

Danish String Quartet to open Cleveland Chamber Music Society series

by Jarrett Hoffman



When you play the first track of *Last Leaf*, the Danish String Quartet’s new album of Nordic folk music, a tune over a drone in the harmonium meets your ears. Whether “Despair Not, O Heart,” a Lutheran chorale known mostly as a funeral hymn, finds a certain spot in you called soul or just some hidden nook of the brain, it feels special.

Praised by the *Washington Post* as “one of the best quartets before the public today,” the Danish String Quartet — Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and Frederik

Øland, violins, Asbjørn Nørgaard, viola, and Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, cello — follow up *Last Leaf* with an October tour beginning in the U.S. and wrapping around to Denmark and Germany.

On October 10, the Cleveland Chamber Music Society brings the Quartet to Plymouth Church UCC in Shaker Heights with a program of Bartok’s *String Quartet No. 1*, Beethoven’s *String Quartet, Op. 59, No. 1*, and Nordic folk music arranged by the Quartet.

Nørgaard said in an email that the story behind the reed organ starts in Frøstrup, Denmark, at the Kirsten Kjær Museum, a tiny old museum in the Danish countryside. “The guesthouse where we stayed during the recording has quite an interesting collection of old instruments — everything from fiddles, pianos, and trumpets to the harmonium that ended up on *Last Leaf*.” The group had previously gathered there to record their first all-folk album, 2014’s *Wood Works*. It was then that Sørensen fell in love with that harmonium and decided it needed to be on their next folk album. “We

love to do these folk recordings because we see them as a creative playground where we can fool around,” said Nørgaard.

Last Leaf is largely a mix of traditional music from Sweden, Denmark, and the Faroe and Shetland Islands, encompassing funeral hymns, medieval ballads, boat songs, and dances, all in custom arrangements by the Quartet. The album also includes three contemporary tunes written in a folk style by Sjölin, a reel by Sørensen after the harmonic progression of John Dowland’s “Flow My Tears,” and a contemporary folk piece by Swedish fiddler Eva Sæther.

“We have always been interested in the traditional music from our part of the world,” said Nørgaard, “and Rune is very active on the Danish folk scene. He has had folk music on his brain forever. He heard his first tune two hours after he was born and he introduced folk music to the rest of us.”

That opening solo flows seamlessly into the second and third tracks, “Shore” and “Polska from Dorotea,” for a strong and varied set that shows off the Quartet’s consummate blend, tight ensemble, beautiful tone, and undeniable verve. The quick cello string crossings — a gift from Sjölin to himself — set an anxious tone in “Shore,” while “Polska from Dorotea” makes you want to get up and dance.

Harmonium isn’t the only surprising instrument on *Last Leaf*. Sørensen also adds piano and glockenspiel to his Norse arsenal, while Sjölin takes on double-bass. Glockenspiel is perhaps most memorable during the Danish traditional tune “Drømte mig en drøm” (I Had a Dream), the oldest known secular song in the Nordic countries, and the tune which gives the album its name. In the liner notes, the Quartet writes, “The magical melody was found on the last leaf of a parchment in the *Codex Runicus* from around 1300, written in runes and containing the so-called Scanian law as well as chronicling the early Danish monarchs.”

Another highlight is “Now Found Is the Fairest of Roses,” a Christmas hymn published in 1732 by Danish theologian and poet H.A. Brorson, which sparked the album’s inspiration and provides a touching closing. “The hymn is set to a mysterious, somewhat dark melody, a tune that most people were familiar with in 1732,” the group writes. “To the surprise of many, Brorson had chosen an old Lutheran funeral chorale to accompany his Christmas hymn, showing how life and death are always connected.

“We believe Brorson touched on something very important: that strong musical material can possess endless possibilities and it is meaningful to explore what happens when the ‘function’ of a melody is tweaked. Can a funeral chorale be used to celebrate Christmas? Can a rustic folk dance conjure up feelings of melancholy and contemplation? Is a

traditional Norse boat song supposed to be sung by the men at the oars or the women at home? And what happens when a classical string quartet once again travels through the world of Nordic folk music?”

Nørgaard explained the process behind the Quartet’s folk music arrangements. “It’s a mix between some that are completed by one member of the group (typically Rune or Fredrik) and some arrangements that are looser and take shape in group sessions. Our idea is to use our strengths as a string quartet and see what that can add to the traditional music. In order to do that, we go for arrangements that are rather ‘classical’ in their nature, trying to use some of the same techniques of creating texture and colors that classical composers have spent hundreds of years developing.”

Moving our conversation toward Asbjørn Nørgaard himself, he has led the viola sections of the Copenhagen Philharmonic and the Danish National Chamber Orchestra, and also boasts the world’s most interesting paragraph in a bio:

At the moment Asbjørn is learning to speak Portuguese and his favourite writer is Thomas Mann. He is a huge fan of encyclopedias and is always reading something about everything. Other interests includes podcasts, American football, public choice theory, operas by Wagner, and the strategy computer game Starcraft, which he plays with his quartet mate Rune. Asbjørn plays the race Zerg and he generally goes hatchery first.

How in the world did he get interested in American football? “American football is quite popular in Denmark,” he wrote, “so I always knew the rules and have watched some Super Bowls in the middle of the night. I got more interested when we started to tour a lot in the States and I often had to practice in hotel rooms with those giant American TVs. At some point it became a tradition for me to put American football on mute while I practiced. I got the idea that I could practice a difficult passage for one drive and then move on to the next one when the other team got the ball. Probably not a brilliant idea, but I enjoyed the football.”

Nørgaard’s current reading includes *City of Thorns*, a book about the Dadaab refugee camp in northern Kenya. “Encyclopedia-wise, my normal strategy is to find the *Wikipedia* article about whatever city we are visiting and then read everything and click every link I find interesting. I end up with 50 browser windows open. In the case of Cleveland, that will lead me to John D. Rockefeller, Lake Erie, Art Deco, polka, Jim Jarmusch, corned beef, and many other interesting things that I currently don’t know anything about. And regarding podcasts, I’m currently listening to a Danish podcast that goes through the history of Danish monarchs since ‘Gorm the Old,’ who reigned from 936-958.”

Finally, for those who are unfamiliar with the video game *Starcraft*, who are the “Zerg” and what does it mean to “go hatchery?”

“There are three races you can play in *Starcraft*: a human race and two alien races, Protoss and Zerg. Zerg looks like the aliens in the *Alien* movies and is my race of choice. To go ‘hatchery first’ means that the first building you construct is a ‘hatchery.’ It is a strategy that focuses on building a strong economy first and then destroying your enemy later, using your superior forces. Put extremely simply, there are two ways of playing the game: either you focus on micro- or macro-management. I tend to focus heavily on macro-management — in *Starcraft*, in music, and in life.”

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