

**THALEA STRING QUARTET**

Christopher Whitley, 1st violin    Kumiko Sakamoto, 2nd violin  
Lauren Spaulding, viola    Titilayo Ayangade, cello

**April 2, 2022 Program**  
**Smith Fine Arts Series at Western Oregon University**

Akshaya Avril Tucker (b.1992)  
Radha in the Forest (2020)

The Beatles / arr. Alex Vittal (b.1984)  
Abbey Road Suite  
i. You Never Give Me Your Money  
ii. Sun King  
iii. Mean Mr. Mustard  
iv. Polythene Pam  
v. She Came in Through the Bathroom Window  
vi. Golden Slumbers  
vii. Carry That Weight  
viii. The End  
ix. Her Majesty

Florence Price (1887-1953)  
Five [Negro] Folksongs in Counterpoint  
    Calvary  
    Clementine  
    Drink to Me With Thine Own Eyes  
    Shortnin' Bread  
    Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)  
String Quartet No. 12 in F major, Opus 96, "American"  
    Allegro ma non troppo  
    Lento  
    Molto vivace  
    Finale: vivace ma non troppo

## The Thalea String Quartet

The **Thalea String Quartet** brings together artists of Nigerian, Japanese and North American heritage. With repertoire as diverse as its members, and every bit as exuberant, Thalea connects with audiences on a musical, emotional and personal level, from first-time listeners to chamber music aficionados.

Top prize-winners at both the 2018 Fischhoff and Chamber Music Yellow Springs Competitions, Thalea was founded in 2014 and made its U.S. début at the Kennedy Center in 2016. They have since performed across North America and in Italy, France, Belgium and China, and were chosen by Canada's Début Atlantic to give a two-week tour of eastern Canada.

Thalea was honored to be the Quartet-in-Residence at Caramoor in 2019-20, joining an elite roster of quartets, including the Calidore and the Dover, who have held this esteemed position. Caramoor has commissioned a work by Paola Prestini ("one of the top female composers in classical music" —Washington Post), that Thalea premiered in 2021.

Beginning August 2020, Thalea has been in residence at University of Maryland as the Graduate Fellowship Quartet. For the previous two years, they were the Young Professional Quartet-in-Residence at the University of Texas-Austin's Butler School of Music, and prior to that they were the inaugural Quartet-in-Residence at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

Thalea has shared the stage with the Borromeo Quartet in the Mendelssohn Octet, with Pulitzer Prize-winning composer/vocalist Caroline Shaw, with Geoff Nuttall of the St. Lawrence String Quartet, and with pianist Tao Lin on a tour of China. A highlight of their '21-22 season is an appearance for the prestigious Washington (DC) Performing Arts Society with pianist Lara Downes and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Rita Dove.

Thalea co-commissioned a chamber version of the Piano Concerto by Florence Price, contributing to the resurgence of interest in this neglected African-American composer. They performed the work with great success at Caramoor across the U.S.

Thalea participated in the 2017 Kronos Festival and have been Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel Associated Artists under the mentorship of the Artemis Quartet. Other mentors include the Miró Quartet and members of the Juilliard, Kronos, Takács, Pacifica and Danish String Quartets. During multiple residencies at the Banff Centre they worked with Gilbert Kalish, Mark Steinberg, Alasdair Tait and the JACK and Miró Quartets.

Individual members also perform jazz, compose for interactive visual art, sing in choirs, dance ballet, and occasionally act on a hit TV show.

***"Just when I thought our society was falling apart, along came the Thalea Quartet's vivid, expansive performances! Their beautifully textured sound is enveloped by thrilling individual brilliance and highlighted by a rare, magnetic quartet sense emanating from every note they play. Hearing them makes me feel very happy and gives me hope for the future. They are great ambassadors for music."*** —David Harrington, Kronos Quartet

***"Fresh, passionate, liberated."*** — San Francisco Classical Voice

***"Thalea never failed to deliver a stirring performance."*** — Calgary Herald

Their website is [www.thaleastringquartet.com](http://www.thaleastringquartet.com)

## **Members of the Thalea String Quartet**

### **Christopher Whitley**

Canadian violinist Christopher Whitley is an engaging and versatile performer. From Baroque to electronic music, Christopher is committed to exploring and performing music of all styles.

