



Alexander  
**ZEMMLINSKY**

**String Quartets • 2**

Escher String Quartet



## Alexander Zemlinsky (1871-1942)

### String Quartets · 2: Nos. 1 and 2

The year 1896 was an auspicious one for Alexander Zemlinsky, the youthful pianist and composer who was quickly earning a name for himself in his native Vienna. Late that year he took prizes with his first opera, *Sarema*, and his recently composed *Trio in D minor* for clarinet, cello and piano, adding to a growing list of awards and culminating with the support of Johannes Brahms. In July the twenty-five-year old Zemlinsky set to work on what was to become his first published string quartet (work on an earlier quartet in E minor had been subsequently set aside). Considering his conservative training and inherent flair for lyricism, it comes as no surprise that Zemlinsky's musical vernacular remained securely tethered to the nineteenth century, evident in his melodies, harmonic language and reliance on nineteenth-century architectural moulds. Nevertheless, the quartet also reveals the bold hand of a composer intent on establishing his musical personality.

Zemlinsky's individual voice is apparent already at the start of the *Allegro con fuoco*. Setting to work immediately, perhaps even abruptly, Zemlinsky launches a theme rich in lyrical sweep and dialogue. If the occasional play of duple and triple rhythms or expressive turns of phrase mirror the extent to which Brahms was influencing Zemlinsky's musical thought, passages such as the secondary theme, which begins a conversation between violins before giving way to a soaring duet between violin and viola, illustrates what the elder Brahms must have seen in his youthful, passionate protégé. There is also little to suggest Zemlinsky's relative inexperience with the medium. Throughout the exposition, ideas unfold with confidence and invention and are subsequently worked out in the expansive development, where Zemlinsky's motivic manipulation and contrapuntal finesse stands fully revealed. Forsaking youthful vigour, Zemlinsky then brings the movement to a close in peaceful resignation, the spirit of Brahms having the final say. The *Allegretto* is ripe with flavours of the Austro-Hungarian Empire of Zemlinsky's day. Its outer

sections, characterized by charmingly Viennese flirtatiousness, frame a driving *Prestissimo*, which in turn gives way to a *furiant*, a thrilling 3/4 time dance associated with neighbouring Bohemia (which remained in the hands of the Hapsburg Empire until swept away by WWI). Zemlinsky opens his expansive slow movement, marked *Breit und kräftig*, with a cascading line built of distinctly chiseled motives from which he draws his subsequent ideas. The expressive violin melody built on a gently rising and falling arch, the expansive F major theme introduced by the cello (*con sentimento*), even the accompanimental lines are all mined from this opening material, demonstrating both a stunning economy of means and Zemlinsky's undeniable lyrical gifts. As a pedagogue Zemlinsky emphasized the importance of molding sharply contrasting ideas, a technique aptly revealed in the *Vivace*'s three distinct theme groups. The rocketing arpeggios and syncopated rhythm of the vivid opening bars are effectively countered by the expressive leaps and rocking accompaniment comprising the sunny, sweeping second theme. The wistful closing material in the expected dominant key of E is itself a study in contrast, the static upper voices countered by the pulsing cello below (Zemlinsky subsequently reverses and expands the voicing outwards to stunning effect). If the conservative outlines of the movement are by now to be expected – the development moves rapidly through a wide variety of keys with fragments from each theme group and each is recapitulated in the "proper" key of A – what lingers is music of unflagging vitality born of Zemlinsky's distinctly personal voice, considerable talent and unabashed love of his Viennese heritage.

By the time Zemlinsky returned to the genre some seventeen years later, everything had changed. His early halcyon years given over almost solely to composition had been exchanged for steady if grinding work in the opera pit and on the podium, first in Vienna and then, following a string of professional disappointments, in Prague. Likewise, his musical thought was now

consumed by the language of a new century, owing in no small part to the musical advances of Arnold Schoenberg, Zemlinsky's one-time student, friend and brother-in-law (Schoenberg had married Zemlinsky's sister Mathilde in 1901). By the time Zemlinsky set to work on what would emerge as his *Second String Quartet*, *Op. 15*, Schoenberg had already completed two quartets of his own – the first, cast as a single movement, and the second, a monumental work from 1908, representing his first foray into atonality. Zemlinsky was intimately familiar with both compositions, each firing his musical thought and pushing him in new directions.

With life devoted to work on the podium, both composition and relaxation had to wait for summers. In the summer of 1913, as war in the Balkans drew the continent ever closer to World War I, Zemlinsky took advantage of the peaceful surroundings of Kitzbühel, located in the Tyrolean Alps. It was here where he began his *Second String Quartet*, a composition conceived of as a single, extended movement comprised of five distinct sections. Easily the longest work of chamber music Zemlinsky ever composed, its appearance in 1915 placed Zemlinsky squarely in the forefront of the avant-garde. While not expressly programmatic, it is music of a deeply personal character, filled with longing, pain, humour, angst and the anxiety of a world teetering on the brink. Such intense emotional states could only be achieved by moving far afield from the traditional techniques that governed Zemlinsky's music prior to the turn of the century, and this he accomplished by expanding his trajectory in a variety of ways. As opposed to a single movement unfolding in a unified tempo or character, Zemlinsky calls for a kaleidoscope of pacing and sound – the first movement alone, for example, evolves freely over the course of five distinct tempos – and is meticulous with respect to instructions, whether indicating tempo, character, articulation, dynamics or upon which string to play. Though operating with traditional key signatures, many passages are devoid of any distinct tonality for measures at a time. Zemlinsky also exploits the quartet's potential via extremes of range and advanced techniques, requiring players of the highest caliber to satisfactorily

balance the score's demanding passagework with appropriate nuance. And finally, the *Op. 15* serves to illustrate Zemlinsky's fascination, perhaps even obsession, with the generating power of a motive, a small cell from which a seemingly infinite variety of ideas is constructed.

