

Bach Festival Society

OF WINTER PARK

JOHN V. SINCLAIR

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR AND CONDUCTOR

BROOKLYN RIDER

Johnny Gandelsman, violin

Colin Jacobsen, violin

Nicholas Cords, viola

Eric Jacobsen, cello

Program

Armenian Folk Songs
Vagharshabadi Dance
Harvest Song
It's Cloudy
Festive Song
The Partridge

Komitas Vartapet
(1869–1935)
Arr. Sergey Aslamazian

In a Landscape

John Cage
(1912–1992)
Arr. Justin Messina

Brooklesca

Colin Jacobsen
(b. 1978)

Intermission

String Quartet No. 12 in F Major, Op. 96, "American"
Allegro ma non troppo
Lento
Molto vivace
Finale: vivace ma non troppo

Antonín Dvořák
(1841–1904)

Sheriff's Lied, Sheriff's Freude

Colin Jacobsen

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Opus 3 Artists
470 Park Avenue South
9th Floor North
New York NY 10016
www.opus3artists.com

This program is sponsored by the Winifred Johnson Clive Foundation

Biography

The genre-defying string quartet Brooklyn Rider deftly employs creative programming and exciting collaborations to illuminate music in fresh ways and invite audiences into a shared experience. Uniquely capable of addressing a wide and inclusive range of music, its members are as willing to explore the world of Haydn and Debussy as they are to delve into the music of our time. They have performed in venues as varied as Joe's Pub in NYC, the Todai-ji Temple in Nara, Japan, and the San Francisco Jazz Festival.

Born out of a desire to use the rich medium of the string quartet as a vehicle for communication across a large cross section of history and geography, Brooklyn Rider is equally devoted to the interpretation of existing quartet literature and to the creation of new works. It has worked with numerous composers, such as Derek Bermel, Lisa Bielawa, Ljova, Philip Glass, Osvaldo Golijov, Jenny Scheinman, and Dimitry Yanov-Yanovsky; and a frequent part of Brooklyn Rider's programming also involves works written or arranged by members of the group. Exploring new creative possibilities through collaborative programs is also an integral part of its work. Some recent special guests include Chinese pipa virtuoso Wu Man, Syrian/Armenian visual artist Kevork Mourad, traditional and technology-based Japanese shakuhachi player Kojiro Umezaki, Irish fiddle player Martin Hayes, and singer/songwriter Christina Courtin, whose widely released debut album on the Nonesuch label features several tracks with the quartet. A long-standing relationship between Brooklyn Rider and Persian kamancheh virtuoso Kayhan Kalhor resulted in the critically acclaimed 2008 recording, *Silent City*, on the World Village/Harmonia Mundi label.

Bringing music to new audience and venues is an essential part of the quartet's creative mission. Brooklyn Rider often appears under the umbrella of outside initiatives begun by all four members of the group. In 2003 violinist Johnny Gandelsman created *In A Circle*, a series of performance events in Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn that explored connections between music and the visual arts. *In A Circle Records* was created by Johnny in 2008 with the release of Brooklyn Rider's eclectic debut recording entitled *Passport*. Brothers Colin and Eric Jacobsen are co-founders of *The Knights*, a chamber orchestra based in New York that opened the 2009 Dresden Musikfestspiele and released two albums with Sony Classical. The quartet also founded the Stillwater Music Festival (MN) in 2006 as a place to unveil new repertoire and unusual collaborations. As educators, members of the quartet have been in residency at Williams College, MacPhail Center for the Arts, Dartmouth College, Texas A&M University, and Denison University. The dynamic musical profile of Brooklyn Rider has been featured on WNYC's *Soundcheck* and Minnesota Public Radio's *Performance Today*, and quartet recordings have been played across North America on radio programs that range in focus from classical to world to jazz to pop to new music.

Much of Brooklyn Rider's desire to extend the borders of conventional string quartet programming has been through its long-standing participation in Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble. Individual members of the ensemble have performed throughout the world, recorded three albums for Sony Classical, and reached audiences through a series of educational initiatives, family concerts, and media broadcasts. Members of Brooklyn Rider have taken part in a series of museum residencies initiated by the Silk Road Project that have taken them to the Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art in New York City, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum Reitberg in Zurich, the American Museum of

Natural History, and the Nara National Museum in Japan. They have also participated extensively in ongoing Silk Road Ensemble residencies at Harvard University and the Rhode Island School of Design. The quartet's name is inspired in part by the cross-disciplinary vision of *Der Blau Reiter* (The Blue Rider), a pre-World War I Munich-based artistic collective whose members included Vassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, Arnold Schoenberg, and Alexander Scriabin, to name a few. In this spirit, Brooklyn Rider has created an online art gallery showcasing the work of friends of the quartet, the proceeds of which support new commission projects (<http://www.brooklynrider.com/>). The quartet also draws inspiration from the exploding array of cultures and artistic energy found in the borough of Brooklyn in New York City, a place it also calls home.

