Taiwanese-American violinist Che-Yen Chen has established himself as an active performer and educator. He is a founding member of the Formosa Quartet, recipient of the First-Prize and the Amadeus Prize winner of the 10th London International String Quartet Competition. Since winning the First-Prize in Primrose Competition and the “President Prize” in the Terzis Competition, Chen has been described by the Strad Magazine as a musician whose “unusual distinction and essential musicality produced an auspicious impression” and by San Diego Union Tribune as an artist whose “most impressive aspect of his playing was his ability to find not just the subtle emotion, but the humanity hidden in the music.” Having served as principal violist of the San Diego Symphony for eight seasons, he is principal violist of the Mainly Mozart Festival Orchestra and has appeared as guest principal violist with Los Angeles Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, CINCINNATI Symphony Orchestra and Canada’s National Arts Centre Orchestra. A former member of Lincoln Center Chamber Music Society Two and participant of the Marlboro Music Festival, he is a member of Camera Lucida, Concertante Chamber Players and The Myriad Trio. Chen is currently on faculty at USC Thornton School of Music and California State University, Fullerton and has given master-classes in major conservatories and universities across North America and Asia. In August 2013, the Formosa Quartet inaugurated the annual Formosa Chamber Music Festival in Hualien, Taiwan. Modeled after American summer festivals such as Marlboro, Ravinia, the Taos School of Music, and Kneisel Hall, FCMF is the product of long-held aspirations and years of planning, and represents one of the quartet’s more important missions: to bring high-level chamber music training to talented young musicians in Taiwan and first-rate music to Taiwanese audiences.

Cellist Charles Curtis has been Professor of Contemporary Music Performance at UCSD since Fall 2000. Previously he was Principal Cello of the Symphony Orchestra of the North German Radio in Hamburg, a faculty member at Princeton, the cellist of the Ridge String Quartet, and a sought-after chamber musician and soloist in the classical repertoire. A student of Harvey Shapiro and Leonard Rose at Juilliard, on graduation Curtis received the Piatigorsky Prize of the New York Cello Society. He has appeared as soloist with the San Francisco Symphony, the National Symphony, the Baltimore Symphony, the Symphonia Orchestra of Berlin, the NDR Symphony, the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, the Orchestra della Maggio Musicale in Florence, the Janacek Philharmonic, as well as orchestras in Brazil and Chile. He is internationally recognized as a leading performer of unique solo works created expressly for him by composers such as La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, Eliane Radigue, Alvin Lucier, Christian Wolff, Alison Knowles and Mieko Shiomi. Of a recent New York recital the New York Times noted that Curtis “playing unfailingly combined lucidity and poise...lyricism and intensity.” The current season includes solo concerts at New York’s Issue Project Room, the Auditorium du Louvre in Paris, the Rothko Chapel in Houston and the Kampnagelfabrik in Hamburg. Curtis is artistic director of Camera Lucida.

Reiko Uchida was born in Torrance, California and is a graduate of the Curtis Institute, Mannes College of Music, and the Juilliard School. Her recording String Poetic with Jennifer Koh, was nominated for a 2008 Grammy Award. She has performed concertos with the LA Philharmonic, and the Santa Fe, Greenwich, and Princeton symphonies. As a chamber musician, she has played at the Marlboro, Santa Fe, Tanglewood and Spoleto music festivals and has collaborated with Anne Akiko Meyers, Thomas Mogford, Sharon Robinson, Jaime Laredo, as well as the Borromeo, St. Lawrence and Tokyo string quartets. As a youngster, she performed on The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson. She is a past member of Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center Two and studied with Claude Frank, Leon Fleisher, Edward Aldwell, Sophia Rosoff and Margo Garrett. Ms. Uchida currently lives in New York City where she is an associate faculty member at Columbia University.

