Danish Splendor, in the Form of a Fabulous Foursome

WORLD-RENOWED DANISH STRING QUARTET VISITS SANTA BARBARA TONIGHT, COURTESY OF UCSB ARTS & LECTURES, WITH THE THEME OF THE HUNT

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent

Danish String Quartet
When: 7 p.m. Friday
Where: UCSB Campbell Hall
Cost: $25-$40, $15 off students
Information: 893-3535, ArtsAndLectures@UCSB.edu

It was back in 2004, at Hahn Hall, that we music-loving Santa Barbarans first fell in love with the entity known as the Danish String Quartet, a young, dynamic, slightly mischievous and thoroughly musical foursome from Copenhagen. Since then, they have been welcomed back, and are headed back for a third time (reportedly with a fourth booking secured by UCSB Arts & Lectures for next season), tonight at UCSB Campbell Hall.

In a string quartet world currently crowded with highly accomplished ensembles, and many with an adventurous spirit and musical aplomb to their name, the Danish Quartet nonetheless stands out. It has partly to do with their innate sense of both musical adventure and grounding, in terms of probing new terrain, ennobling traditional repertoire and also paying respects to their Danish roots and folkloric ties.

This world-renowned quartet has humble, outdoors-y origins, at a music summer camp where violinists Frederik Olander and Rune Tonsgaard Sistersen teamed up with violist Asbjorn Norgaard, later getting serious as teens studying at Copenhagen’s Royal Academy of Music. Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schyen Sjolinn joined the ranks in 2008, winning first prize in the London International String Quartet Competition (now known as the Wigmore Hall Competition) a year later. Off and upward they went, earning a solid place in the ranks of quartets on the international scene.

They recently released “Last Leaf,” a masterful new album of mostly Danish folk tunes — by turns rustically joyful, melancholic and roots-exploring — all beautifully re-arranged for quartet, for the prestigious ECM label. Their 2014 Santa Barbara debut came on the heels of their first folk music-related album, “Wood Works.”

Mr. Norgaard explained that a couple of us — one of the violinists and the cellist — grew up on folks music, actually. Only later, they started to play classical music. Through them, we always did a lot of folk music. When there was a folk band in town, we went to hear the concert and every time we’ve been in Scotland or Ireland, we went to the pubs to hear the fiddle music.

Three Danes and a Norwegian makes up one of the most respected young string quartets around.

“At some point, we started doing encores of Scandinavian folk music that we arranged for string quartet. We had a lot of fun doing this, and people reacted very strongly to it. At some point, we had a large pile of these encores and we thought maybe we should make an album just with this music. We had all the material. We just needed to straighten it up a little bit and we had an album.”

Expect something special, once again, when the Danish return to Santa Barbara tonight. (Incidentally, this visit comes shortly after Denmark’s Prince Henrik’s passing, noted in the American Danish outpost of Solvang, where the Prince visited in 2011). The program this time around is outdoors-y, due to its thematic link to music about The Hunt, including the ”La Chasse” quartet of Haydn (who actually did partake in hunting), Mozart’s “Hunt Quartet,” Jorg Widmann’s hunt-centric ”Jagdquartett” and Brahms’ Quartet No. 3 in B-flat, Opus 67, in hunting horn meter. If the Danish String Quartet story is proceeding with all due success, in terms of critical response and audience kudos for their work — whether serious music or folk-ish — they also seem to marshal a musical assuredness partly based on a relaxed attitude.

“Basically,” according to Mr. Norgaard, “the story is this: we didn’t make the quartet to have a big career. We didn’t think ‘oh, we want to have a chamber music career.’ We just ended up having a quartet and ended up going to the Academy of Music. I don’t know if all of us would even play music if it wasn’t for the quartet. I personally can’t remember not having the quartet and playing music. It goes very far back.”

Critics and listeners have often noted the group’s magical blend of deaf sophistication and sensitivity, and a sense of infectious fun and lively spirit in their playing. That stems from a basic premise amongst the musicians, as individuals and a collective.

