, the Danish Quartet, and an unnamed Juilliard foursome. Earlier in the month, I was at Carnegie Hall for an all-Brahms program by the mighty Emerson Quartet, and also went to the Manhattan School of Music to attend the final event at the Robert Mann String Quartet Institute, led by the longtime first violinist of the Juilliard Quartet, competing CDs of Beethoven and Shostakovich quartets crowding my desk. The genre has even gone Hollywood: “A Late Quartet,” Yaron Zilberman’s tale of a celebrated ensemble undergoing personal and medical crises, came out in November.

Cinematic melodramas notwithstanding, quartet players tend to be among the happier creatures in the classical kingdom. Turnover in leading groups is rare: when David Finckel leaves the Emerson, at the end of this season, it will be the quartet’s first change of personnel in thirty-four years. A job-satisfaction study conducted some years ago ranked quartet players at the top of the various professions surveyed, with orchestra musicians ranking rather lower, near the level of prison guards. If such a study was done today, orchestras might descend yet further; one ensemble after another has lately fallen prey to financial turmoil and labor-management disputes. (The Minnesota Orchestra has yet to perform an ordinary subscription concert this season, players having balked at a drastic pay cut.) The economic collapse of 2008, which is at the root of the current orchestral crisis, has also made life tougher for quartets, yet more than a hundred remain active in North America. Barry Shiffman, who co-founded the St. Lawrence Quartet and now oversees the Banff International String Quartet Competition, told me that while many presenters have cut back on their chamber programming, there has been an explosion of activity at summer festivals, and universities continue to provide a safe berth in the form of residency programs. “It has never been an easy calling,” Shiffman added.

Among the pitfalls are the wildly variable performing conditions. “Ninety-five percent of all halls are terrible,” Mana told the five young quartets who attended his institute. “We have to learn, in a sense, how to play in bad halls all the time.” Often, halls are simply too big. The quartets of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven had their premieres either in private homes or in small-scale public spaces. In the late nineteenth century, venues were designed with chamber music in mind. Wigmore Hall, in London, with five hundred and forty-five seats, comes close to acoustical paradise. (On a recent visit there, I heard the Zande Quartet, a young French group, tearing into Hindemith’s Fourth Quartet.) In the twentieth century, as the audience for chamber music grew, quartets ventured into orchestral-sized halls, where they had to find a way to project their sound without losing intimacy. The Emersons manage that feat better than anyone on the circuit, but the exercise of playing a Brahms quartet in a room three or four times larger than the ones the composer knew in Vienna and Berlin is fundamentally absurd. To hear such music in, say, the eighty-seat theatre of the Austrian Cultural Forum New York—where the Calidore Quartet played some formidable Mozart and Beethoven in December—is a radically different experience. Distant, genteel sonorities become vivid, even violent.

The economic dilemma is clear: intimate spaces give the best sound, yet you can’t make a living playing for a few dozen people a night. So the latest generation of quartet players is prepared to put on a show anywhere: concert halls, high-school auditoriums, gymnasiums, art galleries, bars, clubs. However irregular the circumstances, quartets have the advantage of extreme mobility: no ensemble, classical or pop, can set up or get out more quickly. Above all, quartets are perfect—if sometimes neurotically—self-governing collectives. Autonomy has always been the chief appeal of this itinerant life: Joseph Joachim, the leader of the Joachim Quartet, a formative ensemble of the
late nineteenth century, once described his group to Brahms as "our little four-voiced republic."

The quartet repertory has undergone a major expansion, as recent performances demonstrate. When I was a kid, my parents regularly took me to hear chamber music, and I remember a steady diet of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, and Dvořák, with the occasional spice of Ravel or Bartók. These days, the early twentieth century occupies the center. In a pair of concerts at the Stone, in the East Village, the members of the JACK Quartet, who specialize in new music, raised a few eyebrows by venturing back in time to Brahms, presenting his Clarinet Quartet in collaboration with the composer-clarinetist Derek Bermel. Their rendition was a bit raw, and gave pleasure for that reason. Bermel brought a tangy, Gypsy-like style to his solos in the Adagio, drawing closer to Brahms's gruff spirit than clarinetists who fetishize a smooth, mellow tone. Bermel's own quintet, "A Short History of the Universe (as Related by Nima Arkani-Hamed)," also had a freewheeling folkish vibe, despite its cosmological title, which pays tribute to a leading string theorist. The JACK was most at home, though, in the shimmering, seething world of Ligeti's Second Quartet, the last work of the night.

The Momenta, which formed in 2004, has drawn notice for its wide range, championing contemporary work while maintaining a hold on classic Viennese fare. I saw them at the HiArt! Gallery, on West Twenty-ninth Street, which has been hosting a music-and-video series under the aegis of the composer Matthew Greenbaum. John Cage's "String Quartet in Four Parts" accompanied deliquescent landscapes by the contemporary artist John Gunin; Elizabeth Brown's "Piranesi," for theremin and strings, wove airy, eerie patterns around stop-motion video art by Lothar Osterburg, who, like the composer, drew inspiration from the fantastical architectural etchings of Giovanni Piranesi. (Brown doubled as thereminist.) There were strongly imagined new pieces by Kenneth Brown and David Fox, the one rich in dreamy textures and the other driven by propulsive counterpoint. Yet the Momenta were at their most potent in Haydn's Quartet Opus 20 No. 1, applying opulent, sustained legato in the slow movement. Few American players assume Haydn's idioms with such ease.

Graduates of leading conservatories have no trouble getting the notes right; getting the style right is another matter. Mann, in his Manhattan School workshops, urged participants to breathe life into the notation, to treat the instrumental lines as vocal phrases. (I watched two sessions, via Internet broadcast.) "I was constantly plagued by the lack of committed warmth to singing a piece of music," Mann told the Kleio Quartet. Likewise, he advised members of the Tesla Quartet to listen to a fiddler at a Hungarian restaurant in order to grasp the keening solos in the middle movement of Bartók's Fourth Quartet. Whether or not the Teslas had any luck tracking down a Hungarian fiddler in modern-day New York, they found sultrier tones at the closing concert, and the Kleio's account of the Janáček Second Quartet cracked with intensity, even as it stayed on pitch in high-flying passages. Brahms's C-Minor Quartet, in the hands of the Catalyst Quartet, rose to a rugged finish.

Even so, these performances felt too tight and tense at times, as if some invisible conductor were giving a strict beat. So it was good to encounter the rampaging energy of the Danish Quartet at Scandinavia House on Park Avenue. Whether in Mozart's D-Minor Quartet, Ligeti's First, or Nielsen's Fourth, these shaggy-haired Danes, who look as though they could be manning some inscrutable boutique in deepest Brooklyn, seemed to sing, dance, strut, and glide their way through the music. For the Dacapo label, they've recorded a superb survey of the Nielsen quartets; in zest and twang, it outdoes even vintage accounts by the Koppel Quartet, which had links to the composer. Whatever dark days await the larger institutions of classical music, quartets are furiously persisting. When the dinosaurs depart, the age of the mammals begins. ♦
BBC Radio 3 has announced its 2013 New Generation Artists – six young musicians that the station believes have the potential to be the next classical stars. Now in its 15th year, the scheme supports the most promising musicians via a series of Radio 3 broadcasts over a two-year period - including live broadcasts with BBC orchestras, lunchtime concerts from around the UK and regular studio recordings. Over the years the scheme has nurtured such artists as Benjamin Grosvenor, Alison Balsom, the Belcea Quartet, Christine Rice and Gwilym Simcock.

This year’s New Generation Artists are: the Danish String Quartet, winners of the 11th London International String Quartet Competition; British mezzo-soprano Kitty Whately, 2011 winner of the Kathleen Ferrier Award; Ukrainian mezzo-soprano Olena Tokar, finalist in the 2013 Cardiff Singer of the World competition; French viola player Lise Berthaud, winner of the Hindemith Prize at the Geneva International Competition in 2005; Swiss pianist Louis Schwitzgebel, second prize winner of the Leeds International Piano Competition; and Chinese pianist Zhang Zuo, first prize winner at the third Shanghai International Piano Competition and the 7th International Franz Liszt Piano Competition.

‘It’s fantastic to see this next wave of talented young musicians joining Radio 3’s New Generation Artists scheme,’ said BBC Radio 3 controller and Proms director Roger Wright. ‘In its 15 years the scheme has showcased and nurtured some of the brightest musicians working in the classical music world today and we’re looking forward to showcasing the 2013-2015 NGA artists to listeners across the UK.’
THOMAS ADÈS, PER NORGARD, HANS ABRAHAMSEN: QUARTETS Danish String Quartet (ECM New Series). For its debut recording on the ECM label, this formidable quartet offers a typically adventurous 20th-century program, including significant works by two Danes: the Modernist master Per Norgard’s Quartetto Breve, and Hans Abrahamsen’s arresting 10 Preludes (String Quartet No. 1). This exciting album opens with an early work, “Arcadiana,” by the inventive British composer Thomas Adès.
The Danish String Quartet presented a near flawless performance for the Dallas Chamber Music Society at Southern Methodist University’s Caruth Auditorium on Monday evening. They tackled two major pieces of the repertoire and something lighter as an *amuse-bouche* between them.

In general, the Danish Quartet delivered an impeccable performance of everything on the program. Intonation, bowing and ensemble were as perfect as humans can achieve. What is remarkable is that they rarely referred to each other for starts or other musical cues as they performed. They must have some kind of ESP going on, or maybe a Vulcan Mind Meld. Maybe it is the result of playing together all over the world for 17 years, but it must be something more than that. No matter how it was achieved, it produced a remarkable performance that sounded like there was only one player. This also helped them to achieve the noteworthy clarity of lines, so important in the contrapuntal writing of both composers (more about that later).

Another striking thing about their performance is the extraordinary legato that they achieve. It sounds like they have a circular bow.

As to intonation, it was immediately obvious that the same ESP applies to carefully matching pitches. It is rare to hear such dead-on intonation and, at intermission, nearly everyone was commenting on it.

They opened with Bartók’s First String Quartet, an early work written when he was still refining his unique style and musical voice. It was finished in 1909 when composers were beginning to battle the bastions of tonality. Schoenberg’s revolutionary second string quartet, written a year before, in 1908, featured two movements that were vaguely tonal but two others that struggled to escape the bounds of the tonal centers, even though they both ended with a traditional major chord. Once that seminal work hit the streets, everything changed and its influence on Bartók was no exception.

Each of Bartok’s six string quartets marks a milestone in his compositional career and creates a musical biography. The first one is all about unrequited love for Stefi Geyer, the violinist for which he wrote his violin concerto. He even quotes a motif from that larger work in the very contrapuntal first movement.

This brings us to the connection between the Bartók and the Beethoven’s String Quartet No. 14, Op. 131 that closed the concert. It mainly rests in the first movement of each. Both feature complex, slow counterpoint and the connections between the two works are obvious. How nice to hear them both on a single concert!

The lighter fare mentioned above was some Nordic folksongs that they
arranged themselves. They had as much fun playing them as we did hearing them. It was hard to keep your feet from moving. What was revealing was the similarity of these tunes to Irish and Scottish folk music and their adoption in the American south and Appalachia. To channel Gertrude Stein: a jig is a gigue, it appears
February 2017

DANISH QUARTET, TORLEIF THEDÉEN (CELLO)
ZANKEL HALL 24 OCTOBER 2016

'I would like a shot of that in the morning!' declared my friend, following the Danish Quartet's exuberant finale of Schubert's Quintet in C major. Among many virtues, the ensemble found exquisite balance with its superb collaborator, the cellist Torleif Thedéen. During the memorable first movement, Thedéen matched the group's cellist with every measured bow stroke, followed later by a duet with the violist.

In the fragile beauty of the slow movement, phrases were notable for the controlled pauses between them, until a magnificent moment when the opening melody sneaked in near the end. The scherzo had cinematic urgency, with a short sostenuto break — supernaturally quiet — before the vigorous, propulsive finale brought the sold-out crowd to its feet. A song by Nielsen arranged by the group's second violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen made a plaintive encore.

But the first half of the programme was equally impressive: a gripping traversal of Shostakovich's last and bleakest quartet, no.15. From the desiccated waltz near the beginning to the prolonged gasps for air that made the ending so painful, it would be difficult to imagine a more intense half-hour.

BRUCE HODGES
Today's golden age of string quartets glisters more and more. It can hardly be the case that the Danish Quartet practices more, or harder, or somehow more effectively than other quartets today. But Saturday night at Jordan Hall in the Celebrity Series the group gave a performance of Beethoven and Alfred Schnittke with ensemble playing at an unobtrusively superhuman level. From 1800, the 29-year-old Beethoven’s Opus 18 No. 4 is the only one of that set which has some of his C-minor dark to it, not a lot, both at the start and then sporadically throughout, along with nifty syncopations. The Danes rendered the work utterly musically, relaxed and unanimous, in hair-trigger rhythm. Rare imperfect intonation did not need to be noticed. The young men, presenting as Brooklyn beard farmers in Norse hipster black—violinists Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, violist Asbjørn Nørgaard, and cellist Frederik Øland—give little energy to overshaping moments, to overdemarcation. My lapsed-cellist date declared their performance “absolutely effing perfect” but perhaps “a little too varnished, and unengaged”. I myself thought it altogether marvelous, albeit somewhat rounded, true, lacking, rightly or wrongly, in that articulated and usually oversized Haydnesque crispness familiar from other quartets’ (particularly American) early Beethoven.
Russian composer Alfred Schnittke’s (1934-1998) music is an eclectic, referential postmodernism (Ted Libbey’s wording) in which everything could be used and parodied, even banal ideas, but with an urgency both serious and ironic. He wrote many dozens of film scores, and that facility shows everywhere in a post-Shostakovich, sometimes quasi-serial manner. His Quartet No. 3 opens with Orlando quoted in droning supplicative mode, followed by those (upcoming) Beethoven Grosse Fuge climbing intervals and eventual declaiming, and next much more poly-quote material, dramatically formed, not to say finely stewed: agitated perpetual motion, Soviet hoedown, Crumby insect swatting and swarming, tundral Ives, Dvorak hysterias and later Verklarte Nächte shrieks, humming Glassian chords, Vaughn Williams Tallis and then Górecki dronality, Grosse Fugue plucks, Russian Orthodox hymnody marching in half-steps, and back to Orlando supplication and changes wrought on D-S-C-H. The middle movement glimpses Classical formality in a sort of giddy crisis.