Christopher has performed on period instruments at the Boston Early Music Festival and the Valley of the Moon Music Festival. An avid proponent of contemporary music, Christopher has performed as a member of NOVUS NY and as both concertmaster and soloist of the McGill Contemporary Music Ensemble. He is a regular guest of San Francisco jazz group Le Jazz Hot, performing music inspired by Stephane Grappelli and Django Reinhardt. As a composer, Christopher's primary focus is on expanding the potential of the solo violin, incorporating technology, electronic music and interactive visual art. Blending classical music, popular music and a variety of improvised styles, he has performed across the United States and Canada, including at the 2009 CMJ Music Marathon in New York. He has been invited to create new works at residencies at the Banff Centre and at the Britten Pears Young Artist Program in Aldeburgh, UK.

Christopher received his Bachelor's of music at McGill University studying with Mark Fewer and continued his studies at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music with Ian Swensen.

Christopher performs on the 1700 "Taft" Stradivari, generously on loan by the Canada Council for the Arts Musical Instrument Bank. In his spare time, he can be found at record stores, libraries and coffee shops and does whatever he can to get into a canoe.

### **Kumiko Sakamoto**

Kumiko Sakamoto is a devoted performer, chamber musician, and multi-faceted artist. She has performed as a soloist and chamber musician throughout North America, France, Poland, and Italy, including performances at the Kennedy Center, Massey Hall, St. Sulpice (Paris), and Teatro la Fenice (Venice). Kumiko recorded the first album of works by Italian composer Gino Gorini under the Tactus (Naxos) label which was released in 2015.

After studying with Michael van der Sloot in the Medicine Hat College Conservatory Academy, Kumiko went on to receive an Artist Certificate from Mount Royal University, Calgary, Alberta where she studied with William van der Sloot, a Bachelor of Music in Violin Performance and a Master's degree in Chamber Music from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music where she studied with Ian Swensen. She received a Minor in Vocal Performance from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music under the tutelage of Pamela Fry.

Kumiko's passion for the arts extends to voice, dance, and theatre, each of which she has studied for many years. She has received many awards, including first place in violin, voice and musical theatre at the Alberta Provincial Music Festival, and a chamber music award at the Canadian National Music Festival. A dancer for most of her life, Kumiko still enjoys attending ballet classes in her spare time, as well as cooking healthy meals and hosting dinner parties for her friends and family.

### **Lauren Spaulding**

Lauren Spaulding, a Texas native, is a member of Meredith Monk's performance ensemble, a regular with the Colorado Symphony, and a recording artist with award winning studios such as "Found Objects Music" in NYC. Lauren's playing can be heard on "Social Dilemma" & "Modern Love" Season 2. Lauren performs with Pro Musica Colorado, Boulder Bach, So & So New York, and the Playground String Quartet. She is principal viola for Colorado MahlerFest.

First-place winner in the Reno Pop's Concerto Competition, Lauren was invited, for summer 2021, to be a featured artist at Yellow Barn, Virtuoso Bel Canto, and the Menuhin Academy. In 2012, Lauren's quartet was invited to perform at the White House for President Obama to commemorate American composers as a "Champion of Change." She uses her love for chamber music to advocate for under-represented composers and young neuro-atypical musicians, and works with Kim Kashkashian in the "Music for Food" initiative, fighting food insecurity.

Lauren received her BM and MM in viola performance under the tutelage of Professor Peter Slowik at the Oberlin Conservatory and Geraldine Walther of the Takács Quartet. She studied chamber music under the guidance of the Takács, Cavani, Ying and Pro Arte Quartets, the Orpheus Ensemble, and with Darrett Adkins at the Juilliard School of Music and Roger Tapping of the Juilliard String Quartet.

### **Titilayo Ayangade**

Cellist Titilayo Ayangade, originally from Cincinnati, Ohio, is a dedicated chamber musician, multifaceted artist and purveyor of music. Titilayo holds a Bachelors of Music from CCM where she studied with Ilya Finkelshteyn, and continued her studies at the Chicago College of Performing Arts as Resident String Quartet with the Yas Quartet. While living in Chicago she maintained an active orchestral and chamber music performance schedule as a member of The Civic Orchestra of Chicago, Chicago Sinfonietta, and the Yas Quartet. Titilayo played at the Classical Music day at the White House in 2009 and appeared as a guest artist with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra as a member of the Nouveau Chamber Players.

