

Danish String Quartet

Saturday, February 28, 2026 at 8pm

This is the 1,503rd concert in Koerner Hall

Danish String Quartet

Frederik Øland, violin

Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, violin

Asbjørn Nørgaard, viola

Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, cello

PROGRAM

Alfred Schnittke: String Quartet No. 2

I. Moderato –

II. Agitato

III. Mesto

IV. Moderato

Jonny Greenwood: Suite from *There Will Be Blood*

Oil

HW/Hope of New Fields

Future Markets

Prospectors Quartet

Detuned Orchestra

INTERMISSION

Maurice Ravel: String Quartet in F Major

I. Allegro moderato - très doux

II. Assez vif - très rythmé

III. Très lent

IV. Vif et agité

THE MICHAEL AND SONJA KOERNER FUND FOR CLASSICAL PROGRAMMING

The Royal Conservatory's mission to develop future generations of musicians and to bring the world's greatest performers to Toronto has been made possible, in large part, due to the generosity of Michael and Sonja Koerner. In 2022, the Koerners invested \$10 million to create The Michael and Sonja Koerner Fund for Classical Programming, securing the future of the finest classical music concerts at Koerner Hall and our other performance venues. This latest investment, along with the naming of Michael and Sonja Koerner Hall, support of Glenn Gould School students through The Michael & Sonja Koerner Scholarships, the donation of The Michael and Sonja Koerner Early Instrument Collection, the naming of The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Cello Program and The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Chair in Cello, and support of the annual 21C Music Festival, underscores the Koerner family's dedication to music and to the RCM.

Alfred Schnittke

Born in Engels, Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (now Russia), November 24, 1934; died in Hamburg, Germany, August 3, 1998

String Quartet No. 2 (1980)

Born in the Soviet Union to a Jewish, German-speaking father and a German Catholic mother, Alfred Schnittke described himself as belonging to two worlds. "I am tied to Russia, having spent all my life here," he said. "On the other hand, much of what I have written is somehow related to German music and to the logic that comes out of being German, although I did not particularly want this." This tension between identities shaped a vast body of work – three operas, nine symphonies, a dozen concertos, nine Concerti grossi, ballets, sonatas, and more than 60 film scores that paid the bills, and sometimes fed back into his concert scores. Even after a series of strokes left him partially paralysed and unable to speak, he continued to compose with his left hand, refining what he called the 'even tension' of tonality stretched to its limits.

String Quartet No. 2 (1980) is Schnittke's tribute to acclaimed film director Larissa Shepitko, a close friend killed in a 1979 car crash while preparing her next film. "Her death," Schnittke said, "was a hard blow." His memorial quartet opens with ghostly high harmonics drawn from 16th and 17th century Russian chant – seeds from which the entire quartet will grow. The first movement, brief and spectral, serves as a prelude to the anguished second, where grief erupts in tumultuous fury. This alternates with more considered, if still agonised and dissonant grieving, which gradually reveals a fragment of requiem chant.

The slow third movement deepens the lament: chant-like textures, double-stopped and distorted, weave around a central *cantus*, punctuated by increasingly intense, jagged chords. "The chants are treated quite freely," Schnittke explains – "diatonic themes become chromatic ... instability of the scale steps [and] deliberately complicated playing techniques ... leads to choral effects." The finale gathers the quartet's memories and dissolves them into silence, returning full circle to the spectral sonorities of the opening – grief transfigured into the timeless stillness of a lamenting chant.