I found the Schnittke a stirring experience overall, and wish to hear it again. The Danish Quartet performed it so well, with such unstrained aplomb, that ... well, was it a little on the pat side? In any event it was more elegant than the Kronos’s read. In fact, during halftime I began to wonder if the Danes’ almost unbelievable unanimity, actually achieving the hoary ideal of a single wideband instrument, ever worked against them. Like other European quartets they deploy with rounded attacks and rounded releases, anti-crisp, anti-big, generally muted as to dynamic range, no overpresentation, no overbiting, no over—anything. It’s breathtaking to hear, to mix physiology—but are they not sometimes a bit ungripped, and ungripping?

I wrote to a chamber-music colleague who knew their work well. I went on about their oneness and streamlined sound, their geniality, their polish, none of it in the bad senses. How they were so much both lighter in touch and x-raying than most. I felt similarly to my first time hearing the Yale or the Tokyo (or the Casals) Quartets. “That sounds like them,” came the response. “I admire them, vivid personalities, musically smart and vibrant. ... Interesting to ponder this result of energy and quest for unanimity, and their sweet dispositions tinged with ‘don’t mess with me’!”

Beethoven’s Opus 130 was one of those transcendent concertgoing moments. I have recently heard exalted, yet quite different, renditions by the Jupiter and Leipzig Quartets. This Danish one sang nobly, exactly, with deep interiority, as if we were overhearing, and except for a stray cough Jordan Hall was as quiet, dead quiet, as I have ever heard it. The playing was effortless, perhaps a shade unurgent, Beethoven’s deaf whispers and throbs momentarily muted. You could briefly register how luscious the sound was before realizing that that was beside the point. But the performance had unbroken drive, and the choked beklemmt music was fully anxious and straitened, costing the composer tears, it was reported at the time, and again in his recollections. And then that Big Fugue, recentering the heard weight, to end a composition (Michael Steinberg) “unrelieved in ferocious vigor, limitless bold in harmony”, [its pried-open moments still] “so startling that you could almost think you were dealing with a badly spliced recording.” Eventually “the four instruments then unite in strong octaves like those at the beginning of the Overtura, and from there Beethoven moves swiftly to the end. The resolution of these extraordinary, unprecedented conflicts posed is surprising and
touching—a mixture of the exalted and the humorous that only Beethoven could have invented.”
The Danish String Quartet acquitted this strange, jarring work with a hair less vehemence and more musicality than the norm. The lost, falling-apart moments in the middle and before the end sounded more lost and fallen-apart than usual. They were secure-seeming even when not perfectly secure, so ensemble that even when they went off the road and hit the shoulder, losing sweetness (the first violin)—or in the Grosse Fuge sometimes it seems it’s Beethoven himself who’s responsible for the flailing—they did it together, every man, bobsled-style.
(TMI department: Halfway through the fugue my enthrallment was such that I drooled on my notes. Another first.) Crewing teams speak of swing, and psychology books about groups describe what it means to be in the flow. Good musical quartets learn about such states. But in almost all ways, these guys are Viking masters. If you’re a chamber type, do not miss them
Two recent performances of Franz Schubert’s sublime String Quintet in C Major provided an opportunity to test a common presumption in the classical-music business: that older performers invariably bring deeper insights to late works by the great composers. Schubert’s 50-minute piece, which adds a cello to the usual string-quartet instrumentation, is a late work by a prolific young man in the final stages of syphilis, written months before his demise at age 31 in 1828. Abundant in melodic invention, its pervasive mood swings suggest youthful exuberance as well as the looming shadow of death. So it was illuminating to hear the piece, aka the Cello Quintet, played by superb quartets at different stages of their lives. The first performance, presented by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center on Oct. 23 at Alice Tully Hall, was by the eminent Emerson String Quartet, now in its 40th anniversary season and winner of nine Grammy Awards. The second, on Oct. 26 at Carnegie’s Zankel Hall, was by the impressive Danish String Quartet. Its blond 30-something members, black-shirted on this occasion, began concertizing in 2002. These events also included music by Shostakovich and, on the Emerson program, the New York premiere of Mark-Anthony Turnage’s “Shroud.”

Both concerts were reminders of the changing of the guard taking place in the string-quartet world. Three acclaimed ensembles have disbanded during the last decade: the Melos Quartet in 2005, the Guarneri Quartet in 2009 and the Tokyo String Quartet in 2013. At the same time, a number of “millennial” quartets like the Danish are making their mark on the international scene: the Dover Quartet, the Elias, the Escher, the Pavel Haas and so on down the alphabet.

At Tully Hall, the way Emerson String Quartet violinist Philip Setzer varied the repetitions of the simple but eloquent opening theme in the Quintet’s Adagio movement could have served as a master class to them all: by turns straightforward, tender, assertive, sweet, sorrowful or ethereal. Fittingly for this anniversary concert, the guest cellist was David Finckel, co-artistic director of the Society, co-founder of the Music@Menlo Festival and the Emerson’s cellist for 34 years. The five musicians rendered the Scherzo’s lively opening theme in an appropriately jubilant manner. They were particularly effective in conveying the emotional subtext of some related passages, where it seems as if Schubert is saying, “I know I’m dying, but let’s dance!” And then, interrupted by strident cellos, the music briefly becomes overwrought, because he knows it may be his last chance to celebrate. Similarly, in the Scherzo’s contrasting Trio section, the Emerson gave the somber chordal passages a valedictory quality, wistful without
being lugubrious. Throughout the Quintet, they displayed a beautiful blend of sound and golden tone.

In their concert at Zankel, the Danish String Quartet (three of the performers are from Denmark, the other, from Norway) offered a fresh take on Schubert’s Cello Quintet. They brought a stronger sense of longing to the middle section of the Adagio, when the composer abruptly shifts to an impassioned aria. Here, as elsewhere, they employed a wider range of dynamic levels to “sculpt” the music, from soaring fortissimos to five shades of quietness. Overall, their tonal palette was silvery. At the end of the Quintet’s concluding Allegretto—with its gypsy rhythms and evocations of Viennese café music—where the Emerson communicated a kind of brooding intensity, the Danish intimated anger. It was a powerful moment. Guest cellist Torleif Thedéen’s velvety, finger-plucked pizzicatos in the Adagio and elsewhere added measurably to the performance.

Both quartets played Schubert’s Cello Quintet (and everything else on their programs) at such a high level that accuracy of intonation, ensemble precision and technical fluidity were a given. The Emerson’s rendering was insightful, warmly expressive and thrilling in its virtuosity. The Danish String Quartet’s performance had the finely honed brilliance of a fiery diamond, enabling the listener to experience the work anew. In this marvelous masterpiece, what both ensembles communicated probably had more to do with their ideas about the score than with their age.
On any given night, New York is full of extraordinary rites performed in basements and second-floor rooms. On Monday night, the Danish String Quartet carried out its regular professional duties, performing works by Shostakovich and Schubert at Carnegie’s underground Zankel Hall, and at the same time administered a raw kind of splendor. The concert opened with an almost intolerably dark and stripped-down performance of Shostakovich’s 15th and final quartet, from 1974. It’s a work of ravishing bleakness: The violin sings a cracked and lonely tune, struggling to get past its opening notes. The Danish quartet made it feel as though the voice could be snuffed out at any moment, and then the quartet would have ended, a whisper in the wind. Instead it stubbornly played on, as other instruments gathered, building the piece up from gasp to gasp until it formed the outline of a damaged soul. The funeral march in the final movement didn’t mark a passing, but rather described a burdensome existence. In these players’ hands, music accomplished what life often fails to do: fashion beauty out of pain. Shostakovich lived in a Soviet Union that honored and oppressed him, filling his days with dependency and fear. As I listened, I began to feel that if things go badly on
November 8, this should be my Election Night song. I might even have to start each day with it for the next four years. Replete, rich, and full of tragic euphoria, Schubert’s “C Major Cello Quintet” offers an antidote to Shostakovich’s bleakness. In the Adagio second movement, a quarter-hour of music I can’t imagine doing without, a quiet surf of melody rolls above lilting pizzicatos. The quartet, supplemented by cellist Torleif Thedéen, indulged Schubert’s rhythmic obsessiveness (dum-dum-DUM, dum-dum-DUM) and at the same time softened it into a heartbeat. The hardest thing about performing complex chamber music is to know the score so well that you create the illusion you’ve never heard it before. The Danes shot Schubert’s straits with bravado, letting the syncopations lurch a little on an upturned wave, jacking the intensity of a crescendo until it rattled, or planing into a pool of quiet. Every revelation felt inevitable; each repeated passage told a new tale. How can four thin blond men fuse so completely into a nimble, multi-bowed, poly-stringed organism that tracks the flitting shadows of a dead composer’s mind?
Anyone who has had the pleasure of hearing the young Danish Quartet knows that their playing comes from a different world than most string quartets. Their sound and blend are uniquely pure and beautiful, but it is their wonderful patience, sense of architecture, and always-present spirit and warmth, that most fully distinguishes them from other ensembles. With the Danish, one never notices technique: the music is fully internalized and ‘just unfolds’ with wonder and feeling, often finding serene and meditative corners. On their previous visit, the ensemble gave us a rewarding study of Beethoven, Shostakovich and the ‘art of the fugue’, combining the former’s exalted Op. 131 with the latter’s 9th. This concert stayed in the same territory, pairing Beethoven’s Op. 127 with Shostakovich’s final Quartet No. 15.
There will always be debate on how to perform the last works of these two great composers – and perhaps there should be. There is a long tradition that suggests that both late Beethoven and later Shostakovich exhibit a certain severity of utterance and an uncompromising jaggedness, reflecting the volatile mental states of two geniuses torn between the struggle of this world and the conception of the next. Here the ‘beauty’ that comes forth can be seen as a distilled and fragmented one, intensely personal and free of romantic adornment, and poking its head out from a myriad of other feelings that occur in close proximity: defiance, anger, play, and so on. Nonetheless, the Danish Quartet don’t exactly see things this way: their approach is certainly probing, but it is almost the opposite of severe or acerbic. Spirit, cultivation, and beauty literally abound, underlining the music’s warm flow and suspension and often smoothing out its sharper, more viscerally-etched, postures and contrasts.

So how well does this approach stand up? I deemed the concert of two years ago ‘fascinating’, but generally preferred the Shostakovich to the Beethoven. I thought the Danish’s approach found a type of subtle inward pain and a searching quality in the former that was revealing, yet I thought the Beethoven was too ‘soft’, allowing the austerity of the great opening fugue to colour the work too much. This time, the quartet’s playing was possibly even finer than last time (more clarity and tonal variety, and a bigger sound) yet my conclusion was exactly the same: the approach worked better for the Shostakovich 15th than the Beethoven 12th. Obviously, there is something about Beethoven that just can’t be played with; the Shostakovich was quite magnificent in its own way. Comprised of six consecutive adagios, Shostakovich’s last quartet is structurally unique, and it is natural to see to it as separated to some degree from his previous efforts in the genre. The premonition of death is the pervasive theme. A ghostly pallour in the strings can often be found, punctuated eventually by ‘shrieks’ and protesting soliloquies, only to end with the ‘whistle of the wind’. Nonetheless, trust the Danish Quartet to soften the implied programme, and probe the composition’s beauties almost objectively. They show that the work indeed can be linked to its predecessors, and encompasses as much a study of the composer’s life as his death.

The opening fugue had a tender melancholy in it, making passing reference to the flow and feeling in Beethoven’s Op. 131, but ultimately settling into the type of undulating motion and tonal tensions of the opening movement of Shostakovich’s Quartet No. 10. Everything moved forward with a feeling of transience -- ‘the earth moves on’ -- but pain as such was registered only implicitly, competing with the flow of life. The playing was pure and finely proportioned, conveying a deep sincerity and sense of inevitability, and sometimes a rustic hue. Time and again, we were moved to more meditative postures, the ensemble finding a stillness and suspension through a subtle control of dynamics and keen awareness of harmonies. I did not find the sequential solo crescendos (‘shrieks’) that followed either forbidding or bludgeoning; they were just strongly and objectively stated. Yet I did like the choral reference to the Quartet No. 8, almost a ‘calling card’ of the pain within all his quartets. There was a great sense of longing in the various violin and viola soliloquies, and often more tenderness than defiance. As we proceeded, what was notable is how warm and human everything was, and the fifth Adagio actually brought out the same rich sense...
of struggle and noble determination that one finds in the last movement of Quartet No. 4. The brief closing movement was as it should be: ethereal, set in the mists, with the whistle of the wind given a beautiful gossamer-like treatment. This interpretation was most satisfying emotionally: it is easy to paint the work with the veneer of death, but the Danish Quartet really found a way to convey the composer’s life as a noble, determined struggle, full of human feeling, even with the inevitable outcome lying in waiting.

Beethoven’s Quartet No. 12 can be seen to have many sharp edges and abrupt dramatic contrasts too, but the Danish’s beautifully poised and contemplative performance must be the most listener-friendly reading I have ever encountered. After introducing the concert through a brief fugue from the Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II, the strong majestic chords from the quartet took over attacca, launching a beautifully patient treatment of the opening Allegro. At deliberate tempos, the sense of inner dialogue was stunning. The spirit was always lyrical, focusing on the gentler ebb-and-flow in the movement and seldom registering any ‘grating’ moments at all. This lyrical dimension was taken even further in a very deeply felt Adagio, which had long lines and much warm shaping, and registered a unique sadness. The chording and pizzicato towards the end seemed to indicate that Schubert’s great String Quintet was the underlying model, although the ‘crazy dance’ towards the end might have fit either composer. The warmth and frolic of the Scherzando then took things back in another direction: to the Razumovsky Quartets, the movement emerging as sort of a cousin to the Scherzo of Op. 59, No. 1. The finale was full of energy, warmth of spirit and rustic allusions, and moved us solidly into the Romantic era. Its buoyancy and rhythmic drive at the finish made me think fleetingly of Dvorak.

