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Escher Quartet to make Chamber Music Society debut

by Mike Telin



Formed in 2005, the Escher String Quartet is no stranger to Northeast Ohio. The ensemble has made numerous appearances on Akron's Tuesday Musical series and has served as the quartet for chamber music rounds of the Cleveland International Piano Competition.

One series the Escher has not yet performed on is that of the Cleveland Chamber Music Society.

On Tuesday, October 13 at 7:30 pm at the Cultural Arts Center at Disciples Church**,** The Escher Quartet — Adam Barnett-Hart & Bryan Lee, violins, Pierre Lapointe, viola, and Brook Speltz, cello — will make their long-awaited CCMS debut. Tickets are available online.

"We're thrilled to be making our debut on one of the great chamber music series in America," cellist Brook Speltz said during a recent telephone conversation. "We were happy when the date came through because we thought, 'You know what? We're overdue to play on that series.'"

I asked the cellist to give his insights into their October 13 program.

Joseph Haydn's Quartet in G Major, Op. 76, No. 1

We've been a quartet for 20 years, and unless someone shows us differently, we just don't know a better way to begin a program than with Haydn or Mozart. Call us

old-fashioned, but I think that is just such a wonderful way to introduce ourselves to the audience.

This piece is particularly special for me because it's the first Haydn quartet I ever played. I was twelve years old and growing up in Los Angeles, when my parents put me on a flight to Boston all by myself to go to a two-week chamber music camp hosted by the Colorado Quartet.

You can imagine how nervous I was getting on that flight into the great unknown, and being away from my parents that long for the first time. I remember how scared I was the first day — and then the rest is a blur because I had such a great time. I worked on this quartet for about two weeks. It was an eye-opening experience.

Haydn in particular is a never-ending source of character, charm, beauty, and passion. And I think this quartet has all the hallmarks that we love about Haydn. The second movement is so breathtakingly beautiful.

It's always great to start with this piece, although we haven't played it in many years. There are so many Haydn quartets, — 68 of them — and we want to play them all, but we find ourselves coming back to our favorites, and this is certainly one of them.

Erich Korngold's Quartet No. 3 in D Major

Korngold was one of the great child prodigies of his time. Growing up in Vienna, this *Wunderkind* was constantly compared to Mozart, so you can imagine the pressure that was put on him.

After he and his family emigrated to Los Angeles before the outset of the Second World War, Korngold became immersed in film. He wrote some of the most legendary, beautiful film scores as sort of the in-house composer for Warner Brothers, and that's really where he made himself a household name in America.

At the time, he had sworn off writing absolute music until Hitler was defeated, but early in the spring of 1945, he decided to write this Third String Quartet.

I think it was Stravinsky who said that good composers borrow and great composers steal. And in this instance, Korngold stole from himself. The second, third, and fourth movements all take thematic material from his old film scores.

The first movement is in many ways, the most dissonant. It's tonal, but a little thorny and there are moments of sheer beauty. The second movement is a fast scherzo. And the trio

of that movement is almost like listening to an old American songbook — the first violin breaks into this absolutely beautiful melody..

The slow third movement is like a folk-song, and the last movement is the only one without programmatic quotations. It's just a great romp all the way to the end, and definitely a vehicle to show off our virtuosity as a quartet.

When Korngold was younger, he orchestrated his music in a difficult, overwritten fashion. He would write tempo changes and different expressive markings in every other measure, and it could be a pain to put everything together. But he really streamlined his approach later on in life, and you can hear that in this quartet. It's very economically written for each instrument. and he doesn't overwrite at any point. It's beautifully balanced. You can tell he's really become a master of his craft.

Johannes Brahms' Quartet in A minor

I think this Brahms quartet satisfies both the studious and the casual music lover. The harmony, counterpoint, and thematic material is so wonderful, and so very Brahms.

Of his three quartets, this being the second, I think the A minor is my favorite. It's the most complete of the three. It's a special piece and so we're very lucky to be able to play this music.

The Escher's busy schedule

October and November is typically two of the busiest months of the season. We just finished a stretch in Dallas, on Long Island, and in Washington, DC. Then we have about a week off before Cleveland and San Diego, then we're heading to San Francisco.

There's no rest for the weary, but we get to play great music and meet wonderful people. Do we get tired? Certainly. The traveling is not that much fun, but once we arrive, we get to enjoy each city and find our special moments. So we're lucky to do what we do.

The Quartet's Latest Recording

Released on August 28 on the Bis label, the recording features the clarinet quintets of Johannes Brahms and Max Reger with English clarinetist Michael Collins.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com *October 8, 2026*

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