Balourdet Quartet
New Orleans Friends of Music, Tuesday, December 2, 2025

PROGRAM

String Quartet in F Major (1903) Maurice Ravel (1875–1937

1. Allegro moderato/Très doux
2. Assez vif—Très rhythmé
3. Très lent
4. Vif et agité

Galaxy Back to You (2024) Nicky Sohn (b. 1992)

Active Nucleus / Celestial Motion / Cosmic Dance / Mystical Depths /
Water Masers / Supermassive Black Hole / Gravitational Waves

Intermission

String Quartet No. 3 in B-flat Major (Op. 67) Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

1. Vivace
2. Andante
3. Agitato (Allegretto non troppo)
4. Poco allegretto con variazioni

PROGRAM NOTES
by Marc Loudon

Board Member Marc Loudon provides these program notes in advance of each concert. These contain more detail than those in the program.

[*Note:* Performance links provided in these notes are generally available *YouTube* links that in some cases start with advertisements. You can skip the ads by clicking on the "Skip" message that will appear on the lower right of the video after a few seconds.]

In this concert we celebrate two sesquicentennials: the anniversary of the birth of Maurice Ravel, and the anniversary of the composition of Brahms' final string quartet.

In 1903, when he was 28, **Maurice Ravel**, during his time at the Paris Conservatoire, completed his **String Quartet in F Major**, his only string quartet. Dedicated to his mentor, Gabriel Fauré, the quartet received mixed reviews when it was premiered in 1904, but it has since become a mainstay of the chamber-music repertoire. It was inspired by the string quartet of Claude Debussy, written a decade earlier. It builds upon Debussy's impressionism and vibrant tone colors while also embracing classical form and tradition. Debussy allegedly sent the young Ravel a note of encouragement: "In the name of the gods of music, and in mine, do not touch a single note of what you have written in your quartet." In tonight's concert we celebrate the sesquicentennial of Ravel's birth with this masterpiece.

The first movement is in traditional sonata form, based on two contrasting themes. The first, rising and falling through a long arc, is played by all four players at the opening and taken over

by the first violin accompanied by the lower instruments. The second theme, more reflective in character, is played by the first violin and viola playing two octaves apart. The development section, straightforward and traditional, is predominantly lyrical, gaining intensity before the recapitulation. In the recapitulation, the return of the second theme is subtly changed, with the upper three parts remaining identical to the exposition, but the cello being raised a minor third, moving the passage from D minor to F major.

The second movement is a scherzo that opens with a pizzicato (plucked) passage. In the first theme some writers have detected the influence of the Javanese gamelan (see photo), an instrument that had greatly impressed both Debussy and Ravel when heard in Paris in 1889. Others hear in it echoes of Ravel's Spanish descent, also prominent in his *Bolero* and other works. The time signature of this section is marked **6/8(3/4).** In **6/8** meter six eighth notes are arranged in two groups of three, whereas in **3/4** meter the notes are arranges in three groups of two. These two meters are superimposed, creating the sense of "three against two." (This is the same rhythmic pattern used by Leonard Bernstein in the song, "America," from his *West Side Story.*) Remarkably, we hear exactly the same rhythmic pattern in the first and last movements of the Brahms trio later in the program. A slower section, marked *Lent* (slow), is followed by a short reprise of the opening.

The mood of the third movement is alternately mournful, spooky, and lyrical, moving through a variety of tempos and distantly related keys. There are strong thematic links to the first movement.

The final movement is loosely in the form of a rondo, in which the initial idea is an agitated ten-note figure in unusual **5/8** meter. This idea occurs throughout, alternating with short melodies accompanied by tremulandi or arpeggios. The same figure, followed by seven rapid triplets in an unsettled harmony concludes the movement with a sparkling F-major chord.

The following link is to a performance of the Ravel String Quartet by the Hagen Quartet.

Ravel F Major Quartet by the Hagen Quartet

Galaxy Back to You was commissioned by the Balourdet Quartet from the young composer **Nicky Sohn** (photo) and premiered in 2024. Sohn holds a Doctor of Musical Arts from The Shepherd School of Music at Rice University and a Master of Music from The Juilliard School. A dedicated musician from a young age, she graduated from high school at 14 and earned her Bachelor of Music from Mannes College of Music. Sohn has received commissions and performances from major institutions, including the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra of St. Luke's, Minnesota Orchestra, Annapolis Symphony, Albany Symphony, Sarasota Orchestra, and National Orchestra of Korea. Her work has also been featured by the New York Choreographic Institute, Stuttgart Ballet, and Albany's Dogs of Desire, reflecting her broad artistic range across orchestral, vocal, ballet, and socially driven music projects. Sohn was recently a composition fellow at Tanglewood and has held fellowships with Houston's DACAMERA Young Artist Program and MUSIQA, Atlanta's Hambidge Center, and Wyoming's

UCross Foundation. Sohn has also been commissioned by Robert Spano and the Aspen Music Festival, where she was awarded the Druckmann Prize.