Overall, another fascinating trip from the Danish Quartet -- and so coherently and beautifully executed. Nonetheless, unlike the Shostakovich, the Beethoven again did not seem to hit the composer square on. I think the approach was just too smooth and cultivated to capture either the myriad of conflicting forces and tensions operating on the composer in his last years or the raw iron in his response to these realities. But ‘hats off’ to any young ensemble that can think and play like this: it is truly remarkable.

I was also touched by the little compendium of Danish folk melodies that served as the encore, giving us a taste of their latest CD, ‘Wood Works’.
PLUCK AND VERVE

I believe it was Big Daddy Kane who said “Aces ain’t easy.” However it was, Danish String Quartet likely wouldn’t dispute the assertion, but they certainly have made a case for the often treasury British composer’s warmth and worth in their ECM debut, which opens with Adesh Aubeela’s, the touring, clari n’s highlight of the album. The early Aubeela is coupled with String Quartets No. 3 from Norgaard (Quartetto Basso) and Abrahamson (in Prelude). If we’re Peter Travers, I’ll call the program “a high octane tour de force.” Instead, I’ll say that there’s an infectious energy and pugnacious attack from this Quartet that propels the music forward—and has me eagerly anticipating what they’ll be up to next. — Ben Finsane
A thousand years ago, Norsemen colonized the New World.
On Friday evening, the Danish String Quartet landed as the opening act for SummerFest and won over the audience at Sherwood Auditorium.
If you’re going to open, you might as well open big. Janáček’s “String Quartet no. 2” is a wild, intense ride; it was the composer’s attempt to depict his decade-long love (probably unrequited) for a married woman 38 years his junior.
Its form is intuitive, manic repetitions contrasting with mysterious skitterings, intercut with puzzling interruptions. It takes a special ensemble to make all this convincing. That ensemble is the Danish String Quartet. Its unity was astonishing, an oneness of purpose created by an intense precision of rhythm, matched timbres and ensemble balance. That might sound mechanical, but the group’s ability to merge into a single organism transcended technical issues, permitting us to focus entirely on Janáček’s puzzling but powerful score.
The quartet soared, mused, cried out in pain. Every crazy change in mood, speed and dynamics was remarkably rendered.
When Janáček called for solos, they were played with conviction.
First violinist Frederik Øland climbed ledger line ladders in the last two movements, each stratospheric note intensely throbbing and always on pitch. Asbjørn Nørgaard poured out warm, focused baritone-like melodies on his viola.
When they touched down at UCSB’s Campbell Hall on Tuesday, March 1, it was easy to see (and hear) why the Danish String Quartet have become one of the hottest attractions on the international classical circuit. Fredrik Oland, Rune Tonsgaard Sorenson, Asbjorn Norgaard, and Fredrik Schoyen Sjolin may have the hipster good looks of a stylish rock band, but their performance is rooted in a tradition of string quartet practice that goes back centuries. By bringing the freshness, vigor, and even irreverence of youth to elegant, sophisticated renditions of important works from the string quartet repertoire, they are uniting a new audience of people their own age and younger with those who have long cherished this music.

The program began with the Quartet no. 6 in B-flat Major from Beethoven’s early cycle Op. 18. This work—the last of Beethoven’s first set of string quartets—ends with an unusual movement that has earned its own nickname, “La Malinconia.” Alternating between Adagio and Allegretto quasi Allegro themes, the piece established the premise of the evening’s program, which was the at times complicated relation between musical pleasure and melancholy feelings. In other words, why does sad music sound so good?

The String Quartet No. 1 “The Kreutzer Sonata” of Leos Janáček followed, and listeners were ravished by the group’s masterful command of the composer’s abstract narrative art. The evening’s highlight came last, as the performance of Mendelssohn’s String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 13 was consistently thrilling and brought out all the mixed emotions promised from the beginning. Written in the aftermath of a failed love affair by a brilliant 17 year-old with no inhibitions about expressing his feelings through music, it made a captivating conclusion to a great concert.
The Danish String Quartet’s violist Asbjorn Norgaard expressed surprise at the number of people crowded into the Mary Seaton Room of Kleinhans Music Hall given the weather, noting that it was “nice to see that it isn’t just Scandinavians that know how to deal with snow.” It shouldn’t have been too surprising though, especially given the advance reviews the group had been receiving the past few years. This was one of those concerts where the attendees will remember with fondness and perhaps even awe. The program was well thought out, the playing was marvelous, and everything that could go right, did.

Two of the works played have had multiple performances in the Buffalo Chamber Music Society’s series – Ludwig van Beethoven’s early B flat major quartet (op. 18, no. 6) and Felix Mendelssohn’s A minor score (op. 13) – while Alfred Schnittke’s third string quartet received its first airing in Kleinhans Music Hall. The one thing they all had in common, other than being written for a quartet, was a tie to Beethoven, one by authorship, one by direct influence (Mendelssohn), and the last by direct quotes (Schnittke).
Beethoven’s piece was probably where he really began to step into the future. The influences of Franz Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart were in attendance but, especially in the second movement Adagio, the mature composer was starting to raise his profile. For all intents and purposes, it revealed the heart of the program, dancing with emotion and harmony. Schnittke’s score had that Dmitri Shostakovich shadow cast over the proceedings, but quotes Beethoven’s “Grosse Fugue,” and a lovely snippet from Orlando de Lasso brought 19th and 16th century ghosts into the 20th century mix. The music resulting from this kind of musical quotation was intense, moving, and, by turns, disturbingly beautiful. Norgaard probably had this particular piece in mind during the pre-concert talk when he made the point that not all music worth playing is beautiful, in part because composers often attempt to create material which challenges instead of sating the senses. Mendelssohn’s work was the kind of music that seems to have sprung fully formed from the pen of a seasoned craftsman instead of from an extremely talented young person. It showcased the influence of Beethoven’s late quartets while, at the same time, breaking new ground (re: string quartet writing) for the composer. As an encore, the musicians performed a brief arrangement of a Scandinavian folk tune, the “Waltz after Lasse in Lyby” that proved the perfect aperitif for the evening. Overall, it would be tough to say which was the finest performance of the evening; things were going to be a matter of a listener’s taste. One thing for sure though was that the group delivered on all counts and, if it ever comes to town again, chamber music fans should make their plans to attend. Really. They’re that good.
Danish String Quartet closes CMS Beethoven cycle with revelatory simplicity  
By George Grella

There is more classical music in existence than any listener could hear in a lifetime. The big names, the great composers, dominate attention, and as much as their work deserves that, the constant presence of the same figures on concert programs—Bach, Mozart, Brahms, et al—can be come predictable. Then one gets to the late Beethoven string quartets, and nothing is predictable or humdrum. The music is so mysterious and compelling, so wonderful to hear and so consistently interesting that they sound fresher and more adventurous than most works that have followed.

Sunday in Alice Tully Hall, for the final concert of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center’s Beethoven cycle, the Danish String Quartet explored some of these late works: the Op. 131 and Op. 135 quartets and the alternate Allegro finale to Op. 130.

As in previous concerts in this cycle, the event was the meeting between great music and a superb ensemble. The Danish String Quartet has been a popular and critical favorite at Chamber
Music Society concerts the past few seasons, and their performance Sunday made clear why. They play at the highest artistic and technical level, and they play with a thought-through approach to what they find in the music and how they feel it should sound.

The program was in chronological order of the compositions with the Quartet in C-sharp minor, Op. 131, the only piece on the first half. At approximately 40 minutes, that half passed in a sense of quick suspension, a tumult of ideas and reveries caught in the stillness between breaths.

From the opening few bars, the specialness of the performance was clear; the Danish quartet’s sound was gorgeous, and their attention to the expressive riches of dynamics and phrasing was ravishing. They played the music with as beautiful a sound and shape as they could give it, yet with a self-effacing simplicity—it seemed like Beethoven was playing them.

Some quartets play Beethoven with just an emphasis on making a beautiful sound, others play the music with a focus on psychological intensity and physical aggression. The Danish group played the music with a feeling of lightness. There was nothing insubstantial about their approach—they gave each other air and space, which let through both the substance of the music and their soft, woolen instrumental color.

They also played with an agility akin to a great athlete who makes the difficult look graceful and efficient. The unique energy that Beethoven coiled inside his rhythms—especially in the Vivace movement of the Quartet in F major, Op. 135—released like a stone skipping across water, picking up speed and energy as it went. Few quartets manage to keep such a lithe and perfectly ordered pulse going underneath the violin syncopation as the Danes did. Their playing for the entire Op. 135 Quartet had extraordinary balance and clarity.

The concert closed with the finale to the Op. 130 Quartet in B flat major (written as an alternate to the Grosse Fugue, the original final movement). Coming at the end of the concert, this Allegro felt like a substantial encore. Graceful as in the rest of the concert, the tempo had an easy quickness to it, with wit and vivacious energy.

The performances throughout the evening offered a rare instance of musicians delivering the quality of the sublime that is in Beethoven’s late music. Deaf and increasingly ill, the music is both wildly mercurial and organically logical. Thoughts seem to come and go at random, until there is a moment that brings everything together. The Danish String Quartet captured this in an ideal and revelatory way—the profound intellectual and emotional intensity of Beethoven conveyed in a vessel of beautiful simplicity.
The young players of the superb Danish String Quartet have been performing the four quartets by Denmark’s own Carl Nielsen ever since their student days. Yet these players had never performed all four on a single program until Thursday evening at the intimate Rose Studio, in a concert presented by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

It makes intuitive sense that artists from Denmark would play Nielsen’s scores so distinctively. Still, what exactly is “Danish” about Nielsen’s music? Even these players have trouble answering that question, a difficulty that came through in charming introductory comments from Asbjorn Norgaard, the ensemble’s violist, about the String Quartet No. 3 in E flat, completed in 1898. Nielsen wrote this piece while temporarily separated from his wife. You can hear his turmoil, Mr. Norgaard said, in the expansive opening Allegro and the hymnal Andante, suffused with bittersweet lyricism. But in the last two movements, Mr. Norgaard observed, the mood changes, and the music turns almost goofy. Some people, he added,
think that this is “a Danish thing,” to be “very deep and very superficial at the same time.” But, he added dryly, “we don’t know about that.”

What they do know is how to be an exceptional quartet, whatever repertory they play. (The other members are the violinists Frederik Oland and Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen and the cellist Fredrik Schoyen Sjolin.) In this commanding account of the Third Quartet, the first movement sounded like music trying to be an exuberant late-Romantic Allegro, but roughed up by modernist jolts and sudden shifts. The slow movement unfolded with glowing sound and smoothness. The final two movements were slyly playful, especially the finale, a wild-eyed rustic dance.

What makes Nielsen’s quartets seem the work of someone Danish came through, for me, with the Quartet No. 2 in F minor (1890). Nielsen, 24 at the time, wrote the piece in Germany, where he had gone to study. Though the work hews to a traditional four-movement structure, the teeming music “jumps from one idea to the next, forgetting about the old one,” as Mr. Norgaard put it. Nielsen showed the piece to the great violinist and conductor Joseph Joachim, who praised it but suggested ways to make it less radical. The young Nielsen ignored him. Maybe that was something essentially Danish: to come from a place close enough to the centers of new music in Germany to learn something, but culturally removed enough to stick to your own instincts.

The String Quartet No. 1 in G minor (1887-88) already shows Nielsen searching for his own voice. The Quartet No. 4 in F (1906, later revised) is almost Neo-Classical in character. Yet just below its pleasing surface, the music abounds in quirky strangeness. This rewarding program was the second installment in the society’s series of complete cycles of string quartets by five composers. Coming before the end of the season are Bartok, Ginastera and Leon Kirchner.
Boyish Danish String Quartet all business on stage

By Kenneth Delong

Music for the string quartet constitutes the musical centre of any organization, like the Calgary Pro Musica Society, whose mission is to bring to its audience the best in chamber music. And it is only natural for there to be a constant look out for the next hot property.

A year ago, fresh from its win in the Banff International String Quartet composition the Dover Quartet wowed the audience and jury, going on to increasing fame and fortune. But in the twinkling of an eye things can change, and the already crowded world of fine young string quartets will have to squeeze a little tighter to include (for North America, at least) a newcomer: The Danish String Quartet.

Boyishly tousled, and sporting Justin Trudeau’s concept of hair, the quartet is all business when it is on stage, its performance persona as sensitively inward and reflective as the Dover Quartet is North American in its extroverted approach.

Most of the music in this concert was of the kind that makes its musical points when performed with ultra refinement, pliancy of phrasing and tone, and a sense of reflection. In music of this type, the Danish Quartet has no peer.

This was evident from the outset in the wonderfully crafted account of Haydn’s rarely heard String Quartet in C major, Op. 54, No. 2, one of the composer’s most quirky works, and with more than the usual amount of slow, lyrical music. The performance was a lesson in how to penetrate into Haydn’s unique musical world, filled with articulated musical classic-period grammar and humour. The balance and good taste in projecting these musical values was on full display here, the humanity of Haydn’s music coming through at all times.

This was especially notable in the unique slow movement and in the quirky finale, both of which emerged as special and crafted with real individuality. The syntax of Classic period music, so difficult to find in performances these days, was the strongest side of this performance, making The Danish String Quartet one of the current masters of this style of music.

The concert included Thomas Ades first string quartet, entitled Arcadiana. As the quartet mentioned from the stage, Ades is a hot property today, his operatic works and many other pieces regularly performed and sought-after by
performing groups. This earlier work was attractive and was certainly well performed, particularly in the O Albion movement that has already found a niche among music lovers. Overall, the quartet is clearly the work of a highly capable composer, even if the titles of the movement appeared to be more a composer's conceit than of particular use to a listener. Mostly abstract and spare, the individual movements drew imaginatively conceived sounds and textures from the members of the quartet, the piece emerging as a series of miniature musical poems in a modernist style.

Presented with evident understanding and commitment, the work provided an excellent contrast to the Haydn, if proving a bit challenging for the audience.

