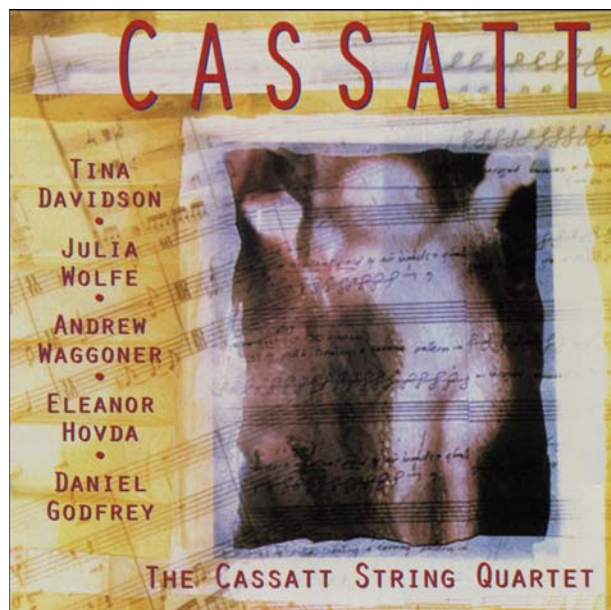


NWCR671

Cassatt

The Cassatt String Quartet



1. Tina Davidson (b. 1952)
Cassandra Sings (1988) (15:02)
2. Julia Wolfe (b. 1958)
Four Marys (1991) (13:01)
3. Andrew Waggoner (b. 1960)
A Song... (Strophic Variations for String Quartet) (1988) (10:43)
4. Eleanor Hovda (b.1940)
Lemniscates (1988) (17:53)
5. Daniel S. Godfrey (b. 1949)
Intermedio (1986) (6:29)
The Cassatt String Quartet: Muneko Otani, Sunghae
Anna Lim, violins; Michiko Oshima, viola; Anna
Cholakian, cello

Total playing time: 63:15

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Notes

In the nineteenth century, the string quartet was the scene of comparatively few radical gestures or departures. Excepting the phenomenal late quartets of Beethoven, or perhaps precisely because of their awesome presence, composers of the Romantic era treated the form with a certain reverence and caution. Turn-of-the-century masters like Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss avoided chamber music altogether, after some compulsory exercises in their student years. The future, it seemed lay elsewhere.

Then, a few years into the new century, all hell broke loose. In 1903 Charles Ives composed a Scherzo for String Quartet, subtitled “Holding Your Own,” in which each player in the group adopted independent tonalities and rhythms. Toward the end of the same decade Arnold Schoenberg let the atonal cat out of the bag in the third and fourth movements of his String Quartet No. 2—and Bartók’s violently dissonant middle-period quartets were not far behind. In the post–World War II music of Carter, Ligeti, Scelsi, and Lutoslawski, the string quartet became the site of the most astringent avant-garde experiments.

The compositions represented on this Cassatt Quartet program do not come up with a unanimous response to the quartet genre’s divided history. The works by Tina Davidson, Andrew Waggoner, and Daniel Godfrey participate in the twentieth-century continuum or mainstream that has its roots in the nineteenth, while Julia Wolfe and Eleanor Hovda mobilize some of the avant-garde techniques that have circulated since the Second World War. Yet all five pieces tell a story of tension and release, wandering and return; in all the pieces some reference to tonality serves as a guiding light. And they all have a sound-world of their own, in which technique of one kind or another is raised to the level of personal idiom.

Tina Davidson, a Philadelphia-based composer, wrote *Cassandra Sings* for the Kronos Quartet, employing dissonant harmonies that are richly suggestive of tonal centers in passing. The title refers both to the solitary prophetess of ancient Greece whose predictions were never believed, and to the composer’s daughter. “I was thinking about the hope I had for her future and how it related to the past,” she has written. “For me the myth is not complete: Cassandra of old is overwhelmed and destroyed by the truth; my Cassandra is transformed by death, and born into a new time, this time, the time of my daughter—a time of telling the truth and being heard.” The work opens with an arresting, long-limbed melody on the cello, the prologue to a propulsive, syncopated section marked “tense but resonant.” A fantastical stretch of ghostly effects ends in a chaotic, upward-scuttling motion. After a sudden calm, the rapid figured motions slowly return, this time clear and affirmative: The work becomes joyous and open.

Julia Wolfe, the co-artistic director of New York’s Bang on a Can Festival, has designed the sound of her *Four Marys* expressly for this ensemble, which gave the premiere at the festival in 1991. “I thought a lot about the way the quartet plays—how they breathe together, how they make music as if they are one organism,” she has written. The title takes its inspiration from mountain dulcimer music, with the title paying homage to a traditional Scottish tune performed by Jean Ritchie. Characteristic dulcimer sounds—the sliding motion of its melody string, the steady strum of its “drone” or accompaniment strings—are transformed into idiomatic string quartet language. An opening section of soft, sustained chords into which destabilizing glissandi are steadily insinuated is followed by a vigorously driving, dance-like middle section with a minimalist undertow. In conclusion, held chords recalling the outset are allowed to retain their glowing calm,

despite the persistence of slow sliding lines. The work was commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation for the Cassatt Quartet.