The composer has provided the following description of *Galaxy Back to You.*

> Two of the most exciting aspects of being a composer have become the inspirations for "Galaxy Back to You"—working within the parameters of each commission and drawing from my personal experiences. The Balourdet Quartet is an ensemble I have admired for years, and it was an absolute delight to finally write for them. All four of them are ecstatic players with so much character and depth, and every performance of theirs has been electric. I wanted to write a piece that showcases their powerful dynamic as a group but also highlights their individuality, with a variety of textures, moods, and energy. Each commission brings interesting, sometimes challenging, objectives; and for me, parameters are the most fascinating inspirations for my creative process. They help narrow down my ideas, making the process extremely productive and effective. For this project, Balourdet Quartet asked me to incorporate some aspect of AI [artificial intelligence]. While AI can be seen as a threat to artists in all genres, I decided to explore various music-generating AI programs to see what they offered. Though intriguing, I wanted to create a work where I could maintain full ownership of the musical material. So, I turned to ChatGPT, arguably the most widely used AI program, to brainstorm and structure the piece. In 2024, my partner gifted me a "galaxy" named after me for my birthday. It was an unusual but incredibly sweet gift because he thought I deserved a whole galaxy. The galaxy he gave me is NGC 4258, discovered in 1781. It is an intermediate spiral galaxy in the constellation *Canes Venatici* (photo), rich with fascinating characteristics. ChatGPT helped conceptualize seven distinct sections, each with names and musical descriptions, which I endeavored to honor with my imagination. I used the galaxy number 4258 as the main thematic idea, focusing on the intervallic relationships of those four numbers. [*Author's Note*: For the musicians reading these notes, this numerical sequence would result in the notes in C major F–D–G–C. You will hear this four-note sequence repeatedly.] I feel that a string quartet is the most intimate and personal genre for composers—one can truly get a sense of who the composer is through exploring their string quartet repertoire. I believe a string quartet may be the best gift a composer can offer to another (unfortunately, perhaps!). The title, "Galaxy Back to You," is quite self-explanatory, as I am giving the galaxy back to my special person, but in my own musical form, for his birthday. Seven section titles and descriptions created by ChatGPT are: I. *Active Nucleus*: A rapid and intense section with frenetic bowing and dissonant chords, representing the energetic activity of the galaxy's central nucleus. II. *Celestial Motion*: Flowing and melodic, with graceful melodies and gentle swells, capturing the majestic movement of stars and galaxies through space. III. *Cosmic Dance*: Upbeat and rhythmic, with lively melodies passed between the instruments, reflecting the dynamic interplay of celestial bodies. IV. *Mystical Depths*: Deep and resonant tones, with sustained notes and rich textures, evoking a sense of infinite space and the mysteries that lie within the depths of the universe. V. *Water Masers*: Delicate and shimmering passages, perhaps with harmonics and tremolo, evoking the ethereal and watery nature of the masers. VI. *Supermassive Black Hole*: Deep, resonant tones in the cello, accompanied by ominous chords in the lower registers of the violins and viola, conveying the immense gravity and mystery of the black hole. VII. *Gravitational Waves*: Reflective and contemplative, with gentle, undulating melodies and harmonic swells that evoke the ripples of gravitational waves traveling through the fabric of space-time. This section features a soothing interplay between the instruments, creating a sense of wonder and awe at the beauty of the cosmos.

The following link is to Balourdet Quartet's performance of "Galaxy Back to You."

Balourdet Quartet, Galaxy Back to You, by Nicky Sohn

Johannes Brahms cultivated friendships with a number of accomplished amateur musicians. Among these were Professor Theodor Wilhelm Engelmann, a medical doctor and distinguished Physiology Professor at the University of Utrecht, an amateur cellist who had hosted Brahms on a visit to Utrecht in 1876. (His wife Emma was also an accomplished pianist.) Brahms had just resigned the year before as the artistic director of the Vienna Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde (Vienna's Society of the Friends of Music) and was relishing his new freedom to compose as well as to visit with friends. To Engelmann Brahms dedicated his **String Quartet No. 3,** which was written in 1875 and published in 1876. To Engelmann he wrote, "This quartet rather resembles your wife [Emma]—very dainty, but brilliant! It's no longer a question of a forceps delivery, but of simply standing by. There's no cello solo in it, but such a tender viola solo that you may want to change your instrument for its sake!"

About the quartet, Brahms wrote, "The work is lighthearted and cheerful, *a useless trifle*, to avoid facing the serious countenance of a symphony," referring to the work on his Symphony No. 1, which Brahms worked on for years (it had a "forceps delivery") and debuted a week later. This rather self-effacing assessment of the quartet by the notoriously self-critical composer belies the fact that he looked back on the quartet as his favorite of the three that he composed. Brahms allegedly wrote or started perhaps as many as 20 other string quartets but burned them all before he died, feeling that they would not stand comparison with the quartets of the great Beethoven.

The engaging qualities of the work are immediately apparent in the opening Vivace, as a "hunting-horn" theme with triplet rhythms reveals the light-hearted side of Brahms. As in the Ravel quartet, Brahms employs superimposed **6/8** and **3/4** meters. In the second movement we hear a serenely flowing, Schumann-like melody. The third movement is a slow and mournful waltz—or perhaps a minuet—that reminds us of the facility with slow waltzes that Brahms displayed in his *Liebeslieder* waltzes. In the final movement, Brahms introduces an original theme on which he constructs eight variations. In one of the last variations, we hear a "hunting-horn" theme very much like the one introduced in the first movement, and then Brahms ingeniously superimposes it on the theme on which the variations are based. Clara Schumann wrote to Brahms that this movement is "too fascinating for words, with its delightful, mocking conclusion." This lighthearted quartet seems to evoke the Brahms who would join his conductor friend Hans von Bülow to drink beer, smoke cigars, and listen to Johann Strauss waltzes.

The following link leads to a performance of the Brahms Third String Quartet by the Schumann Quartet (not named for the composer, but rather for the three brothers who founded the quartet).

Brahms String Quartet Op. 67 by the Schumann Quartet