The final work on the concert was Beethoven's final string quartet (Op. 135), which, like the opening work, found the players in excellent form. More lyrical than dramatic, this quartet, with its strikingly beautiful slow movement, was the perfect vehicle to showcase what the Danish Quartet does so exceptionally well — perfect balance within the individuality of the players, and with the emphasis upon lyricism. But there was energy and good humour here as well as, including a fine projection of Beethoven's wry wit in the final movement.

It its conception of quartet performance the Danish Quartet stands slightly to the side of what North American audiences normally encounter. They have the courage to play to the centre of the music, trusting that the audience will follow if this centre is strongly and clearly articulated — and this it most certainly is. The opposite of the notion of “playing to the audience,” this approach offers its own special internal world, giving the Danish Quartet its individual performing voice in a world frequently notable only for its efficiency. It was a concert to treasure.
Danish String Quartet’s ambitious program proves rewarding

By David Weininger

Even among the large crop of superb youngish string quartets — those with between five and 15 years under their belts — the Danish String Quartet stands out. The foursome — violinists Frederik Oland and Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen, violist Asbjorn Norgaard, cellist Fredrik Schoyen Sjölin — boasts a confidence and command beyond the 15 years it’s been together. Having made its Boston debut in 2013 in the Celebrity Series of Boston Debut Series, it chose a riskier and more ambitious program for its visit to the Cape Cod Chamber Music Festival on Monday, a concert that was as comprehensively rewarding as any chamber-music performance in recent memory.

The quartet’s dark, velvety sound was apparent in two of Mendelssohn’s Four Pieces for String Quartet (Op. 81), making them sound unusually tender. It also made the gentle opening of Shostakovich’s Ninth Quartet into a
comfortingly nostalgic dream. But when the music turned bitter and impassioned, the quartet’s sound quickly became more acerbic thanks to Oland’s slashing interjections from the second chair, a perfect foil to Sorensen’s mellow sound. (The two switch off in first chair.) The finale, a juggernaut that reaches hard-won victory only after ardent struggle, was electric.

Alfred Schnittke’s Third Quartet was the evening’s most impressive achievement, if only because of the music’s sheer strangeness. The piece is openly haunted by the past, as quotations from Lassus’s “Stabat Mater” and Beethoven’s “Grosse Fuge” collide with an unsettlingly dissonant vocabulary. The music seems too sinister for pastiche, challenging your conception of what the composer’s “real” style actually is.

The DSQ’s performance was impassioned, precise, and brilliant in ways both technical and conceptual. The “Grosse Fuge” itself followed, sounding even more avant-garde than it usually does with the memory of what Schnittke had made of it still fresh in the ears. The performance was notable not only for its exhilaration but also for the careful pacing and planning that went into it. Each segment of this highly sectionalized work seemed to bring something new and unexpected.

The demanding program was given a rapturous reception at Dennis Union Church, so the Quartet played a brief encore from its homeland: a Christmas-themed chorale by Danish composer Carl Nielsen. It offered what nothing else on the program did: serene, untroubled beauty.

Do not lose track of this group: Even by today’s high standards, it offers something very special.
Stately Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra, a Brave Danish String Quartet

By Anthony Tommasini

In recent summer seasons, Jane Moss, the artistic director of Lincoln Center, has successfully transformed the Mostly Mozart Festival. What was once a stodgy diet of Classical-era hits and occasional novelties has become a varied festival that includes a valuable platform for contemporary music. This week, for example, the festival presents the American stage premiere of George Benjamin’s acclaimed opera “Written on Skin,” with Alan Gilbert conducting the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, a major event.

Still, this summer, as in recent seasons, the main programs by the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra at Avery Fisher Hall are hewing closely to Classical period staples, as with Friday’s program, conducted by Edward Gardner, the impressive 40-year-old music director of the English National Opera in London. For what it was, the concert was excellent, especially the crackling, clearheaded account of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony that Mr. Gardner drew from the orchestra after intermission. The festival did offer a real musical adventure on Friday, but only after the orchestra concert, up in the intimate, inviting Kaplan Penthouse.

There, the exciting young players of the Danish String Quartet made their Mostly Mozart debut as part of A Little Night Music, the popular series of hourlong programs at 10 p.m. The quartet played an intriguing program: two Fugues from Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier, arranged for string quartet by Mozart; Thomas Adès’s “Arcadiana,” a rapturously strange and engrossing work composed in 1994; and, to end, Beethoven’s visionary and slightly crazed Grosse Fuge, played here with such conviction and command that this thorny late piece sounded utterly exhilarating, even playful at times. The concert by the festival orchestra certainly offered high-quality performances. Mr. Gardner opened with a colorful account of Weber’s Overture to “Der Freischütz,” bringing telling dramatic shape and a feel for surprise to the episodic score. Then the excellent Scottish pianist Steven Osborne was the soloist in Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 24 in C minor (K. 491). In the first movement, passages of grim turmoil in this elusive piece are balanced by elements of regal elegance and somber restraint. It’s hard to achieve that balance, and Mr. Osborne and Mr. Gardner seemed to be searching for it. The tempos varied: Sometimes Mr. Osborne played with hushed mystery; other times with restless intensity. All was fine in the Larghetto second movement, however, in this graceful performance, touched with a little suspense. The finale was the highlight, full of urgency, sweep and slyly shifting moods.

Still, it sends a mixed message when the festival farms out contemporary music and unusual works into concerts beyond the safe confines of Avery Fisher Hall.
Glittering marvels
Sublime playing by three quartets, and poetic pianism by Melvyn Tan
By Paul Driver

The City of London Festival, now in its 53rd installment, is less preoccupied with classical music than it used to be — it’s distinctly more populist — but this is still the main strand, and the opening event was a concert of rare quality. The engaging young Danish String Quartet gave a programme in the glittery luxuriousness of the Plaisterers’ Hall that deftly combined the lofty and the demotic. In the first half, Quartet No 2 in F minor by Carl Nielsen — whose 150th anniversary is upon us — was followed by Beethoven’s E flat quartet, Op 74, nicknamed the “Harp”, while the second half was a stylish survey of Nordic folk music.

The Nielsen seldom appears in our concert halls, but proved a brilliant, dramatic work in the Beethovenian tradition, and was projected by these players with vividness and ardour. The Harp account, too, had terrific vitality and a fine precision; and their way with folk music was not dissimilar. They transformed raw materials from Denmark, the Faroes and Norway, in adroit arrangements with their own quartet-textural appeal. They demonstrated — as their violinist-presenter said they would — that rock’n’roll originated not in jazz, but in a tiny village in Norway. And they revealed to me, if unintentionally, how much of the phraseology and rhythm of a great Finnish, rather than Danish composer, Sibelius, stems from such sources.
Danish Quartet
New York

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's Artistic Director Wu Han came into the intimate Rose Studio to introduce the Danish String Quartet. She was very proud that the organization had found this remarkable group. They are in the first of a three-year residency with CMS Two, a program for young musicians and ensembles on the precipice of international careers in chamber music. The four blonde, tousled, striking musicians are in their early 30s and have been together (with one exception) for 12 years. They made their NY debut 10 years ago as the Young Danish Quartet, having met and formed as students in Copenhagen. In 2008 cellist Fredrik Sjolin joined violist Asbjorn Norgaard and violinists Frederik Oland and Rune Sorensen.

From the first chord of Debussy's quartet, I knew that perfection of ensemble and unanimity of interpretation would characterize the evening's performance. Only in my own chamber performances have I been seated close enough to the other musicians to make eye contact, but here I was close enough to observe every interaction between these string players. It was a memorable, strong account of one of the masterpieces of the literature. The hushed, barely audible ending of the third movement (marked "blissful and as soft as possible") was revelatory, with all four men making judicious use of their mutes. The finale was a rainbow of colors and textures; as Debussy wrote, "Any sounds in any combination and in any succession are henceforth free to be used in a musical continuity."

Pianist Gilles Vonsattel, also a member of CMS Two, joined in for the other work on the program, Louis Vierne's Piano Quintet (1917-18). Vierne, organist at Notre Dame for nearly 40 years, wrote this big work after the death of his son in World War I. It is very chromatic, thickly written, and has a true virtuoso piano part. It is to the entire ensemble's credit that all of the contrapuntal lines were clearly delineated. As in the Debussy, recurring themes and motives tie the movements together. Unlike the Debussy, Vierne's work is rare and has almost no performance history. I felt privileged to first encounter this work in all of its romantic glory at this concert. The musical depth the Danes and Vonsattel brought were astonishing. They missed none of the excitement either. Their convincing performance often created a huge sound in a relatively small performance space. It was akin to a big romantic piano concerto.

The Rose Rehearsal Studio is on the 10th floor of the Rose building, a part of Lincoln Center just across 65th Street from Avery Fisher Hall and the Metropolitan Opera. Much of Julliard is also in the same building, as are the main offices of the CMS. The concerts are typically about an hour long and performed twice at 6:30 and 9:00. Several of the late night performances are also streamed over the Internet. There are only 100 seats, and almost all concerts are sold out at $50 a seat. The early concert has traditional seating, but the later has chairs arranged around small tables. This was the only time in my life that I attended a concert and then got to see a second performance of the same program on my computer after I got home. There were many superb camera angles, excellent audio, and state-of-the-art engineering. The performances were even more exciting the second time around. This kind of inventive programming and presentation bodes well for the future of classical music.

James Harrington
Flourishes From Denmark
By James R. Oestreich

Anyone listening to the Danish String Quartet for the first time on Friday evening didn't have to wait long to figure out what all the raves have been about. From the start of the opening work, Haydn's Quartet in C (Op. 54, No. 2), to its hushed ending, the group exhibited a remarkable smoothness and balance that left ample room for strong individuality.

Alert to Haydn's many surprises and twists, the players — Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen and Frederik Oland, violinists; Asbjorn Norgaard, violist; and Fredrik Sjolin, cellist — lent a deeply, almost comically, tragic cast to the little trio section of the Menuetto.

Then, happily, they seconded the Danish National Symphony, which at its recent Carnegie Hall appearance proselytized for their great compatriot Carl Nielsen, performing his Quartet No. 4. Here the individuality came to the fore in an imaginative display of tone colors, the quartet making a wholly persuasive case for a powerful work seldom heard hereabouts.

Only in the final piece, Brahms's burly Piano Quintet, with Jon Kimura Parker as pianist, did the Danish players show their age, or rather their youth. As Mr. Parker tried to stir drama in the opening movements, the quartet seemed still to be concentrating on beauty and blend of sound, an unusual approach to this music, though one not without its rewards.

But the Scherzo and the Finale seemed to pull the performers together in common purpose and passion, bringing the concert to a triumphal conclusion.
To many classical music lovers, “crossover” is a dirty word. And who can blame them? The holiday season is especially rich in ill- advised CD releases by opera stars belting out operetta arias or crooning Christmas jingles in arrangements that do no favors to either the singers or the songs.

The string quartet scene, too, buzzes with crossover energy. On Monday at Zankel Hall, Brooklyn Rider performs selections from its new album, “Almanac” (Mercury Classics), featuring pieces commissioned by a rainbow of musicians from the worlds of folk, indie rock and jazz. Last month, the Danish String Quartet presented arrangements of Scandinavian folk tunes taken from its new CD, “Wood Works” (Dacapo), at SubCulture. That same evening at Zankel Hall, Quatuor Ébène, from Paris, capped a performance of Mozart, Mendelssohn and Bartok with a samba- flavored encore taken from its recent album “Brazil” (Warner).

But here’s the difference. Not only is the music from these ventures engrossing, satisfying and fun, it also enriches the way the ensembles play the core chamber repertory. To borrow a term from the world of sports, this isn’t crossover. It’s cross training.

Take Brooklyn Rider. This multitalented quartet has toured with the Silk Road Ensemble and played alongside the banjo virtuoso Béla Fleck, the Iranian kamancheh player Kayhan Kalhor and
the Irish star fiddler Martin Hayes. In a phone interview, Johnny Gandelsman, one of Brooklyn Rider’s violinists, said these collaborations deepened the quartet’s approach to the standard classical repertory.

“Those are oral traditions, so the listening and the learning had to be very different,” Mr. Gandelsman said. “A lot of it is improvised. And when you transfer that experience onto the page, you can look at a Brahms score and see a written-out improvisation and remember that feeling of what it’s like to actually make something up on the spot.”

That feeling came across strongly and joyfully during Ébène’s performance of Mendelssohn’s String Quartet in A minor (“Ist es wahr?”) at Zankel. The piece has a flashy first violin part full of brilliant cadenzas. The violinist Pierre Colombet rendered them with a spur-of-the-moment wit that was almost certainly sharpened during his forays into Brazilian jazz improvisation.

And what better way for classical musicians to hone their sense of rhythm and swing than in styles that are still functionally danceable? The sprightly minuet of Mozart’s String Quartet in E flat (K. 428) that the Èbène offered during the same concert, the courtly dance in the third movement of the Mendelssohn: Would they have had the same graceful zing if it hadn’t been for all that samba training?

Mr. Gandelsman said that while preparing for performances of the complete Bach Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin, he is drawing on his experience playing jigs and reels alongside Mr. Hayes. “To see Martin play dances, to know what it means to play a jig when you’re not playing it off the page, is perhaps more valuable than listening to a great Baroque violinist play a Bach gigue,” he said.

Playing nonclassical music also calls for a different sound. For its recording of folk songs and wedding tunes from Denmark and the Faroe Islands, the Danish String Quartet created a particular color palette — fine grained, sober and discreet — that pays tribute to the choral tradition it draws on. The quartet has made a specialty of recording the music of Carl Nielsen, Denmark’s great Romantic composer. (In February, it will perform his Fourth Quartet at a Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center concert at Alice Tully Hall.) Delving into the folk culture of the region is a way of examining the musical soil from which Nielsen’s works grew. And glints of that cool, silvery folk sound came through in alluring flashes when the Scandinavians gave a searing performance of Debussy’s String Quartet at the Rose Studio at Lincoln Center last month.

Across the new generation of versatile, adventurous ensembles, you can also detect the influence of contemporary string music, and its obsession with glassy harmonics and bleached, whistling sounds created by bowing close to the bridge. Some of that extended technique may not have been in use during Debussy’s time or Bartok’s, but using it judiciously can create hauntingly atmospheric sounds.