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Recording engineer - Tim Erbe
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The piano quartet is a genre that consistently elicited music of the utmost seriousness from Brahms. Despite Brahms’ self-deprecation, the first movement of the C-minor stands as one of the most imposing pieces of instrumental music of the 19th Century. After the piano rings out initial octaves, we hear the “Clara” theme, uttered and developed in successive sighing figures that seem to whisper her name. We move into the Allegro non troppo on a driving, pulsating repeated tonic pitch echoed later in the introduction to Brahms’ C-Minor Symphony. The emotional path from one theme to another in this first movement is almost violent: as tragic as the first theme poses itself to be, the astonishing second theme is re-emptive—stated first in the piano, then immediately subject to the “developing variation” for which Brahms is known. The exposition closes with a simultaneous statement of both melodies within the affective tone of voice of the second. The development is uncompromising in the intensity with which it rearticulates the first theme while the recapitulation redefines the main and subordinate themes, returning like a bullying thesis from which, almost gratefully, we digress into more elegant secondary and tertiary themes that lend themselves more seamlessly to development. The topic of this first movement—a taut and clearly organized sonata-allegro form—becomes an ongoing narrative of this first theme and its affective place in the musical landscape. There is a connection with mature Schubert here: remote and unusual keys are visited almost surreptitiously, unified and connected by a convincing and unabated melodic effusion. The development highlights the difference in the themes, as the head motive governs moments of ominous fantasy, whose tension the secondary melodies inevitably relieve. The recapitulation sets the principal motive in multiple guises, from a hushed poco sostenuto e tranquillo rising to a celebratory and opulent close.

The second movement Lento—a serene, elegiac song, offered by the cello and tinged with smoky touches of the minor, that breaks into crystalline chorale interjections by the piano before the other strings enter, bathing the melody in counterpoint. This first section is captured first by a dark and turbulent episode—again evoking late Schubert—and then by a gently rocking passage whose place in the form seems almost out of place—as further testimony of the abundance of Dvořák’s ceaseless melodic inspiration.

The third movement, which begins Allegro moderato, grazioso, with a waltz, introduces the idea of national voice so often associated with Dvořák, that with the possible exception of the first movement’s main idea, has been relatively absent from this work. The use of the harmonic minor scale gives the music a non-western air, and some have suggested that the upper-register writing for the piano is evocative of the cimbalom—the hammered dulcimer of Central and Eastern Europe. The outer section of this movement is surprising in the variety of moods and mercurial colorings that belle its formal simplicity. The Trio section is galloping and urgent, and counterposes with the main melody as if comparing the bluster of the hurled, outside world with a soothing and intimate parlor.

The finale, marked Allegro ma non troppo, has been criticized by some writers as being overly “symphonic.” The logic of this indictment is difficult to follow; certainly Dvořák’s skill at wringing sumptuous textures from four players is nothing other than thrilling. What is daunting, however—the factor to which the critics may have been referring—is navigating the emotional terrain of this movement, made up as it is by themes so individually compelling in their moods and references. We move between a rousing (and serious) country-dance on the one hand, and a sentimental, even melancholy, theme on the other, and the positioning of these ideas in this sort of roiling and expansive form may have been beyond the abilities of some of Dvořák’s contemporary listeners. These themes are developed at length and in numerous keys before the music rushes to an exciting, dramatic conclusion.

About the performers

Violinist Jeff Thayer is currently the concertmaster of the San Diego Symphony as well as concertmaster and faculty member of the Music Academy of the West (Santa Barbara). Previous positions include assistant concertmaster of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, associate concertmaster of the North Carolina Symphony, and concertmaster of the Canton (OH) Symphony Orchestra. He is a graduate of the Cleveland Institute of Music, the Eastman School of Music, and the Juilliard School’s Pre-College Division. His teachers include William Preucil, Donald Weilerstein, Zvi Zeitlin, Dorothy DeLay, and James Lyon. He has appeared as soloist with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, San Diego Symphony, the Jupiter Symphony, the North Carolina Symphony, the Canton Symphony Orchestra, the Pierre Monteux School Festival Orchestra, the Spartanburg Philharmonic, the Cleveland Institute of Music Symphony Orchestra, The Music Academy of the West Festival Orchestra, the Willamssport Symphony Orchestra, the Nittany Valley Symphony Orchestra, and the Conservatory Orchestra of Cordoba, among others. Through a generous loan from Irwin and Joan Jacobs Family Trust, Mr. Thayer plays on the 1708 “Sir Bagshawe” Stradivarius.