Two ideas presented at the start contain both the basic building blocks and capture the tenor of the overall work: the sorrowful opening motto, characterized by its initial three-note ascent, which Zemlinsky already begins to develop in the fourth measure, and the highly charged material with its strongly defined rhythmic contours (and which can arguably be traced back to the motto). As opposed to following a pre-existing formal scheme (sonata form, for example), Zemlinsky allows his material to create its own drama. Matters, therefore, unfold independently of traditional architecture, the juxtaposition of these opening characters – the one reflective, the other aggressive to the point of violence – generating the conflict and resolution occurring repeatedly throughout the movement and the entire composition. As such, the opening, marked *Sehr mäßig*, might best be considered a microcosm of the quartet as a whole. Nor should the quartet's striking textures and the interplay among voices escape notice. Among the most colorfully expressionistic passages Zemlinsky would ever compose, for example, is that introduced by the haunting pizzicato heartbeats of the cello toward the close of the first movement, as the violin's springing sixteenth dance atop a steely, two-bar ostinato.

A warmly expressive theme introduced by the viola ushers in the D major *Adagio*, as Zemlinsky continues to spin a maximum of material from his initial three-note cell. At the exact midway point of the movement Zemlinsky unleashes a tempest, the cello surging forward with hysterical passagework and textures approaching symphonic proportions. Its intensity unsustainable, matters quickly settle down before launching into a set of highly distinctive variations, only to climax again in a furor of intensity. Calm is once more momentarily established at the *Andante*, as Zemlinsky treats his opening cell "with greatest expression," before driving the music forward yet

again in the *Allegro molto*. Frenetic exploration of the basic material is here countered by expressive cello and violin lines, with much of the movement underscored by a series of dramatically rendered variants on the former heartbeat rhythm until fully exhausted. The music now completely spent, Zemlinsky devotes the last eighty-five bars of his expansive score to calm introspection until the

final echoes of his opening motto come to rest in an atmosphere of stable, D major tranquillity, a subtle if unequivocal affirmation that even in a work of such progressive dimensions, the composer remained inescapably bound to centuries of musical tradition.

**Marc D. Moskowitz**

### **Escher String Quartet**

**Adam Barnett-Hart, Violin I • Wu Jie, Violin II • Pierre Lapointe, Viola • Dane Johansen, Cello**



The Escher String Quartet has received acclaim for its profound musical insight and rare tonal beauty. Championed by the Emerson String Quartet, the group was on the BBC New Generation Artists scheme from 2010-2012, giving débuts at both the Wigmore Hall and the BBC Proms at Cadogan Hall. In its home town of New York the ensemble serves as Artists of The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, where they presented a critically acclaimed three-concert series featuring the quartets of Benjamin Britten. In 2013, the Quartet became one of the very few chamber ensembles to be awarded the prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant. Within months of its inception in 2005 the Escher Quartet was invited by both

Pinchas Zukerman and Itzhak Perlman to be Quartet in Residence at each artist's summer festival, the Young Artists Programme at Canada's National Arts Centre and the Perlman Chamber Music Program on Shelter Island, NY. In addition the quartet has since collaborated with artists including Khatia Buniatishvili, Leon Fleisher, David Finckel, Wu Han, Lynn Harrell, Joseph Kalichstein, and Jason Vieaux, as well as jazz vocalist Kurt Elling.

By 1896, at the age of twenty-five, Alexander Zemlinsky was one of the rising stars in the Viennese musical firmament. His first opera had been written, he had won a number of awards, and he had earned the support of Johannes Brahms. In July of the same year he began writing his *First String Quartet*, a work of sweeping lyricism, rich dance patterns, and self-confidence, couched within the bounds of a relatively conventional palette. Seventeen years later he began his *Second String Quartet*. Kaleidoscopic in effect, mood, and technical demands, and redolent of the music of the new century – led by his brother-in-law Arnold Schoenberg – it was to place Zemlinsky securely in the European avant-garde.

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**String Quartet No. 1 in A Major, Op. 4 (1896) 31:55**

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|----------|-------------------------------|--------------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>I. Allegro con fuoco</b>   | <b>12:06</b> |
| <b>2</b> | <b>II. Allegretto</b>         | <b>4:25</b>  |
| <b>3</b> | <b>III. Breit und kräftig</b> | <b>8:01</b>  |
| <b>4</b> | <b>IV. Vivace e con fuoco</b> | <b>7:23</b>  |

**String Quartet No. 2, Op. 15 (1913) 42:59**

- |          |                                       |              |
|----------|---------------------------------------|--------------|
| <b>5</b> | <b>I. Sehr mässig (quasi andante)</b> | <b>12:09</b> |
| <b>6</b> | <b>II. Adagio</b>                     | <b>8:22</b>  |
| <b>7</b> | <b>III. Schnell</b>                   | <b>6:05</b>  |
| <b>8</b> | <b>IV. Andante</b>                    | <b>10:10</b> |
| <b>9</b> | <b>V. Langsam</b>                     | <b>6:13</b>  |

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