Some string quartets, including the JACK Quartet and the Escher String Quartet, have reached back to the queasy harmonies of Gesualdo. Playing those — with all the discipline they require in terms of intonation and vibratoless sound — sets a quartet up to tackle the dissonances in a Mozart slow movement.

Not every chamber music aficionado will want to follow these ensembles as they explore new terrain. But the borders dividing classical chamber music, folk and world music were always more fluid than purists like to admit. “We are lucky that those distinctions are crumbling,” Mr. Gandelsman said. “People can find connections that have always been there, but have long been forgotten. And people look at things with fresh eyes.”
Danish String Quartet makes a truly fab four in Santa Barbara

By Mark Swed

Danes are the most content of the world’s great discontents. Credited as home to the happiest people on Earth, Denmark — and Copenhagen in particular — is home to what has been called the world’s best restaurant, the most environmentally friendly urban bike lanes, some of the world’s best design and most beautiful people.

It has also given us the marvelous Danish String Quartet, which appeared in Hahn Hall at the Music Academy of the West on Tuesday night.

The secret to all that satisfaction is often credited to an inherent Danish fatalism, an acceptance of life as it is. The Danish String Quartet embodies a great deal that is admirable about Scandinavia. It has a stunningly elegant rounded sound, four guys in their early 30s who play like one. They are also four hip guys who appear to be going through a little bit of an identity crisis. Like another Fab Four of old, every new recording or publicity shot reveals different degrees of facial hair and different hairstyles, along with increasingly informal dress.
The quartet's repertory also is going through a bit of upheaval, adding modern angst and folk music repose to otherwise solid classical foundation. The group's latest release, "Wood Works," is bathed in an aura of backwoods Scandinavian fiddlers. In the recommended high-quality vinyl version, the LP jacket looks as if the record could be a Danish classical update of the Band. In a rare Southern California appearance as part of UC Santa Barbara's Arts & Lectures series, the ensemble felt Danish to the core. (The quartet will finally make its local debut in February in the Coleman series at Caltech.) It began with Haydn's late String Quartet, Opus 77, No. 1, a work upbeat on the surface, but leave it to these Danes to show Haydn's surprise harmonies and turns of phrase to be hidden dark corners in an otherwise aging composer-optimist. It ended with Beethoven's most visionary late quartet, No. 14 in C-Sharp Minor, Opus 131. In this case, Opus 131 served as a corrective to the evening's middle score. In 2011, the Danish String Quartet and composer Thomas Agerfeldt Olesen were awarded the Carl Nielsen Prize, Denmark's largest cultural prize, which is named after the country's national composer. It seemed only natural for the players to ask Olesen to write a string quartet for them. "Nielsen was a positive guy," violist Asbjorn Norgaard explained to the audience. "Olesen is not a positive guy." Nielsen's most famous symphony is called "The Inextinguishable," a work in which music is meant to show that, depressing as life is, there is a high moral need for struggle, and that music can lift the spirit to higher purpose. Olesen has titled his Seventh Quartet "The Extinguishable." It is a piece full of interruptions, just as the essence of life is a series of interruptions that lead to the final one. The quartet starts out with the cello stuck in a rut, bowing the same note over and over. The other instruments play fluty figures, as though a kind of string quartet birdsong might be a freeing agent. A hauntingly tonal middle section is, as Norgaard described it, a memory of when you might once have had hope. It is inevitably full of stops and starts. The cello figure returns at the end of the piece, but the struggle is over, and it now sounds almost ethereal. "Life isn't going to go on forever," Norgaard explained. "Since we don't have any hope, maybe it's a good thing that we don't live forever." In this context, the group made Beethoven's great C-Sharp Minor string quartet into "the unflappable." Over a 40-minute span, Beethoven fights gravity, in both senses of the word. He is gravely serious and struggling with freeing himself from earthly struggle. The players were here both as Scandinavians riveted to the land and as artists questing for liberation. Their command of the quartet's challenging arch-shape formal structure was complete. They could be grounded in their tone or mystical. They allowed time to stand still, and they could assume the pose of excitingly aggressive rockers. They did it all. Beethoven, however, was no fatalist but, rather, a spiritually transcendent discontent. As an evolving young string quartet, the Danish provides inevitably young Beethoven and inevitability. It is better thus far at providing answers than letting spiritual provocations remain mysterious. But there could be no arguing with great playing.
The Danish String Quartet is now a dozen years old, and though its members are still boyish and gangly, the group is in full artistic flower. After its performance last year at the Library of Congress, I wrote: “It is a true four-way collaboration. The violinists trade off the first chair, and no personality dominates (at least in performance). The young artists are all very fine instrumentalists, and in matters of blend, intonation and technical dispatch, the group is certainly world-class.” On Wednesday at the Terrace Theater, it was, if anything, better; this is one of the best quartets before the public today.

The program, presented by Washington Performing Arts, was a bit conservative — Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Shostakovich (No. 9) — but with playing on this level, it didn’t matter. While the Danish does not wring the last ounce of gutsiness out of the music and can
sound a little sleepy at slow tempos, the clarity and musical detail of its performances are rare indeed. Also, the group would sound still richer if its violist had a larger instrument; the silvery timbre blends nicely with the violins, but the lower end of the quartet could use more heft.

Mendelssohn’s “Capriccio” encapsulated the group’s profile; in the introduction, the artists were a little too willing, perhaps, to make musical points by slowing down, but in the fiery fugue, the virtuosity of passagework and balancing of voices were simply stunning. If achieved at the expense of a true fortissimo, it was still a good trade.

The Shostakovich quartets require, first and foremost, perfect intonation. The composer’s long, droning passages can set the teeth on edge if anything is out of place, and here the Danish was particularly fine, everything lining up. Bow strokes were matched to the centimeter, and the entire thing was a tour de force of quartet discipline. The Danish Quartet did not bring the savagery that some Russian groups do to this music, but it was artistically valid.

Beethoven’s Op. 131 is the Everest of the literature, and no performance can capture everything. But here again, the scrupulous detail (one of the few renditions I’ve heard that made a real effort to execute Beethoven’s seemingly crazy dynamics), the unanimity of interpretation and the cleanliness of the ensemble were outstanding. While the opening fugue and the penultimate movement could have been a little less dirgelike, the imagination and impish interplay in the scherzo were delightful. It was a memorable performance, and while the season is young, this concert is likely to be one of its true highlights.
Among the young string ensembles making their mark in classical music, the Danish String Quartet is the enfant terrible. It plays with an urgency that can feel dangerous, and with a unity of intention that makes familiar material stand out in bold relief, as if it were brand new territory. Friday night at the Music@Menlo festival, the group left its mark on Beethoven.

The ensemble performed his String Quartet in F major, op. 18, no. 1 -- the first of his 16 quartets -- in such a manner that one could practically smell the stirrings of revolution. The Adagio emerged as kin to one of the composer's unbearably sad and mystic excursions -- last gasps, extended prayers of thanks, violent out-lashings; something Beethoven might have composed toward the end of his life, instead of at age 30. Indeed, listening to the ensemble -- three of whose members have turned, or will turn, 30 this year -- one got a
renewed sense of what made Beethoven radical all along.

One of his great patrons was Prince Joseph Franz Maximilian Lobkowicz, scion of a Bohemian lineage dating to the 14th century. Beethoven's first set of string quartets (there are five others in the op. 18 set, besides the F major) was dedicated to the prince, as was every one of the pieces on Friday's program, and three of Beethoven's symphonies, the Eroica, the Fifth and the Pastoral.

I mention this only because, while the Danes (actually, cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin is Norwegian) were exposing the emotional substrata of Beethoven's early opus, the great-great-great-great grandson of Prince Joseph Franz Maximilian was seated in the audience at the Menlo School's Stent Family Hall, an intimate venue that resembles an Old World music salon.

He is William Lobkowicz, who was born in Boston, attended Harvard, became a real estate broker and then -- in 1989, amid the breakup of the Soviet Union -- moved to Czechoslovakia. He sank roots, learned to speak Czech and began to reclaim his family's cultural and philanthropic legacy; one of his businesses now operates four family castles in the Czech Republic as tourist destinations. Friday night at the festival, he delivered a lecture (titled "A Royal Tradition") to a sold-out audience, explaining his own story as well as his family's history, including Joseph Franz Maximilian's avid arts patronage, which also extended to Gluck and Haydn -- and basically bankrupted the prince.

Friday, as William Lobkowicz sat in the sixth row with his wife, Alexandra, and their children, their presence tied a neat bow around the program, aptly titled "Lobkowicz Legacy." The whole night felt like a testament to the continued relevance of the music.

The Danish String Quartet -- its other members are Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, violins; and Asbjørn Nørgaard, viola -- has a tousled indie-band persona that adds to its aura. But it's the ensemble's group mind that counts. It permeates the quartet's technical command and playfulness, its abundance of sound and ability to sing like a choir. All of that was evident in Haydn's String Quartet in G major, op. 77, no. 1, which opened the program.

In its approach to Beethoven's String Quartet no. 10 in E-flat major, op. 74 ("Harp"), the group made some bold decisions in regard to tempo and phrasing. But more important was that unanimity of intention, the groupthink, which created clarity and fresh impact -- in the startling sound of a unison chord or the breathy flow of the Allegro's coda, for example. This is a group that makes you listen.

The program also included "An die ferne Geliebte" ("To the Distant Beloved"), Beethoven's song cycle, a setting of six poems by Alois Jeitteles. Baritone Randall Scarlata and pianist Gilbert Kalish delivered these love songs with idiomatic comfort and elegance. As a listener, it was hard not to fall into the yearning and romance of it all: Kalish's voicings were just right, bringing out the melodies that Scarlata sang with such fragrant sound. The duo was a storytelling partnership.

The program was to repeat Saturday at Menlo-Atherton High School's Center for Performing Arts. Music@Menlo continues through Aug. 9.
Bach’s legacy, which is the focus of this summer’s Music@Menlo chamber music festival, encompasses a wealth of genres and styles. But nothing in the musical world says "Bach" quite as unmistakably as preludes and fugues.

Saturday night’s ingeniously varied concert at the Center for the Performing Arts at Menlo-Atherton explored this point thoroughly, tracing Bach’s influence through a range of preludes and fugues both singly and in the paired configuration he preferred.

The resulting evening was a double demonstration of the versatility of both forms - the "prelude" in particular can sometimes seem to accommodate nearly anything a composer chooses to designate with that title - and of Bach’s inescapable presence through the centuries. Each piece sounded unmistakably like its creator, and at the same time each owed a little debt to Bach.
The point was made clearly just a few minutes into the concert, when the Danish String Quartet - a doughty ensemble comprising violinists Frederik Oland and Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen, violist Asbjorn Norgaard and cellist Fredrik Schoyen Sjölin - launched into Mozart’s Adagio and Fugue in C Minor, K. 546. This is one of Mozart’s most overt celebrations of Bachian counterpoint, a fusion of Baroque clarity with his own theatrical impulses.

Haydn's String Quartet in F Minor, Op. 20, No. 5, came afterward as a stark contrast. The fugal element shows up in the finale, an intricate but wittily restrained exercise marked "sempre sotto voce," and it could not be taken for the work of anyone but Haydn (even if the rest of the quartet weren’t a dead giveaway).

The Danish Quartet gave sterling renditions of both pieces - dark and provocative in the Mozart, delicately tender in the Haydn. The group wound up the first half with a robust and forceful account of Mendelssohn’s Capriccio in E Minor, Op. 81, No. 3, one of the many homages to Bach the composer produced during his too-short career.

Pianist Gilles Vonsattel was on hand to set the tone for the evening with three excerpts from Book 1 of Bach’s "Well-Tempered Clavier" - done with crisp precision if a little brusquely - and returned after intermission with just one Prelude and Fugue from Shostakovich's Op. 87. He was at his best, though, in three pieces from Debussy’s "Préludes," Book 1, particularly a limpid and loving "Girl With the Flaxen Hair."

Vonsattel was joined by violinist Ian Swensen for Gershwin’s Three Preludes (originally for piano solo, but arranged for duo by Jascha Heifetz), which took the evening rather far from Bach, but sounded so spirited and joyful that it was hard to object.

But the evening's real novelty came at the end, with a rare performance of Britten’s Prelude and Fugue for 18 strings. Composed in 1943 for the conductor Boyd Neel (who had commissioned his Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge), this is a strange and hard-to-classify score - at once whimsical and somber, and with an almost willful disregard for the conventions of the genre.

The fugal subject is so coiled and tense that it almost defies contrapuntal treatment, and the music’s dramatic energy instead emerges from its gradual expansion, like so many springs unwinding in sequence. Saturday’s performance, with the stage packed, had the feel of a celebratory free-for-all.
July 21, 2013

Magical Danes Debut at Music@Menlo

By Janos Gereben

There is music in another dimension. Just as at times music takes over when words fail, there is this otherworldly experience that relieves the limitations of music itself.

This is what you hear in the maze of the forest and of anguished feelings in Schoenberg's *Transfigured Night*; when Mahler's Symphony No. 9 trails off into silence; when the chorus falters with grief in the Mass in B Minor's "Crucifixus" (before the redeeming explosion of "Et resurrexit").

The other dimension, the ambiguous-transcendent feeling persists through the entire third movement of Beethoven's String Quartet No. 15, Op.132, a contemporary of his Ninth Symphony, but kin only to the meandering, sublimely lyrical slow movement. The string quartet movement is marked *Molto adagio* and inscribed by the composer as "Holy song of thanksgiving to the Divinity by a Convalescent, in the Lydian Mode." He might have just as well called it "Music that suspends time."

There is probably no chamber music that poses more contrasting demands on the performers. It is a landscape without landmarks, a progression of phrases both inevitable and mysterious; it requires from the musicians both superb control and total letting go — shaping music that exists without recognizable boundaries.