As an avid chamber musician Titilayo has worked with the Ying Quartet, Tokyo Quartet, Harlem Quartet, Takács Quartet, Catalyst Quartet, members of the Juilliard Quartet, and the Vogler String Quartet. As a member of the Yas Quartet, Titilayo was a semi-finalist at the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition in 2016 and a prize winner at the Schoenfeld International String Competition also in 2016. Titilayo has attended Bowdoin International Music Festival, Sphinx Performance Academy at the Walnut Hill School, Meadowmount Summer Music Festival, International Festival de Inverno Campos do Jordão, Aspen Music Festival, National Orchestral Institute, and Colorado College Summer Music Festival. Beyond the concert stage, Titilayo has made several appearances on the hit TV show Empire and also enjoys her work as a professional photographer.

## Program Notes

### TUCKER:

Akshaya Avril Tucker ([www.akshayatucker.com](http://www.akshayatucker.com)) is a composer, cellist, dancer and choreographer from Massachusetts. Having spent 20 years studying and performing Classical Indian dance, her work is greatly inspired by the music and dance traditions of South Asia. Even when writing for Western-trained performers, Akshaya lays a path toward luminescent, meditative sound worlds somewhere between Indian and Western music.

This unique work for string quartet and voice, *Radha in the Forest*, was composed specifically to highlight the vocal skill of our second violinist Kumiko Sakamoto, who performs both as second violinist and as soprano soloist. Inspired by Tucker's study of Classical Indian music and dance, the work depicts the story of the Sanskrit heroine Radha, using distinct compositional techniques from the classical Indian tradition. The piece renders a 12th century poem for the modern age, grappling with love, divine joy, environmental tragedy, and social isolation.

### PRICE:

As both a woman and an African American, Florence Price was a dual pioneer in the world of American classical music at a time when there were formidable obstacles in place against both groups. Born and raised in Little Rock, she began playing the piano at four and had her first composition published at 11. By the time she was 14, Price had already graduated at the top of her high school class and matriculated at Boston's esteemed New England Conservatory of Music. In 1906 before she was 20, she had graduated with honors; nevertheless, during part of her time there, she pretended to be Mexican in order to counter the prejudice against her race.

In 1910, Price moved to Atlanta, where she became head of the music department at Clark Atlanta University. Upon her marriage, she moved back to Little Rock, but after a series of racial incidents there, including a lynching, she and her lawyer husband left for Chicago. There she became friends with both the writer Langston Hughes and the great African-American contralto Marian Anderson, both of whom had a hand in promoting her composing career. After her Symphony in E minor won first prize in the Wanamaker Foundation Awards in 1932, conductor Frederick Stock selected it for performance in June 1933 at the Chicago World's Fair by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra: the first composition by an African-American woman ever to be played by a major American orchestra.

Over the course of her career, Price wrote some 300 pieces in a variety of genres. Her songs and arrangements of spirituals were in heavy demand in Chicago during her lifetime; both tenor Roland Hayes and soprano Leontyne Price programmed them. But after her death, Price's music was largely forgotten for decades. With the coming of the 21st century, its rediscovery began when new owners of her summer home found major, previously unpublished works and sent them on to the University of Arkansas's archives. There musicologists found a treasure trove of works

that revealed her appealing combination of late Romantic style invigorated by influences from African-American folk music. Recently, a Florence Price revival has been spreading around American orchestras as more of her pieces are prepared for performance.

Found in the University's library only through its individual parts in Price's handwritten manuscript, the **Five Folk Songs in Counterpoint** are believed to have been written about 1927. It epitomizes the string quartet's unique aptitude for contrapuntal writing: that is, playing in a texture of independent lines rather than chords. Rae Linda Brown notes that "When the American folksongs not of African American origin, 'Clementine' and 'Drink to me only with thine eyes,' were added, the word 'Negro' was erased on the manuscript, or nearly so. It is still legible in the title in quotation marks.

Most solemn and densely contrapuntal is the first movement "Calvary" (Adagio *vigoroso*) based on that keening African American spiritual. It is also the most modern in its harmonies, its dissonances matching the harrowing subject matter. Much lighter is the setting of "My Darling Clementine;" it closes with a more up-tempo peroration on the familiar tune. The old English melody "Drink to Me Only" is allowed to shine more clearly in a simpler texture before blurring into lush, shimmering variations. The lively syncopations of "Shortnin' Bread" suggest ragtime. Finally, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" is presented initially in fugal style rising from the cello through imitative entrances in the other instruments. Imaginative rhythmic and harmonic distortions build it to a strong, virtuosic ending.

