Marc-André Hamelin, piano
Balourdet String Quartet
Angela Bae, violin | Justin DeFilippis, violin
Benjamin Zannoni, viola | Russell Houston, cello

STRANGE MACHINES (STRING QUARTET NO. 4) (2022)
Karim Al-Zand (b. 1970)
Alberti Machine
Goldberg Machine
Mannheim Machine

QUARTET IN E MINOR, OP. 44 NO. 2, MWV R26 (1837)
Felix Mendelssohn (1809–47)
Allegro assai appassionato
Scherzo: Allegro di molto
Andante
Presto agitato

:: INTERMISSION ::

PIANO QUINTET IN F MINOR (1878–9)
César Franck (1822–1890)
Molto moderato quasi lento
Lento, con molto sentimento
Allegro non troppo, ma con fuoco

GENEROUSLY SPONSORED BY DIANE CHEN KOCH-WESER
Felix Mendelssohn (b. Hamburg, Germany, February 3, 1809; d. Leipzig, November 4, 1847) composed 2022; 12 minutes:

Op. 44 No. 2, MWV R26

PIANO QUINTET IN F MINOR

César Franck (b. Liège, December 10, 1822; d. Paris, November 8, 1890) composed 1878-9; 37 minutes:

The impetuous, frequently passionate Piano Quintet, which Franck worked on throughout much of the year 1878-9, combines restless questioning with peaceful reflection. It is often heavy and intensely romantic, and, when written, it was easily the most impressed chamber music to have come from the pen of a French composer. Franck’s exact contemporary Édouard Lalo described it as an “explosion.” It made the more strait-laced and traditionalist listeners and composers such as Gounod uncomfortable. Saint-Saëns, who gave the first performance with the Marsick Quartet, held the work in disdain and walked off the stage leaving the music (already dedicated to him) on the music stand.

Wagner’s musical language provided the basis for Franck’s intense, deeply emotional style. Liszt’s use of recurring themes as a dramatic element led the Franco-Belgian composer to develop a technique that his followers named ‘cyclic’ form. From the quintet onwards, this technique was to become irrevocably associated with Franck’s name. At its deepest level, the device involves deriving all the themes of the work from a single common source, thereby giving an underlying unity and cohesion to the music. The central theme is foreshadowed in the tremulous, stepwise, descending theme for strings alone with which the quintet opens. The piano then immediately develops one aspect of the idea in a hesitating, exploratory reply. But Franck skilfully holds back the full theme, allowing it to blossom as the gentle, yearning second theme of this opening movement. It is to reappear in many guises. It creeps up on us as a dreamy, swaying echo from the piano in the middle of the barcarole-like slow movement. It remains the central idea, though by no means the center of attention, throughout the agitated finale – built upon a chromatic theme, in essence a first cousin to Franck’s cyclical theme. It appears again towards the end of the finale, now in triple time, to herald an extended, blazing coda.

Franck’s Piano Quintet is a highly-charged, passionate, often stormy work, one of the most emotionally demonstrative works in the chamber music repertoire. Madame Franck is said to have disliked its emotional explicitness when she heard Franck composing it at the piano in their apartment on the Boulevard St. Michel. But the oft repeated legend that it resulted from her husband’s infatuation with one of his students, a beautiful young Franco-Irish composer called Augusta Holmès, who went on to cut a swath through Parisian artistic circles and write vast music dramas and symphonies on a Wagnerian scale, has been proven unfounded. Nevertheless, even loyal friends of the composer were embarrassed by the work’s emotional explicitness. “Le Père Franck me ravage,” one of them muttered. Even Liszt is said to have blushed when he first heard the work.

Belgian composer César Franck was 57 years old before his Piano Quintet (1878-9) heralded a remarkable series of compositions for which he is now chiefly remembered. Then came the Prélude, Choral et Fugue of 1884. This majestic piano work was followed the next year by the Symphonic Variations for piano and orchestra, then the much-loved Violin Sonata, the D minor Symphony, and, one year before his death, the String Quartet (1889). Not wishing to repeat himself, Franck tended to write just one work in each of the major musical forms.

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