Danish String Quartet with pianist Gilbert Kalish

Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and Asbjørn Nørgaard

On Sunday, in Music@Menlo's splendid Center for Performing Arts at Menlo-

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The grand finale: Frederik Øland, Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, Asbjørn Nørgaard, Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin

The youthful Danish String Quartet made its West Coast debut with a concert of one ravishing performance after another, culminating in the Beethoven, weaving magic over the full house, which gave a genuine standing ovation to the quartet, not one of those half-hearted crouching applause. No, this was very real, really loud, and more than well-deserved.

To be pedantic about it, the quartet is three-fourths Danish because cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin is Norwegian. But violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard are true, if non-melancholic Danes:

We are simply your friendly neighborhood string quartet with above average amounts of beard. The three of us met very early in our lives in the Danish countryside at an amazing summer camp for enthusiastic amateur musicians. Not yet teenagers, we were the youngest players, so we hung out all the time playing football and chamber music together.

During the regular school year we would get together often to play music and just have fun. We became best friends. In 2001, professor Tim Frederiksen of the Royal Academy of Music in Copenhagen got in touch with us and started coaching us on a regular basis. All of the sudden, at the ages of 15 and 16, we were a serious string quartet. It all happened so fast that none of us seemed to notice the transition.

In just three years of being a professional ensemble, the quartet already received raves in major newspapers, and were given the Carl Nielsen Prize, Denmark's most important cultural award.

At the Sunday concert, the brief opening piece, Mozart's arrangements of two Bach fugues, was the perfect introduction to the musicians, instruments entering one by one, right to left, from cello to first violin. We heard microscopic solos, clear, warm, beautiful sound from each instrument.

The quartet then launched into Haydn’s 1796 String Quartet in D Minor, Op. 76, No. 2, nicknamed "Die Quinten," because of the first movement’s motif of descending fifths. While the Danes were phenomenally musical and consistent throughout the work, they gave a special treatment to the "mildly demonic" minuetto, known as "Hexen-Menuett" or Witches' Minuet. With the two violins in unison, viola and cello mimicked them an octave lower. The musicians virtually exploded (while adhering to the boundaries of Haydn-esque classicism) in the joyful finale.

Shostakovich’s 1940 Piano Quintet in G minor, op. 57, followed, a contemporary of the first string quartet and Symphony No. 7 ("Leningrad"), in the brief period between the end of the Winter War with Finland and the beginning of Nazi invasion the following year.

With Gilbert Kalish at the piano, the work opened with a big, bold, symphonic forte, and as the strings joined in, it sounded for all the world like a piano concerto. The Danish SQ played brilliantly in the runaway scherzo and with deep emotion in the next movement's "night music." First violinist Øland shone in his solo of a Russian folksong, all four performed as virtuosi as the music sped up again with a grotesque circus tune, a Shostakovich trademark. All through the piece, Kalish and the quartet remained joined at the hip, five instruments playing as one. >{> And then the Beethoven. This next-to-last of the late quartets is still so
complex and rich, it's difficult to imagine what the first audiences heard in it in 1825. The first two movements, performed with power and certainty, served as a prelude to the wizardly third movement Beethoven wrote after a severe illness (hence the reference to "thanksgiving... by a convalescent"), and anybody in the audience who by now didn't fully realize the brilliance of the Danes came to a moment of inevitability. Here, transcendent music received its due from four musicians making an unforgettable debut. May they soon return.
July 27, 2013

Preludes First, Fugues Follow at Menlo
By David Bratman

“Preludes and Fugues” was the title of Saturday’s Music@Menlo concert at the Menlo-Atherton Center for Performing Arts. It sounds stuffy and academic, and, indeed, the concert contained some rarefied music and some reserved, formal performances. That didn’t mean it wasn’t also interesting and exciting. It was certainly also popular: The auditorium was sold out, and overflow seating on stage was also packed.

From another perspective, the title could have been “Hail and Farewell,” to acknowledge the performers who divided the program into two approximately equal parts, intermingled somewhat in the playing order. This was the first Menlo concert for pianist Gilles Vonsattel and the last, at least this year, for the members of the Danish String Quartet, who made such a splash over the last week, and who were scheduled to fly out on Sunday.

Vonsattel opened the program with piano performances of three of the most basic prelude and fugue pairs in the classical repertoire: excerpts from Book I of Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier. These were smooth and gentle, the Prelude in E Minor, in particular, giving a sense of flowing water building up into a rainstorm.

Vonsattel's second appearance began with the E-minor Prelude and Fugue from Shostakovich’s Op. 87 set, an homage to Bach. Despite the different musical idiom, this too was a scholarly and lean performance.

After that, Vonsattel went a little freer in search of preludes. A fugue is a specific musical form; a prelude can be whatever a composer wants it to be. Debussy wrote a couple of dozen pieces for piano that he called preludes. Vonsattel played three of these, gently, quietly, unprepossessingly. The Engulfed Cathedral, one of the three, stayed submerged.

Lastly, he was joined by Ian Swensen for Jascha Heifetz’s arrangement of Gershwin’s Three Preludes for violin and piano. These are inherently extravagant pieces, jazzy and fun, so a little more lightness and playfulness was on display here.

The Danish Quartet opened its set with Mozart’s Adagio and Fugue in C Minor, K. 546, with the Adagio serving as prelude. This is not the gracious Mozart; rather, it’s an anguished, severely uncompromising work that could be passed off as having been written over a century later.

That shifted to a complete contrast with the following piece, Haydn’s Quartet in
F Minor, Op. 20, No. 5. Its finale is a double fugue, so perhaps the other three movements may be considered as forming a prelude. Although the quartet dates from Haydn’s dramatic “Sturm und Drang” period, this was a courtly and civil performance. Even the fugue danced on the edge of inaudibility, bursting into fortissimo at the coda. The entire work felt fully contrapuntal, in the sense that each voice was finely judged and balanced. That organlike sonority was part of what made this performance so exquisite; even more was the way in which each arpeggio and ornament felt utterly natural, like a living, breathing thing of its own.

The set concluded with Mendelssohn’s Capriccio in E Minor, Op. 81, No. 3. Despite its title, this too is a prelude and fugue, one even more anguished than Mozart’s, at least in the Danish Quartet’s performance, which drove through a vigorous rhythm. Here was an ideal match of performers and material. Later, the four members of the quartet reappeared among 14 other string players, including some of the most renowned names playing at Menlo, for a truly unusual treat: Britten’s little-known Prelude and Fugue for 18 solo strings, Op. 29. Arnaud Sussmann, as first violinist, led the ensemble and had the most prominent solo parts. Not at all like the Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell (better-known as The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra) that Britten wrote at about the same time, this Prelude and Fugue, while tonal, is harsh and modernist.

The fugue is a formidable structure requiring quick reflexes from the performers, with all 18 of them having fugal entrances in immediate succession — a feat Britten has them pull off more than once. Instead of the chaos this recipe might generate, there was clarity and the sense that each performer was on stage for a reason.

There was more to Menlo’s day than this evening concert; Saturday was busy, by Menlo’s standards, with two other events also at the CPA. All these fugues were preceded by what Menlo appropriately calls a Prelude concert, this one by the Tallis Quartet, which played Haydn’s Quartet in G Major, Op. 76, No. 1, in a cool, wry-faced manner, following it with the same emotional state even more appropriately for Shostakovich’s tiny and brittle Quartet No. 7.

That, in turn, had been preceded by a Koret Young Performers Concert, a two-hour marathon of individual movements performed by the under-18 artists of Menlo’s Young Performers Program. As usual, the best reaction was to sit back and marvel at the facility displayed on stage. All three movements of Beethoven’s Piano Trio in D, Op. 70, No. 1, with different sets of performers, came out well, as did much else. The most amazing moment came when two 10-year-old girls, Leslie Jin and Josephine Chou, both locals, sat down at the piano and gave a casually carefree rendition of three pieces from Bizet’s four-hand suite, the appropriately titled Jeux d’Enfants.
Three Danes (and A Norwegian) Make Fine Debut

By Cashman Kerr Prince

Last night Vikings sailed into Longy’s Pickman Hall: in its Celebrity Series of Boston debut, The Danish String Quartet conquered New World audiences with music by Abrahamsen, Mendelssohn, and Debussy.

All four members of the quartet (actually three Danes and a Norwegian cellist) are Vikingsian young, blond men, and three sport beards worthy of Boston Red Sox players during the World Series. The skinny ties and more casual dress mark them as new and hip, but there is nothing casual about their artistry. They describe themselves as “simply your friendly neighborhood string quartet with above-average amounts of beard.”

If only we could all live in such a musical neighborhood! Frederik Øland and Rune Tønsgaard Sørensen alternate between first and second violins (Øland playing first on the Mendelssohn in this concert); Asbjørn Nørgåard plays viola, and the Norwegian Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin plays cello. The violinists and violist met as children at a summer music camp for amateur musicians, and continued their studies together at Copenhagen’s Royal Academy of Music. The Danish String Quartet debuted in 2002 at the Copenhagen Festival, and Sjölin joined them in 2008, forming the current line-up. Throughout this program they played with a tight ensemble and constant interaction among the players. Their readings of the Mendelssohn and Debussy quartets were subtle and smart, with judicious and well-considered musical decisions building into interpretations that were unique, fascinating, convincing. This is a mature quartet with a fabulous future before them.

The program began with Hans Abrahamsen, String Quartet No. 1, “Ten Preludes” (1973). A member of the Danish ny enkelhed, or “new simplicity” movement, which is a reaction to the Darmstadt School of serialism, Abrahamsen’s quartet is a series of ten self-contained movements exploring a
variety of musical styles even as recurring musical cells unite this series of character-piece preludes into a unified string quartet. Although I am not well-versed in this composer’s idiom, I heard similarities to the music of Terry Riley and Philip Glass in the focus on subtle change, repetition, and sparse or open harmonies. At the same time the piece opens with a piercing ferocity that signals Abrahmsen’s broader, more polyglot musical language, one which included chorales and traditional dance elements. This work is a compendium of musical forms and expressions and ends in a playful scherzo that is more traditional than the beginning. Individual preludes played with the idea of deferred resolution, even as the whole clutch of preludes comprising this string quartet find a unity in shared and repeated musical gestures. This work was played with drama and flair and the sheer artistry of the performance was inescapable.

Mendelssohn’s String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor, op. 13 (1827), written in the wake of Beethoven’s opus 132 quartet, is an homage to and an extenuation of the explorations of form and harmony Beethoven undertook in his quartet. The similarities are more noticeable for the differences between these works. The Adagio opened with a tenderness, a gut-wrenching hesitancy making of this a poignant start and imbuing the ensuing Allegro vivace with a patina of sadness that was enhanced by a judicious use of portamenti. Even the exuberance of Mendelssohn’s music in this opening movement was tinged with melancholy. The second movement, Adagio non lento, began as a lullaby then turned to a delicate fugato, before growing jagged and edgy as it developed in intensity: a fury raging to escape the bounds of civility, then surprisingly calming into a rounded and sweet hymn. The third movement, Intermezzo: Allegretto con moto – Allegro di molto, was lighter in spirit: a small child skipping through sun-dappled fields of hay on the last day of summer. Again, an ineluctable sense of poignancy. The playful scherzo here opened with a subdued pianissimo. A highly effective ritardando brought back the lilting a-theme before the concluding amalgamation of these two ideas. The concluding Presto, like the Beethoven model, opens with a violin cadenza which Øland played with passion and verve in a lushly overwrought moment of anguish; this was a palpable stylistic conversation between late Beethoven and Classical restraint. The movement continued with vigor and intensity but did not shout in the full-blown expansiveness of later nineteenth century forceful expression. The performance ended in a resolute silence which the enthralled audience held.

Following intermission, the quartet gave a fully inhabited reading of Claude Debussy, String Quartet in G Minor, op. 10 (1893), with marvelously sinuous interplay among voices producing a sea of vibrating colors and resonant modalities. If, as one early critic opined, this music is “orgies of modulation,” then please, by all means, give me more—so long as it is played with such astute artistry and keen passion as this. The Danish String Quartet returned to the stage to offer their thanks for being included in the Celebrity Series of Boston season, and offered as an encore Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen’s arrangement of a traditional Danish folk tune from the western Danish island of Sønderho often performed at weddings. This second tune from the Sønderho bridal trilogy can be heard on a CD of Scandinavian folk music the Danish String Quartet will be releasing on their own label in Spring 2014.
Danish String Quartet: Chord Accord
By David Bratman

The Danish String Quartet, an ensemble of four young blond men with three blond beards, concluded an American tour with a Cal Performances concert at Hertz Hall on Sunday. The group had made a tremendous impression at Music@Menlo last summer, and now it was Berkeley's chance to hear them.

The repertoire on the program was dark and foreboding. It featured two huge, deep-minded, serious quartets in A Minor: Beethoven's Opus 132 — the Danes' signature piece, which they had performed at Menlo — and Mendelssohn's Opus 13, written only two years later and in direct response to Beethoven's. The opener was a modern work, the String Quartet No. 1, "Ten Preludes," by the contemporary Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen.

Abrahamsen's 10 movements came across as tiny experiments in note patterns and harmonic coloring. They ranged from harsh and buzzing in the European modernist style of the day (this was written in 1973) through chromatic lyricism, to gentle chords, with a lot of driving pulses, a touch of folk song, experiments in minimalist drones and phase shifting (in 1973, minimalism was still real minimalism), and a big surprise in the form of a finale of pure 18th-century pastiche.

The toughness of the earlier movements still echoed in the finale, though, and this turned out to provide an ideal sound context in which to hear the Mendelssohn. The outer movements of this received a driving, bright-toned, wiry performance under the lead of the edgy first violin of Frederik Øland (the one nonbearded player). The buzzing, the dissonance, the driving pulses (with particularly good churning rhythms in the slow movement from the group's sole Norwegian, cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin), a brutality in the finale's opening, and a secretive harshness are all there in Mendelssohn's score; it just needed the Danes (and the Norseman) to bring it all out.
All along, though, there was another side to Opus 13. This showed in the main section of the charming intermezzo, which was played slowly and sedately, like a courtly medieval dance. The trio had the light buzz of the outer movements, and by contrast was so fast it wasn’t possible to slow down enough at the return to the main section to make the transition convincing. Most of all, throughout the work — even in the fast skittering of the finale, and most strikingly in the impassive presentation of the first movement’s opening theme — what most impressed in this performance were the rich, distinctly vibrant chords. The four voices, each individual, when added together shot an animated resonance through the music.