## VITTAL:

Alex Vittal is a violist, arranger, and Executive Director of the Colorado-based Sphere Ensemble, which he brings to marginalized schools and communities, homeless shelters, juvenile detention centers, women's shelters, children's hospitals, and assisted living and memory care facilities.

Alex has diverse musical tastes, performing orchestral music as a member of the Steamboat Symphony Orchestra, traditional Argentine tango music with *Orquesta Típica Natural Tango*, Baroque music on period instruments with the Baroque Chamber Orchestra of Colorado, and a wide variety of musical styles with Sphere Ensemble. Dedicated to social justice through music education, Alex spent seven years working with under-resourced elementary and middle school students as a Teaching Artist with El Sistema Colorado.

**Abbey Road Suite** is Alex Vittal's amazing quartet rendering of the B-side from the Beatles' Abbey Road album. He writes:

"I was first exposed to The Beatles' *Abbey Road* in my later teenage years after I had begun learning the electric bass as a hobby to go alongside my main instrument, the viola, and it was a revelatory experience for me. I loved the entire album immediately, but the long form of the B-side in particular struck me as particularly brilliant on so many levels. The songs have such great movement and energy, explore so many emotions and musical styles, and have a fascinating structure. Listen for a recurrence of the opening theme of "You Never Give Me Your Money" at the close of "The End." "Her

"Majesty" was actually the first ever hidden track included on an album, and is a sort of silly coda to the whole set. Even more striking to me than the songs themselves are the bold and singular musical styles of each of the four Beatles. You can really hear their unique personalities throughout the entire B-side, from Paul's sensitivity and passion to John's bravado to George's virtuosity to Ringo's sense of humor.

In this arrangement, a true labor of love written and re-written countless times over seven years, I have sought to remain as true as possible to the original recording, including capturing individual personality quirks in the original recording. I believe that we collectively love The Beatles both because of the quality and originality of their songs, but even more so for their musical personalities and public personas. I hope this performance brings you closer to The Beatles and their peerless *Abbey Road*."

## DVOŘÁK:

Antonín Dvořák was the most prolific chamber music composer of the late 19th century. He wrote numerous excellent works in every standard form as well as for novel ensembles. His natural and seemingly effortless proclivity for chamber music resulted in a body of work that was unusual for a composer of the Romantic period, a time in which the exploration of large forces, extra-musical programs and expansive, subjective forms had little to do with this intimate and formalized genre most associated with the Classical era. It was characteristic of his time for Dvořák to express his musical nationalism; strong elements of his native Bohemian (i.e. Czech or Slavonic) folk music appear in his music in the dance and narrative forms of the *furiant* and the *dumka* respectively. But despite such general influences of form, rhythm and mood, Dvořák's music has a freshness, clarity of texture and bounty of dramatic lyricism that makes it original.

Dvořák's best-known works date from the 1890's during his three-year sojourn in America, where he served as director of the National Conservatory in New York. They include the New World Symphony and the "**American**" **String Quartet**. Dvořák encountered American folk music in the form of Native-American drumming and African-American spirituals, the latter of which he regarded as profoundly original music that might serve as a basis for a national style. While Dvořák himself denied that he intentionally incorporated any American elements, the "American" String Quartet in particular bears the stamp of the time and place of its composition.

Ironically, Dvořák composed the "American" Quartet while on holiday in the predominantly Bohemian farming community of Spillville, Iowa. A spirit of relaxation and perhaps joyful homecoming inspired him to swiftly compose the quartet within a few weeks. Flowing, spacious, and bright, the music seems to reflect his disposition, if not, as some claim, the expanse of the American plains. The most pervasive aspect of the quartet supporting these qualities, as well as reflecting Dvořák's general preoccupation with folk idioms, is the use of the pentatonic or five-note scale, which is common in folk music around the world. Whatever influences or expressive intentions lay behind this choice, it imbues the quartet with a personality and a continuity that is distinctive and strongly evocative. The most particular trace of the quartet's rural, American origin, however, is birdsong. The third movement Scherzo features the song of the Scarlet Tanager, a bird that Dvořák heard and transcribed while hiking the countryside. After an



initial statement of a sprightly, rustic theme, the first violin sings the birdsong high in the treble range. The instantaneous evocation of dance, the outdoors, and the piercing simplicity of nature's own music define a pure moment of folk music as high art.  
—Kai Christiansen