Andrew Waggoner, director of the Syracuse University School of Music, uses a harmonic idiom that seems dissonant and modernistic on first encounter, but later proves to have a decided tonal bias. *A Song... (Strophic Variations for String Quartet)*, also written for Cassatt, is rigorously derived from the slashing fortissimo figure of its first bar; a rich profusion of events ensues, including an exultantly stamping dance-like episode about halfway through (essentially in F Major) and a powerful sequence in which upward-striding unison figures alternate with massive chords of C and B major combined. Driving eighth-note rhythms create a surge of energy for the final section, whose rising melodic strain and stretto-like tuttis are not so much songful as operatic. The composer again had the Cassatt's particular sound in mind: "*A Song...* is indelibly marked with the *numen* of their playing."

Eleanor Hovda's *Lemniscates*, written originally for the Kronos Quartet, is the most technically complicated work on this release. The conventional language of rhythm and pitches gives way to an otherworldly zone dominated by harmonics and overtones. Hovda creates a whole new bowing technique: a figure-8 in which the bow moves from the ordinary position to the fingerboard and to the bridge. (The mathematical term that gives Hovda's work its title refers to the figure-8, and is derived from the Latin *lemniscus*, meaning "with hanging ribbons.") This technique, combined with the continual use of harmonics (very light fingering, so that only overtones and not fundamental tones are produced), results in a continually shifting sound-texture composed not of notes but ghosts or "glints" of notes. At first this sonic space seems devoid of activity, inhabited only by static whispers of tone hanging in mid-air. But hints of passage work slowly intrude—trills, tremolos, little chromatic figures, and arpeggiated patterns of overtones. The work's unexpected climax is an enormous, droning crescendo on tones of E.

Daniel Strong Godfrey's deft and brief *Intermedio*, which closes the disc, is as distinct a contrast from the Hovda as you could wish: a work deeply indebted to European forms from earlier in the twentieth century, and even from the twilight of the nineteenth. The *con fuoco* introduction is aggressive and dissonant. But the splendid, swaying theme that soon emerges on the violin shows an obvious lust for plain tonality that is consummated in a fortissimo C-Major-ish passage halfway

through the piece. After some tense back-and-forth argumentation, the theme and its propulsive accompaniment return even more emphatically, this time in G. The complex, forward-tumbling motion of that accompaniment results from a technique of "hocketing," very challenging for the players, in which each rhythmic segment is handed from one instrument to another like a hot potato.

—Alex Ross

Hailed as one of America's outstanding young ensembles, the **Cassatt String Quartet** has performed in halls throughout North America and abroad, including Weill Concert Hall at Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall, the Tanglewood Music Theatre, the Kennedy Center, the Théâtre des Champs Élysées in Paris, and Maeda Hall in Tokyo. The quartet is frequently heard on WGBH, WQXR, and WNYC, and has given recitals for CBC Radio and Radio France. The Cassatt has also given master classes and performed at such institutions as Yale University, Princeton University, Oberlin Conservatory, Wellesley College, and Bennington College.

The Cassatt String Quartet was formed in 1985 with the encouragement of the Juilliard Quartet. They were inaugural participants in Juilliard's Young Artist String Quartet Residency Program. In 1986 the Cassatt Quartet won the first prize at both the Fischhoff and Coleman Chamber Music competitions, and was awarded the first Tanglewood Chamber Music Fellowship. The Cassatt was the only American quartet to win a top prize at the 1989 Banff International String Quartet Competition, where they were also awarded a special prize for the best performance of the commissioned work.

In 1990 they were finalists in the Walter W. Naumburg Chamber Music Competition, and were also chosen to perform in the Pro-Quartet Forum in Paris, France.

The Cassatt Quartet was in residence at the Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts from 1990 to 1993. From 1991 to 1993, they were also awarded the Wardwell Chamber Music Fellowship at the Yale School of Music, where they acted as teaching assistants to the Tokyo String Quartet.

During the summer, the quartet is in residence at the Swannanoa Chamber Festival in North Carolina. As dedicated performers of contemporary music, the quartet has commissioned and premiered many new works, and is in residence at the Bang on a Can Festival in New York City. This program of contemporary works is their debut recording.

Production Notes

Produced by the Cassatt String Quartet

Executive Producer: Joseph R. Dalton

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Waggoner: American Composers Alliance (BMI)

Hovda: composer (ASCAP)

Godfrey: G. Davidge Publishing (BMI)

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