Program Notes

ARMENIAN FOLK SONGS

Komitas Vardapet (1869–1935)

Komitas Vardapet (born Soghomon Soghomonian) is a deeply cherished figure by the Armenian people worldwide. The beloved priest, composer, musicologist, baritone, and educator is widely credited with preserving the folk melodies of the southern Caucasus region as well as creating a new national musical voice. Komitas was born in 1869 in Anatolia, and his musical gifts were quickly recognized during his seminary studies as a youth. When he was ordained a priest, his musical activities included organizing choirs, researching the history of Armenian sacred music, and working with popular folk melodies and instruments. Becoming increasingly curious about European music, he decided to continue his musical studies in Berlin at the conservatory of Professor Richard Schmidt. He returned to Armenia in 1899 and spent much of the next decade collecting thousands of melodies of Armenian, Kurdish, Persian, and Turkish origin, often creating choral arrangements and compositions based on these melodies. He also made numerous trips to Europe, introducing audiences to Armenian music. Komitas never recovered from the deeply tragic events of 1915–1917, in which hundreds of thousands of Armenians were displaced and lost their lives. He spent the remaining twenty years of his life in a Paris sanatorium. Tonight's selection of Armenian Folk Songs was collected by Komitas and later arranged by Sergey Aslamazian, the founding cellist of the Komitas Quartet (which happens to be the world's oldest string quartet in continuous existence, 1924–present).

IN A LANDSCAPE

John Cage (1912–1992)

The iconic and prophetic American composer John Cage composed *In a Landscape* in 1948, much before the fame that he achieved later in his life. Cage's beautifully meditative and gently melismatic work suggests a much wider world than it would seem from a cursory glance at the score. Writing about the *String Quartet in Four Parts* from 1949, Cage expresses a sentiment that could easily apply to *In a Landscape*: "This piece is like the opening of another door; the possibilities implied are unlimited." Indeed, the natural world would seem to suggest limitless sonic and metaphorical

possibilities, especially in Cage's open-ended approach. The original version of *In a Landscape* is scored for solo piano or harp; the string quartet arrangement was created by our friend and New York-based composer Justin Messina in 2009. Reflecting on his treatment of this work, Justin writes: "When I play *In a Landscape* at the piano, the thing that strikes me most is how different it is from other piano music. Cage specifies that the pedal is to remain depressed throughout, resulting in a rich, almost atmospheric quality. The ensuing musical language is one where the focus shifts away from the notes and phrases and centers on the resonance that emerges beneath them. In this arrangement I endeavored to accentuate and animate that resonance."

One of Cage's concerns of this early period was to find a viable way to free himself from the confines of Western harmony. In this regard, we see a shared vision between Cage and Debussy, who was grappling with the same issue in the last decade of the 19th century. Our latest recording entitled *Dominant Curve*, which features the Debussy String Quartet, also includes an alternate version of Justin's arrangement of *In a Landscape* for string quartet and electronics.

BROOKLESCA (2007)

Colin Jacobsen (b. 1978)

We end the program with music that captures the vibrancy of a place that we call home. As our name might suggest, all of the members of Brooklyn Rider currently live scattered throughout Brooklyn, the most populous borough of New York City. We have been constantly amazed by the diverse pageantry of the world's peoples that live in our midst. Conversely, our itinerant lifestyles as musicians have often affirmed that there are very few degrees of separation that connect the world's citizens to Brooklyn. Brooklesca literally means "in the Brooklyn style," and the piece, much like the physical place it evokes, is a true melting pot of styles. In the words of Colin Jacobsen, "Brooklesca is a celebration of our home and draws upon the rhythmic vitality created by the multiplicity of cultures we encounter on a daily basis. It began as a couple of gypsy-esque riffs that Johnny Gandelsman and I toyed around with. Eventually elements of klezmer, jazz, rock, as well as Kayhan Kalhor's mesmerizing kemaneh playing found their way in. Above all, I wished to write something that my fellow Brooklyn Riders would get a kick out of playing!"