Jonny Greenwood

Born in Oxford, England, November 5, 1971

Suite from *There Will Be Blood* for string quartet (2007, arr. 2018)

Best known as the lead guitarist and keyboardist of Radiohead, Jonny Greenwood has carved a parallel life as one of the most original voices in contemporary film and concert music. Trained in his teenage years as a violist, drawn to Bach and Bartók, Greenwood grew up fascinated by sound itself – "realising there were no rules," he recalled of childhood experiments with a violin bow under the strings. "The variety of colour one player can make with a string instrument is quite mind-blowing," he says. Greenwood had to learn to communicate sounds imagined in his head to performers and this he did through work as composer-in-residence with the BBC Concert Orchestra and through studying the scores of Penderecki and Ligeti. *Smear* (2004), his first work for orchestra, was premiered by the London Sinfonietta. His 2005-7 string orchestra work *Popcorn Superhet Receiver* was developed while working with the BBC Concert Orchestra and went on to win the *BBC Radio 3* listeners' prize at the 2006 British Composer Awards. *48 Responses to Polymorphia* was premiered in Poland in a joint concert with Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki. *Water* was commissioned and recorded by the Australian Chamber Orchestra, while *Horror Vacui*, premiered at the 2019 BBC Proms, earned him a 2020 Ivors Composer Award.

Greenwood's collaboration with filmmaker Paul Thomas Anderson began in 2007, when Anderson asked him to collaborate on *There Will Be Blood*. "I thought, this is going to be like being in a band with Paul," Greenwood said. The partnership has since produced *The Master*, *Phantom Thread*, and *Licorice Pizza*, and brought Greenwood an Academy Award nomination for *Phantom Thread*. He received another nomination for *The Power of the Dog* (2021), directed by Jane Campion – and three Grammy nominations.

The film *There Will Be Blood* is a bleak epic of greed, isolation, and faith, following oil prospector Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis) as he transforms ambition into moral decay. Greenwood's music becomes its moral counterpoint – not illustration but atmosphere, shaping the film's sense of dread and desolation. Critics have hailed the prize-winning score. Of his process for composing the score, Greenwood said: "I saw some fairly long sections of the film, read the script, and just wrote loads of music ... I tried to write to the scenery and the story, rather than

specific ‘themes’ for characters.” He subsequently made a concert suite for string orchestra and ondes martenot in 2012, followed six years later, by the five-movement string quartet version, based upon five of the original 14 film score cues. First written entirely for strings, the music ranges from stark minimalism to soaring aspiration and austere beauty. Detuned Orchestra (a reworking of the film’s closing cue) asks each player to slacken the lowest string almost an octave. The result is a wavering, unstable sonority – “deliberately unpredictable,” Greenwood notes – that mirrors the film’s moral corrosion.

Maurice Ravel

Born in Ciboure, France, March 7, 1875; died in Paris, France, December 28, 1937

String Quartet in F Major (1902-3)

When French composer Vincent d’Indy first heard Ravel’s new quartet at its premiere in Paris on March 5, 1904, he enthusiastically said: “It is a piece worthy of any composer’s work at the end of a long career.” Ravel, however, was just 28 when he wrote the masterpiece that was to become a cornerstone of the string quartet repertoire and one of the most popular of all quartets. He wrote it immediately before his exotic, sometimes voluptuous song cycle *Shéhérazade*. Ravel dedicated the quartet to Gabriel Fauré, whom he considered his true mentor, even though academic officialdom had expelled him from Fauré’s composition class at the Paris Conservatoire for failing to write a fugue. Its roots, though, are intertwined with those of the D Major Quartet of César Franck, composed two decades earlier. And in between these landmark works – the Franck and the Ravel – equally intertwined with both, lies a third masterpiece, the only quartet of Claude Debussy.

Ravel, the youngest of the three composers, was enthusiastically absorbing the music of Debussy, 12 years his senior, when he began work on his string quartet. He went to all 14 performances of the first run of Debussy’s revolutionary opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* and had the sound of Debussy’s earlier quartet so much in his head that some of its lifeblood carried over into his own piece. He borrowed the use of Eastern exoticism and the modality of the harmony from Debussy. He also borrowed the richly scored textures and the idea of a pizzicato second movement.