If there’s anything the performance was memorable for, it was the harmonies of those chords. A switch in first violinists helped make the Beethoven even more satisfactory in this respect. Rune Tønsgaard Sørensen’s sweet, dark tone and smooth note-running, especially in the first movement, fit the moderate, well-chosen pacing, full of beautiful curvatures of melody and brightly accented drive. Sørensen’s duets with Øland’s more cut-and-dried playing made a lovely mixture of violin styles, like a sweet-and-sour flavoring.

Mix that with the low moaning sound of Asbjørn Nørgaard’s viola and the strict concentration of Sjölin’s woody cello, and the combination came off something like an old portative organ, sending vibrations out to shudder in the air. The grace and gentility of Beethoven’s second movement scherzo and fourth movement march benefited from this sound. The enormous slow hymn of thanksgiving between them reached a spiritual state almost of religious intensity. The Danes took the Molto adagio quite fast, which focused attention to the shifting chords over any tragic utterance; the Andante interludes didn’t feel faster (though they were) so much as insertions of shafts of brightly sputtering sunlight.

The rondo finale was the rawest and most energetic movement. Bursting energy in the ritornello, contrasting with weird, dark episodes, kept the pacing clean and avoided repeating a rambling quality that had hit Mendelssohn’s finale.

Perhaps knowing that their chords are their most glowing recommendation, the Danes chose for an encore a plain, full-chordal harmonization of a 17th-century Swedish melody that is also well-known in Denmark, “Nu Blomstertideu Kommer” (The spring is coming). It, too, felt like a hymn. The dark program had been filled with holy light.
To talk about the Danish String Quartet performance at Southern Methodist University’s Caruth Auditorium on Monday evening, under the auspices of Dallas Chamber Music, requires a trip to the thesaurus for superlatives. There is little wonder why they are always mentioned when speaking ranking such ensembles into a top 10 or so. They delivered a nearly perfect performance of a wildly varied program to an astonished audience. The Danish part of their name was immediately evident as the four young very blond players took the stage. “Young,” in fact, used to be part of their name. They dropped it a few years ago with an eye to the inevitable future (even though they all still hover around 30). Cellist Frederik Schøyen Sjölin is the oldest, born in 1984, and the only one
not from Denmark. He is Norwegian, but explains that away by the fact that Norway was a part of Denmark until 1814. Violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, born in 1983, has the lightest hair of the group and looks like he is still in his teens. Violist Asbjørn Nørgaard, also born in 1984, founded the group. Violinist Frederick Øland, also born in 1984, is an expert in computer gaming. In fact, computer gaming is mentioned frequently in most of their biographies. Nørgaard makes quite a point of it in his, declaring that the viola player is the “Overmind” of the quartet, a reference to the online game Starcraft. There is no mention of what the other three think of this. But, you didn’t need to look at their birth dates to tell that they are part of Generation Y, the Millennials.

All this matters because their playing has a youthful presence to it; nothing you can put your finger on specifically, but something that is definitely there. The impeccable playing and superb musicianship that they so amply demonstrate can be found (rarely) elsewhere, but it is this freshness, this je ne sais quoi, that sets them apart in such a remarkable manner.

Their program ran the gamut from the very new to the standard masterpieces of the repertoire. Hans Abrahamsen’s 10 Preludes, written in 1973, covers just about every musical language there is in its short 20 minutes—wild atonalism to something that could have been written hundreds of years ago. Felix Mendelssohn’s String Quartet No. 2 in a minor, Op. 13 is a great technical challenge, as is most of his music, and they met it with ease. Debussy’s First Quartet in G minor, Op. 10 makes both monumental technical and musical demands. The Danish group gave definitive performances of all three.

The two violinists switched off playing the first part and it made quite a difference. Sørensen has a deep and resonant sound while Øland’s sound is brighter. They used this to great advantage. Sørensen played first on the Mendelssohn, whose sparkling scampering music greatly benefited from his glittering sound. Øland’s darker sound was perfect for Debussy’s impressionistic harmonies. Rather than going into the details of their spectacular performance of each piece, here are the hallmarks of their playing that allowed this concert to rise above many others and one which will remain in the memory of all who attended.

First and foremost, their intonation was amazing. Each and every sonority rang true and clear. Their individual musicianship is self evident by their biographies: Rune is the concertmaster of the Copenhagen Philharmonic, a chair that Øland once held and where Nørgaard once sat in the principal viola chair. But it is their collective musicianship that is so remarkable.

It is apparent that this group has carefully considered every note and phrase and then how to resample them into a realization of the composer’s intentions. They approached each of the very different pieces on the program in a very different manner, that is true to the composer stylistic demands. Their sound changed to match the music. You could easily imagine rehearsals where there was as much musicological discussion as playing. Quite remarkable.

Virtuosity, impressive as it was, never became an end unto itself. Their ensemble was so together that even the fastest passages were so precise that it was as if there was only one player involved. Balance was magnificent and constantly in flux. Each voice came forward at just the right moment and then stepped back, sometimes even after a single note was so favored. This gave the performance an integrated sound, where the four individual players vanished into a new sonic entity. This
was especially noticeable in the Debussy's undulating harmonies. If you missed it, keep an eye out for their next appearance and get there. Their recordings cover all these same attributes but cannot convey the experience of watching them create such an impressive performance. One very well known violinist in the audience turned to me at the end of the Mendelssohn with a look of sheer joy and commented that this was the way to play it. I agree.
Classical and folk music continue to intermingle in fascinating ways. The intersections stretch back far beyond Bach, who cleverly slipped a German folk song into his Goldberg Variations. Later, composers like Ralph Vaughan Williams and Béla Bartók combed the countryside, collecting tunes from villagers. And a recent piece, Steel Hammer, by Pulitzer-winner Julia Wolfe, draws inspiration from the folk ballad "John Henry."

The members of the Danish String Quartet also have affection for folk. They are plenty happy playing Haydn and Brahms, but their new album, Last Leaf, is entirely devoted to old Nordic folk melodies and dances, which they’ve arranged for string quartet. The oldest date to around 1300, but there are newer ones, and even a couple faux-folk tunes composed by the group’s cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin. "Æ Rømeser" is an 18th-century dance from the village of Sønderho, situated at the southern end of Fanø, one of the many Danish islands that hug the country’s west coast. The Danish String Quartet’s arrangement is smart, evocative and touching. After a somber introduction, the first violin teases out a bittersweet theme, which gets infused with loads of personality. The piece sounds like a melancholy song without words, backed by a droning squeezebox, and a toe-tapping dance tune all at the same time. A beautiful viola solo, midway through, adds to the wistful vibe before the main theme comes back around and the music builds to a joyous climax. A solo fiddle returns to whisper the melody as a mist of plucked strings evaporates.

Click to listen or visit http://n.pr/2kHoqlz
Alongside the aforementioned 10 Preludes, which closes the album, is Adès' Arcadiana and the aptly named Quartetto Breve, a two-movement work by Nørgård. There's a lot to bite off and chew. In the Adès, their performance of O Albion, an achingly gorgeous movement, contrasts with the others, which are rife with textures drawn from punchy and prickling pizzicatos, whispery glissando harmonics, and other brash textures.

Here, you get the same washing effect as in the most tender Beethoven movement. In the lush Nørgard, the players deftly negotiate contrasts in tone and dynamics; the second movement has gritty and gripping lines that unfold with a mesmerizing spirit. A folksy violin solo highlights the quartet's range. 10 Preludes, which the composer likened to mini stories, unfolds like a dream.

The last three movements are particularly gratifying with driving patterns and bold textures. The last movement rounds out the album with an unexpected throwback to classical chamber-music writing. It bounds with a brisk and peppy energy.

—Cristina Schreil
Exquisite nightmares

Helen Wallace relishes the Danish String Quartet's atmospheric album

POWERFUL VISIONS:
the Danish Quartet reveal surprising kinships with Adès

Adès: Arcadiana;
Nørgård: Quartet No. 1 (Quartetto Breve); Abrahamsen: Preludes
Danish Quartet
ECM 481 2385  46:45 mins

Adès's Arcadiana sprang into being in 1994, reaching back to a Venice haunted by Britten and Listz in a series of seven idylls of hallucinogenic intensity. Curious young quartets immediately recognised a work of genius; this recording and the Quatuor Varsèse's (see following review) brings the tally to eight. Here vaulting imagination is so precisely mapped that poor performances are rare; but for sheer range and penetrating intelligence, this is my favourite. In the Danish hands the Elgarian 'O Albion'

The Elgarian 'O Albion' sheds its pale shroud and breaks the heart

sheds its pale shroud and breaks the heart, while drunken pizzicatos and slithering dissolution in 'Auf dem Wasser zu singen' have a thrilling abandon, and 'tango mortale' comes at you with the force of nightmare. What's fascinating is how these exquisite miniatures/fugues are clear kin to Abrahamsen's kaleidoscopic

10 Preludes (1973). These tense miniatures seem to ask questions about the nature of composition at that point in time, answering each with probing wit, captured here with bristling style. More powerful still is Nørgård's first quartet from 1952: Bartók and Holmboe are present in the explosive rhythms of the Allegro, but already the 20-year-old composer is playing with intervals rather than keys, interrogating their intensity, their translucence and opacity from different perspectives.

PERFORMANCE
RECORDING

ON THE WEBSITE
Hear extracts from this recording and the rest of this month's choices on the BBC Music Magazine website
www.classical-music.com
The Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen has been in the spotlight of late, thanks to the success of his chamber work “Schnee” and the extraordinary orchestral song cycle “Let Me Tell You.” But the ingenuity and clarity of that recent work goes all the way back to the beginning of his career, as evidenced by his early String Quartet No. 1, “10 Preludes.” Each movement in this collection of short character pieces from 1973, which caps the infectiously appealing new release from the Danish String Quartet, creates a distinctive landscape out of a few simple thematic ideas, and in each case Abrahamsen works out the implications with winning simplicity. Nothing is wasted, but at the same time the music has a humanistic robustness that marks a contrast to the austerity of midcentury modernism. The concision and rhetorical forthrightness of the “Quartetto Breve” by Abrahamsen’s teacher, Per Norgard, makes a fitting entree, and Thomas Adès’ gorgeously evocative “Arcadiana” — in a committed, slightly edgy performance — sets the recording on its suave course.
Among all the dauntingly good young string quartets currently doing the rounds, the Danish String Quartet stand out: not because they’re shinier or plusher or pushier than the rest, but because of their nimble charisma, stylish repertoire and the way their light and grainy shading can turn on a dime.

Their last album was a set of winsome Nordic folk tunes; now comes this classy ECM debut with three bold early works by contemporary composers. Hans Abrahamsen described the exploded landscapes of his 10 Preludes as “short stories”; Thomas Adès called his Arcadiana “images associated with ideas of the idyll”, while Per Nørgard’s Quartetto Breve is seven handsomely sculpted minutes of almost-tonality. It’s an exacting programme requiring grace, grit and clarity and the Danish players sound terrific – lithe and glassy in the Abrahamsen, richer in the Nørgard, able to capture the picturesque watery shimmer of the Adès but also the slime and murk below the surface. It’s a sophisticated performance.
Though recorded five months earlier, this disc closely resembles a concert the Danish Quartet gave in October, marking the beginning of Thomas Adès’s Sonning Prize residency in Copenhagen. Out goes the highly reactive performance of Adès’s Piano Quintet (with the composer on keys) and in comes Per Nørgård’s little Quartetto breve, which makes a useful central pivot in a mirror-like programme where Adès’s Arcadiana reflects Abrahamsen’s 10 Preludes and vice versa.

Both the longer pieces present lessons in how to be disciplined with your material: Adès and Abrahamsen set themselves rigorous tasks and fulfil them as simply and as briefly as possible (which doesn’t mean the results are either simple or brief). Arcadiana looks at the same material as if through seven different twists of a kaleidoscope. In 10 Preludes, each movement looks backwards to its predecessor and forwards to its successor, arriving at a C major Classical pastiche that ‘sorts out the loose ends’ (Abrahamsen).

10 Preludes is something of a petri dish, a touchstone for the composer himself who has returned to it for technical and thematic inspiration since 1973. Its ‘étude’ footing (in a materialistic sense) shows, but the music is both energetic and extremely careful; the ninth prelude operates almost entirely on a unison but winds up among the most complex and fascinating.

I have reservations about Arcadiana, only because it shows how far Adès has come (since 1993) when viewed against a more recent masterpiece such as In Seven Days, which in a sense has the same goal but achieves more with less. Per Nørgård doesn’t look at the same object multiple times in his Quartetto breve; instead his piece from 1952 foreshadows his tapping of that Sibelian meta-flow which would deliver such powerful symphonies some years later. He explores a bunch of varied textures and themes along the way, but each arrives on its own terms. The Danish Quartet are more sepia-toned in Arcadiana than the Calder Quartet on their recent Signum recording, and the approach works. Elsewhere, the Danish are remarkable, as ever – capable of intense blend, extreme dynamic variation (in which they seem glued together), perfect intonation even on harmonics, and constant vitality and flow.
Even if you know nothing about the Danish String Quartet, after listening to their latest album, it is clear that their capital strengths are versatility, sensitivity, and humility. Throughout this release, their inexhaustible flexibility, as well as their clearly attentive and humble collaborative spirit, show that this group of Scandinavians represents the acme of musical professionalism.

The repertoire selected for this release is tightly related in certain ways. All three pieces, by Thomas Adès, Per Norgård, and Hans Abrahamsen, are the composers’ first published attempts at writing for string quartet. Additionally, all three pieces come from the composers’ early twenties: both the Norgård and Abrahamsen were written when the composers were twenty years old, and the Adès arrived when its composer was twenty-three. These common threads provide the listener with interesting food for thought, setting up a satisfying journey through this music.