STRING QUARTET No. 12 IN F MAJOR, OP. 96, "AMERICAN"

Antonin Dvořák (1841–1904)

"Nothing must be too low or too insignificant for the musician. When he walks he should listen to every whistling boy, every street singer or blind organ-grinder. I myself am often so fascinated by these people that I can scarcely tear myself away, for every now and then I catch a strain or hear the fragments of a recurring melodic theme that sound like the voice of the people. These things are worth preserving, and no one should be above making a lavish use of all such suggestions. It is a sign of barrenness, indeed, when such characteristic bits of music exist and are not heeded by the learned musicians of the age."

"Music in America" by Antonin Dvořák—*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*,
February, 1895

We begin the second half of the program with the beloved “American” String Quartet, op. 96 of Antonin Dvořák. Dvořák’s tenure as director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City from 1892 to 1895 gave him a unique perspective on musical life in America that was to have a profound effect on his creative output. Dvořák spent the summer of 1893 in the community of Spillville, Iowa. Finding comfort in the welcoming community of the Czech immigrants who settled the small hamlet, Dvořák found this setting musically fruitful. There, he completed many career-defining works, including the “New World” Symphony and the “American” Viola Quintet. The “American” String Quartet was completed in a mere three days that summer, thanks in part to his agreeable surroundings. Dvořák scribbled on the final page of the manuscript: “Finished on 10 June, 1893, in Spillville. I’m satisfied. Thank God. It went quickly.”

There are many iconic features about this quartet. The slow movement, though not a direct quote, is much inspired by Dvořák’s love of African American spirituals, which he considered to be America’s most quintessential music. In a *Harper’s Magazine* article in 1895, Dvořák commented that “the most potent as well as the most beautiful among them, according to my estimation, are certain of the so-called plantation melodies and slave songs, all of which are distinguished by unusual and subtle harmonies.” Other distinguishing features of the quartet include a scherzo movement that mimics a birdsong he heard while in America and outer movements that seem to be at least partially inspired by his fascination with trains (Dvořák, while in New York, was known to have spent many hours in rapt attention observing the trains coming and going).

What is compelling about this often performed work, beyond these elements? Why does it belong with Colin Jacobsen, John Cage, and Komitas?

One commonality is the modal nature of these pieces. Many of the melodies in the American quartet are based on pentatonic-like modes, derived from the footprint of African American spirituals. Fast forwarding half a century, John Cage was trying to escape the confines of both harmonic and serial music in the late 1940s, using modal scale structures to hint at the complexities of the natural world. The Komitas pieces, while often richly harmonized (in a way that often brings Dvořák to mind), are full of extended, drone-infused moments. Colin’s work is also essentially modal, drawing from a rich tapestry of traditions and influences.

A second unifying element is the constant rhythmic propulsion pumping through the veins of this program—from the machinations of the Dvořák, to the bluegrass-inspired riffs in *Sheriff’s Lied*, *Sheriff’s Freude*, to the trance-inducing waves of *In a Landscape*, to the rustic flavor of the Armenian Folk Songs. The rhythmic DNA of these works serves as their life force: without this, nothing else can survive.

It worthwhile to note that Dvořák, who spent much of his life forging a Bohemian national musical style out of the Austro-German tradition that he was taught, would come to America for a short period of three years and come up with some of the most treasured works in the classical canon. These works represent the successful intersection of the Austro-German tradition, the national style of his homeland, and an assimilation of his experience in America. It is not an exaggeration to make the claim that most the most compelling music throughout history has been the byproduct of converging influences, later synthesized by a singular artistic vision. This convergence, beautifully modeled by all of the selections tonight, is the third unifying aspect of this program.

One parting thought: Dvořák was instrumental in opening the door for the American composer to look to indigenous sources for musical inspiration rather than towards the European continent. From the same *Harper's* magazine article in 1895: "My own duty as a teacher, I conceive, is not so much to interpret Beethoven, Wagner, or other masters of the past, but to give what encouragement I can to the young musicians of America.... I myself, as I have always declared, believe firmly that the music that is most characteristic of the nation whence it springs is entitled to the highest consideration." It is interesting to ponder the indirect role of Dvořák in the history of jazz. His student in New York, Will Marion Cook, was to become a mentor to Duke Ellington. It is also perfectly possible to muse that Dvořák may have emancipated the path for lots of later American maverick composers to exist, perhaps even a young John Cage or a Colin Jacobsen?

Nicholas Cords