Both Ravel and Debussy, at 10-year intervals, followed Franck’s lead in using a single theme, transformed both melodically and harmonically throughout all four movements. Although generally freer in his use of the cyclical principle, with each appearance of the theme, Ravel makes subtle changes, using the thematic unity to bring about a constantly shifting sound world. Following the premiere on March 5, 1904, critics were quick to comment on the similarity of the two quartets. They divided themselves and the followers of the composers, into two polarised camps. From this point on, the relationship of these two revolutionary French composers was to grow uneasy. Nevertheless, when Fauré criticized Ravel’s finale as a failure, Debussy was magnanimous in the way he reassured Ravel shortly before the premiere: “In the name of the gods of music and in my name too, do not alter a thing in your quartet.” His advice was backed up the following month by Jean Marnold, critic for the bi-weekly journal *Le Mercure de France*, who wrote: “A healthy and sensitive temperament of a pure musician is developing here ... We should remember the name of Maurice Ravel. He is one of the masters of tomorrow.”

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Danish String Quartet

The Grammy nominated Danish String Quartet continue to assert their preeminence among the world’s finest string quartets. Celebrated for their “intense blend, extreme dynamic variation (in which they seem glued together), perfect intonation even on harmonics, and constant vitality and flow” (*Gramophone*) and renowned for the palpable joy they exude in music-making, the Danish String Quartet has become one of today’s most in-demand classical quartets, performing to sold-out concert halls around the world.

The Quartet’s inventive and intriguing programming and repertoire choices have produced critically acclaimed original projects and commissions as well as sophisticated arrangements of traditional folk tunes. In August 2024, the Quartet released their long-awaited third album of folk-inspired traditional and original tunes, *Keel Road*, on ECM. Comprising 14 tracks, *Keel Road* is a retracing of musical pathways across the North Sea. This release marked the Quartet’s tenth anniversary of exploring Scandinavian folk traditions, beginning with their 2014

album *Wood Works* and followed by *Last Leaf* (ECM 2017); both of which were chosen as one of the top classical albums of the year by *NPR* and *The New York Times*.

With a growing audience in North America, they embark on three tours this season that bring them to 22 cities in the US and Canada. They perform at prestigious series including Washington Performing Arts, San Francisco Performances, and UC Santa Barbara Arts & Lectures in California, Carnegie Hall, The University Musical Society in Ann Arbor, Celebrity Series of Boston, and the Schubert Club in Minnesota.

The Danish Quartet's April US tour in 2026 features longtime collaborator, the Danish National Girls' Choir in their first coast-to-coast tour together. The wide-ranging program includes a new co-commissioned work by David Lang, *in wildness*, to receive its US premiere on April 10 at the University of California Santa Barbara. The program also includes music by Caroline Shaw, Lotta Wennäkoski, and Schubert, as well as traditional and original tunes arranged by the Quartet. The Danish String Quartet also plan two more tours in November 2025 and February 2026.

The Quartet takes an active role in reaching new audiences through special projects. In 2007, they established the DSQ Festival, which takes place in intimate and informal settings in Copenhagen. In 2016, they inaugurated a concert series, Series of Four, in which they both perform and invite colleagues to appear. They have been the recipient of many awards and appointments, including *Musical America's* 2020 Ensemble of the Year; the Borletti-Buitoni Trust; BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artist; and the Bowers Program. In 2011, the Quartet were awarded the Carl Nielsen Prize, the highest cultural honor in Denmark, and in June 2025, the Léonie Sonning Music Prize – the first ensemble to receive what is one of the most prestigious awards in classical music.

The Danish Quartet recently celebrated their 20th anniversary in 2024, having formed when violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard were teenagers under the mentorship of Tim Frederiksen of Copenhagen's Royal Danish Academy of Music. In 2008, the three Danes were joined by Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin. www.danishquartet.com.

Danish String Quartet made its Royal Conservatory debut on November 4, 2018, and this is its third appearance in Koerner Hall.