The title of the first piece, Arcadiana, is a theme of sorts for this entire collection of music, referring to the ancient Greek legend of the mythical utopian land of Arcadia. “Arcadia,” in the context of this release, refers to two aspects present in all of the included pieces. First, it is connected to the frequent use of traditional tonality in this otherwise “modern” music as a means of harkening back to the “utopia” of earlier music. It is also connected to the utopia of youth, when the future appears bright and promising; this refers to the youthful ages of the composers at the times of composition of all three pieces.

The disc is laid out with the two longer pieces as bookends. It begins with Arcadiana, Op.12 by Thomas Adès. This piece is a series of short vignettes referring to geographic places (both real
and mythical) and/or the music of other composers, including Mozart, Schubert, Debussy, and Elgar. The skill and versatility with which the quartet executes the contrasting textures here is striking. This piece is an enjoyable listen at the surface level, with beautiful moments couched in fascinating complexity and, and also provides an engaging intellectual journey, if the listener is so inclined.

The second piece, the shortest on this disc, is the *Quartetto Breve* by Per Norgård. It is indeed *breve*, but it still packs a punch. Its two movements are of contrasting character, with the first being deliberate and rhapsodic, and the second having a punchier contrapuntal texture. As in the first piece, in both movements, the great delicacy with which the quartet approaches these contrasting pieces shines. The second movement, in particular, showcases the quartet’s egalitarianism, which is required in order for this music to work. The pointillistic music in this movement demands the same kind of ensemble-wide sensitivity that is called for in Bach’s contrapuncti, and that ethic is equally at home here, yielding excellent results. The opening cello notes in this movement are also notable; they showcase the warm yet balanced acoustic environment found throughout this superbly-mastered disc. The listener gets a complementary balance of proximal sounds (bow hair scratching, etc.) and warm resonance; this results in a beautiful but non-distracting sound environment that serves primarily to showcase the supreme delicacy and deep preparation of the quartet.

Hans Abrahmsen’s *String Quartet No.1* rounds out this release. It is a series of 10 miniatures, called “short stories” by the composer. These diminutive pieces all have distinct characters, stemming from combinations of American minimalism, European serialism, contemporary techniques, and folk song. This piece is perhaps where the versatility of the Danish String Quartet is most obvious. The ease and dexterity with which they execute these dramatically different characters is impressive and delightful.
Danish String Quartet: 'Wood Works'

Artist: Danish String Quartet
Album: Wood Works

It was a good year for Danish music, with excellent recordings of symphonies by Carl Nielsen, Per Nørgård and Poul Ruders, plus two lovely albums of Rued Langgaard’s string quartets. But the most striking of all is Wood Works, a musical journey through Nordic folk music guided by the extraordinarily gifted Danish String Quartet. "Sønderho Bridal Triology — Part II," with its colorful grooves, turns out to be a 400-year-old wedding song from the Danish island of Fanø. There are stops in other Nordic hamlets for local versions of polkas and jigs, all played with such unmannered charm that you might wish the group would give up its usual diet of Haydn and Brahms. — Tom Huizenga
November 25, 2014

Wood Works
A young Scandinavian ensemble turns to the region’s folk roots
By Tim Woodall

Musicians
Danish Quartet
Composer
Folk music
Catalogue number
Dacapo 8.226081

After recordings of Brahms, Haydn and two discs of Nielsen’s quartets, the members of the Danish Quartet – currently BBC New Generation Artists – turn their attention to entirely different music. ‘Wood Works’ is an obvious alternative route for a classical quartet from this corner of the world: a set of arrangements of traditional Scandinavian folk tunes. But this clearly lovingly crafted album is much more substantial than other string quartet side-projects. The four players – three Danes and a Norwegian – have developed a reedy, crystal clear group sound for this repertoire that evokes the mournful timbre of Nordic string playing. Closely recorded, the sound is dry but warm, picking up every turn of phrase in sharp detail.

First violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen leads a merry Danish jig, Sekstur from Vendsyssel/The Peat Dance, which culminates in a runaway, fingerboard-thumping cadenza. The Sønderho Bridal Trilogy whispers, glides and cajoles. In both joie de vivre and melancholy moments, the quartet’s performances feel authentic, but not slavishly so. The subtle but characterful arrangements do not stick to a single script. O Fredrik, O Fredrik is a rhythmically bustling piece of folk minimalism that develops into a genuinely funky jazz quartet. Swedish ballad Ack Värmeland, du sköna morphs into Schubertian Romanticism. Highly recommended.
**Brahms • Haydn**

Brahms String Quartet No. 2, Op. 51 No. 2

Haydn String Quartet, 'Lark', Op. 64 No. 5

Danish Quartet

C-Auris Music (© AV8553264 41/8F • DO13)

The Danish Quartet compare and contrast Haydn and Brahms.

The cover of this disc looks a bit like a blond (with hair product) *Reservoir Dogs*; and there's certainly an air of film-star energy to this recording. Although they have been around for a surprisingly long time, the Danish String Quartet (formerly known as the Young Danish String Quartet) still have the puppyish energy they had 11 years ago, but now that enthusiasm has the lustre of maturity that was missing in their earliest recordings of the Nielsen quartets for Kontrapunkt (1999). Their recording of Haydn's *Lark* Quartet and the serene, Beethoven-influenced *Op. 51* A minor Quartet of Brahms compares and contrasts one of Haydn's best-known chamber works with one of Brahms's less popular pieces.

These works are both virtuoso in their own way, though the Haydn is more overt in its technical demands; and in particular here, the slightly sad accompaniment of the finale is given its own validity and bounce by the energy with which it is played, and even gives the phosphorescent top line under which it sits extra momentum as a result. The overarching feeling one gets when listening to the Haydn is of light and space—a sense that is carried over to the Brahms, but perhaps with less reason. There are points in the latter, particularly in the *Andante*, when the harmony and inner parts move with such intense direction by way of yearning melody, harmonic dissonance and resolution that the music cries out for a more sustained approach than the Danish Quartet seem willing to give it. There is, though, a deliciously discomfiting lack of pulse in the opening of the first movement, which takes so long to shake off once it has righted itself that you really are compelled to listen with keener ears, which is ultimately what this work really needs. **Caroline Gill**
November 23, 2012

Danish String Quartet, With Haydn and Brahms

HAYDN: STRING QUARTET IN D (OP. 64, NO. 5); BRAHMS STRING QUARTET IN A MINOR (OP. 51, NO. 2)

By Anthony Tommasini

In 2004 the Young Danish String Quartet, as it was then called, made an impressive New York debut at Scandinavia House. The players, who had met at the Royal Danish Conservatory in Copenhagen, were certainly young: all under 21. They were also clearly accomplished and ambitious.

Since then the quartet has wisely dropped “young” from its name and, as the Danish String Quartet, has secured a position as a significant ensemble. In 2008 a Norwegian cellist, Fredrik Schoyen Sjolin, became part of the group, joining the violinists Frederik Oland and Rune Tonsgaard Sorensen and the violist Asbjorn Norgaard. The players are still young: all under 30.

A new recording, which pairs Haydn’s Quartet in D (Op. 64, No. 5, “Lark”) and Brahms’s Quartet in A minor (Op. 51, No. 2), makes clear why this fast-rising ensemble has been having such international success in recent seasons. This is one of the most stylish and spirited accounts of a Haydn quartet to come along in a while.

All the benchmarks of superior quartet playing are here: integrated sound, impeccable intonation, judicious balances. Scurrying passagework, especially in the perpetual-motion finale, is dispatched with fleetness and clarity.

But what makes the performance special is the maturity and calm of the playing, even during virtuosic passages that whisk by. This is music making of wonderful ease and naturalness.

Brahms’s Quartet in A minor is a hard piece to bring off, with its curious blend of noble sentiment and restless impetuosity. The Danish String Quartet conveys both the work’s arching structure and its moment-to-moment inventiveness. The players bring deep, rich Brahmsian sound to the passages with thick harmonic textures. Yet the playing is never weighty or dense. A very fine recording.
Haydn-Brahms String Quartets, Danish String Quartet

Having noted other day in this space that since Beethoven's late quartets, the string quartet has often become the preferred medium for composers to extend their musical language to the limits of their imagination, I now listen to a new recording of the Danish String Quartet doing Haydn and Brahms (BR Klassik 8553264) and reflect a little on that thought. What was most certainly true of Bartok and Carter wasn't especially the case with Haydn and perhaps not Brahms either. Not that either's quartets aren't first-rate examples of the art. But the composers perhaps didn't view the configuration as a privileged place to communicate their most advanced ideas. They engaged with the form for some of the finest examples nonetheless. It's just that they didn't tend to be "heavy" about it. That's my impression.

In the case of the Haydn Quartet in D No. 63 op 64 No 5, a part of the Danish Quartet's release, it is music of sheer delight (so to speak) with allusions and commentaries on Viennese dance forms and popular music. It goes out of its way *not* to be serious, yet in the process produces a balanced work that is in no way "light." It is not ponderous either. But it is Haydn at his infectious best.

The Brahms String Quartet in A minor op. 52 No. 2 is a good pairing with the Haydn, because it too is high spirited without being unsubstantial.

The Danish String Quartet does a terrific job with these quartets. The group has achieved the considerable ability to vary the timbre of each of the instruments in cases where they wish to articulate clearly the importance and multi-voiced distinction of several parts--it's especially heard in the Haydn but it is true of the Brahms as well. Then they of course can properly and mellifluously blend as one in passages that call for that. The point is that the quartet has an great sense of structure that comes through as extraordinarily articulated performances. Their sound is ravishing and well recorded. And the music has a beautiful sense of proportion and definition. These are near-benchmark performances, uplifting to hear, and highly recommended of course.
String Quartet Repertoire

Abrahamsen, Hans
Quartet no 1 "10 preludes"
Quartet no 3

Adès, Thomas
Quartet no 1 "Arcadiana"

Agerfeldt Olesen, Thomas
Quartet no 5 "Plappergeister"

Bach, JS
Kunst der Fuge

Bartok, Bela
Quartet no 5

Beethoven, Ludvig
Quartet in F, op 59 no 1
Quartet in f, op 95
Quartet in Eb, op 127
Quartet in Bb, op 130
Quartet in a, op 132

Brahms, Johannes
Quartet in c, op 51 no 1
Quartet in a, op 51 no 2

Debussy, Claude
Quartet in g, op 10

Grieg, Edvard
Quartet in g, op 27

Ligeti, György
Quartet no 1 "Méthamorphoses Nocturnes"

Haydn, Joseph
Quartet in C, op 20 no 2
Quartet in f, op 20 no 5
Quartet in A, op 20 no 6
Quartet in Eb, op 33 "The joke"
Quartet in D, op 64 "The lark"
Quartet in d, op 76 no. 2 "Fifths"
Quartet in C op 76 no 3 "Emperor"

Holmboe, Vagn
Quartet no 2 op 47
Janacek, Leos
Quartet no 1 "Kreutzer Sonata"

Kreppein, Ulrich
Quartet no 1

Malling, Otto
Strygekvartet no 1

Mozart, W. A.
Quartet in d, KV 421
Quartet in C, KV 465

Pärt, Arvo
Fratres

Mendelssohn, Felix
Quartet in f, op 80

Nielsen, Carl
Quartet no 1 in g, op 13
Quartet no 2 in f, op 5
Quartet no 3 in Eb, op 14
Quartet no 4 in F, op 44
Andante lamentoso, "Ved en ung kunstners båre".

Schostakovich, Dmitri
Quartet no 2 in a, op 68
Quartet no 8, op 110

Schubert, Franz
Quartettsatz in c, op. Posth.

Tommesen, Ole Anton
"Borodins Law" for string quartet

Webern, Anton
Five movements

Wolf, Hugo
Italian Serenade

The Danish String Quartet (arr)
Scandinavian folk music

Collaborative Works

Brahms, Johannes
Sextet in Bb, op 18
Piano quartet in A in 26
Piano Quintet in f, op 34
Sextet in G, op 36
Piano quartet in c, op 60
Viola Quintet in G, op 111
Clarinet Quintet in b, op 115

Dohnanyi, Ernst
Serenade in C, op 10 for violin, viola and cello

Fuchs, Robert
Clarinet quintet, op 102

Kodály, Zoltán
Serenade for 2 violins and viola op 12

Lindberg, Magnus
Piano quintet, "...de Tartuffe, je crois,"

Mahler, Gustav
Piano Quartet in a

Mendelssohn, Felix
Octet in Eb, op 20

Mozart, W. A.
Flute quartet in D, KV 285
Viola Quintet in C, KV 515
Viola Quintet in g, KV 516
Piano quartet in g, KV 478
Piano quartet in Eb, KV 493
Clarinet Quintet in A, KV 581

Nielsen, Carl
Viola Quintet in G

Piazzolla, Astor
Tango Sensations for accordion and string quartet

Ratkje, Maja SK
Gagaku Variations for accordion and string quartet

Romberg, Bernhard
Flute quintet in G

Schoenberg, Arnold
"Metamorphosen" for septet

Schubert, Franz
Cello Quintet in C, D. 956
Winterreise for string quartet and song
Mignon for string quartet and song

Schafer, R. Murray
Quintet for harp and strings

Schuman, Robert
Piano Quintet, op 44
Svendsen, Johan
String Octet in A, op 3

Vierne, Louis
Piano Quintet in c, op 42

Weber, CM von Weber
Clarinet Quartet, op 34
Danish Quartet
Discography

**ECM**

ECM 2550  
**Last Leaf:** A collection of Nordic folk music (September 2017)

ECM 2453  
Adès, Nørgård & Abrahamsen: Thomas Adès - Arcadiana, for string quartet, Op. 12; Per Nørgård - String quartet no.1; Hans Abrahamsen - 10 Preludes for String Quartet (April 2016)

**Dacapo**

8.226081  
**Wood Works:** A collection of Nordic folk music (September 2014)

6.220522  

6.220521  
**Nielsen:** String Quartets, Vol. 1: String Quartet in G minor, Op.13; String Quartet in F major, Op.44; String Quintet in G major (March 2007; The Danish String Quartet; Tim Frederiksen, viola)

**CAvi-Music**

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**Haydn·Brahms:** Haydn – String Quartet in D No. 63, Op.64, No. 3 Hob. III: 63; Brahms – String Quartet in a minor Op. 51, No. 2.