November 13th, 2025, concert

Maxwell Quartet

in memory of
Marlene Preiss

The WMCT gratefully acknowledges
Dianne Henderson
for her support of the Student Outreach Program

Artist Supporter
Kathleen McMorrow

As a courtesy to others, please refrain from wearing perfume or other scents.
Please turn off cell phones and other noise-making devices.
No photography or recordings of any type during the performance.

Please come and meet the artists on the stage following the concert.

Tuning Your Mind Lecture:
The life of a professional string quartet player:
Mark Fewer in conversation with Robin Elliott
Open to all, 12.15 p.m. sharp
Walter Hall, Edward Johnson Building

PROGRAM for NOVEMBER 13, 2025

String Quartet in D major, Op. 20 No. 4 — Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

I. Allegro di molto
II. Un poco adagio e affettuoso
III. Allegretto alla zingarese
IV. Presto scherzando

Folk Music of Scotland — Maxwell Quartet

---INTERMISSION---

String Quartet No. 2 in A minor, Op. 51 No. 2 — Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

I. Allegro non troppo
II. Andante moderato
III. Quasi Minuetto, moderato
IV. Finale. Allegro non assai

Visit the artists' website at www.maxwellstringquartet.com

If you haven't followed any of the advertising for this concert you may be surprised when you first see the program: two mainstays of the classical repertoire coupled with Scottish folk music. And of course, today's performers are hoping that will be your reaction, since they have built an image around this unusual juxtaposition. But is it so unusual? Would either of the composers sharing the program have felt uneasy in this company? I think not. Haydn would often incorporate folk idioms into his music, and indeed the minuet movement of today's D major quartet is labelled *alla zingarese,* in the gypsy style, or as we now prefer, in the Romani style. Much later in his life, Haydn had a contract to supply arrangements of Scottish folk songs for the Edinburgh publisher George Thomson, so we have an almost direct connection across more than two centuries. Brahms was an assiduous collector of folksongs and made many arrangements of these, especially when he gave concerts with the Hungarian violinist, Eduard Remenyi. The last movement of the quartet on today's program is modeled on a Hungarian folk dance, the csárdás.

The six Op. 20 quartets by Haydn are sometimes known collectively as the "Sun" quartets for no other reason than an early edition contained a picture of a rising sun on the title page. They were written in 1772 and published in 1774. Haydn claimed that a later group of quartets was written in a "new and special way." This may have been partly advertisement but in any case, there are good reasons for thinking the Op. 20 quartets just as deserving of that description. As Rosemary Hughes put it, "here the string quartet texture is finally achieved, however capable it may still be of further refinement or expansion." That word texture is one that musicians throw around rather casually; in this case it really means that all the instruments get interesting things to say. The overall harmony is produced by the four individual threads of sound weaving together, likened so often to intelligent conversation. And this is where a live performance wins hands down over even the very best recording: you can see the conversational give and take—or staying with weaving, the warp and weft— of the musical sounds reflected in the movements and gestures of the four players. The importance that the Op. 20 quartets had for later developments is clear from the fact that Beethoven

copied out the score of the first quartet, and Brahms acquired Haydn's autograph score of all the quartets and notated it carefully.

When these quartets were written, Haydn was Kapellmeister for Prince Nikolaus Esterházy, the wealthy Hungarian nobleman who, besides owning residences in Vienna and Eisenstadt, built Eszterháza, a lavish palace near the swampy shore of the Neusiedler See on the site of his favourite hunting lodge. To begin with he, along with the whole family household, would spend the summer months in this rather isolated spot, but these stays became more and more extended. And when the prince was there, Haydn had to be as well, along with the couple of dozen musicians who made up the prince's orchestra. The amount of music that was performed for the entertainment of the prince and his visitors is staggering—for weeks on end no evening would pass without an elaborate program; besides preparing and directing this music Haydn wrote much of it himself. It is not clear where the quartets fit into all this music making. There is no evidence of chamber music being performed for the prince. It is true that for a time he was obsessed with playing the baryton, a curious hybrid cello-sized string instrument, and Haydn was required to write works for him to perform. But the prince's overwhelming musical passion was opera, and to realize this he built a fully equipped theatre at Eszterháza. It seems likely that Haydn wrote these string quartets for Viennese patrons.

Brahms' Op. 51 quartets were written and published in 1873 when he was forty, the same age that Haydn had been when he wrote his Op. 20 quartets. The difference was that Haydn had already published two collections of quartets, a dozen works in all, and this was Brahms' first quartet, although he claimed to have destroyed at least a dozen in the previous years. Many years earlier Schumann, in an over-the-top essay had predicted an almost Messiah-like future for Brahms, as the one composer of his generation destined to take the place of Beethoven. Impossible expectations like this were to dog Brahms for much of his life and to make him unusually self-critical, especially when it came to symphonies and string quartets, the two genres that Beethoven had taken to such heights. His comment to the composer Hermann Levi about the writing of symphonies is well known and is equally

applicable to quartets: "you have no idea how it feels to the likes of us to have such a giant marching behind you." Oddly enough Beethoven was also very careful as a young composer to steer away from any too obvious comparison with Haydn; he certainly waited before launching his own early quartets, preferring to publish first a collection of string trios, a genre that hadn't interested Haydn. Brahms gave the publisher August Cranz a more down-to-earth explanation of his tardiness in completing his Op. 51 quartets: "it is not difficult to compose," he said, "but it is incredibly difficult to let the superfluous notes drop under the table."

Brahms dedicated the two quartets to his friend Theodor Billroth, chief surgeon at the Vienna General Hospital. Billroth was an accomplished amateur pianist and violinist—he had once contemplated a musical career—and often took part in informal rehearsals of Brahms' works. As a surgeon, he has been called the founding father of modern abdominal surgery, and two surgical procedures are still named after him. Towards the end of his life, he attempted to bring the two sides of his life together by studying the phenomenon of musicality and the perception of music from a scientific point of view. He began an essay on the subject, but it remained incomplete at his death. Both quartets were performed publicly in late 1873, but they were probably heard first in private performances in Billroth's house. The works were reviewed favourably by the influential Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick, who picked up the idea suggested in Schumann's essay of twenty years before, and placed them in direct line of descent from the late Beethoven quartets, singling out especially the slow movement of today's quartet: "an Adagio of such sweet, long-breathed melody has not been written since Beethoven," he wrote. The twentieth-century composer, Arnold Schoenberg, who wanted to secure his own place in the tradition stemming from Beethoven, took this same melody to demonstrate the progressive nature of Brahms's compositions, and thus to show how they led inevitably to his own radical experiments.

I seem to have strayed off into a musicological backwater. A few of the Maxwell Quartet's "striking arrangements of Scottish Traditional Folk Music" should bring us back to reality.

-John Mayo