Mr. Norgaard comments that “it was very important, and still is, to really have a lot of fun doing it. Every time we have been in a situation where we could go one direction that maybe was the more right direction, versus the more enjoyable direction, we always chose the more enjoyable one.

“We’re not lazy, but the first priority was really always to spend time together and enjoy it a lot. Whatever happened wasn’t so important, career-wise. Of course, we went to competitions and this and that, and we had a lot of ambition and a lot of targets, but we never felt it as the first priority.”

He adds “I think we’re a little bit surprised that we can actually make a living as a string quartet. People always tell you that that...”
BALL AND SULTAN SIGHTING:

Without questions, the country blues duo of Tom Ball and Kenny Sultan, besides being one of the most seasoned and durable of Santa Barbara-based musical entities, is one of those live and recording acts with both local and global credibility. While the duo stops in at Cold Spring Tavern on Sunday afternoons, in between playing gigs far and wide, they rarely make an official concert appearance while in their hometown, which makes Saturday's show at Alhecama Theatre, in the new Wooden Hall Concerts series, a special occasion for all concerned. 7:30 p.m. Saturday. Alhecama Theatre, 914 Santa Barbara St. Tickets are $20. sbamu.org.

QUARTET AS MUSICAL CATALYST:

The rightfully esteemed chamber music series in the intimate, acoustically-welcoming Mary Craig Auditorium of the Museum of Art continues Thursday with a return visit from this string quartet-centric series, the Catalyst Quartet. A young-at-the-establishment group on the contemporary quartet scene, with ears open to new music, the Catalyst has performed at Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center, and they are bringing a provocative all-American program to SBMA. They will feature music of Samuel Barber, Philip Glass, Caroline Shaw, Javier Alvarez, Kevin Puts and Catalyst member Jessie Montgomery’s own work, “Strum” 7:30 p.m. Thursday. Mary Craig Auditorium, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State St. Tickets are $20 for SBMA members, $25 for non-members. 963-4364, sbmuseart.org.

BANDA PIONEERS:

Mexican regional music of note returns to one of its regular venues in the County, when the vastly popular and veteran Banda el Recodo brings its brassy sound to the stage of the Chumash Casino’s Samala Ballroom tonight. With a history going back to 1938, founded by Don Cruz Lizárraga and now with his sons, clarinetists Luis Alfonso Lizárraga and Joel David Lizárraga in charge, the 17-piece Banda el Recodo boasts more than 200 records to its name, handfuls of Latin Grammy Awards, and successive generations of fans. Not for nothing has the group earned the nickname “the mother of all bands.” 8 p.m. tonight. Friday. Chumash Casino Resort, 2-800 East Highway 246, Santa Ynez. Tickets are $55 to $75. chumashcasino.com.

BOWL SEASON, FILLING OUT:

This week’s additions to the ever-expanding Santa Barbara Bowl season kicking off next month represent a varied stylistic map and musical demographic appeal. In chronological rather than style-based order, the new calendar markable concerts coming up are:

“TALES FROM” AND “SINGS LIKE” REPORT:

The similar but different singer-songwriter/Americana/whatnot concert series in Santa Barbara County, Sings Like Hell at the Lobero Theatre and Tales from the Tavern over the 15th at Maverick Saloon in Santa Ynez, are in midstream, with promising musical harvests in store. The current Wednesday night Tales series, which has so far featured Tish Hinojosa and Torn Russell, continues on March 7 with Johnny Irlon and the legacy artists Steve Miller Band, on a bill with Peter Frampton, on August 15; Isla Vista-born Cali reggae stars Rebellion, on a bill including Stephen Marley and three other acts, on September 9, those good vibes dispensers Jason Mraz and Brett Dennen, on September 15. sbbowl.com.

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is really hard, or impossible. It feels very nice that we can make a living as a quartet. In these times when a lot of orchestras are having financial trouble and there is a lot of debate about how you can continue with classical music when it’s so dependent on public funding, it feels amazing that we are able to make a living and earn our money ourselves, without making any compromises.

“We play exactly the music we believe in.”

Danish String Quartet makes a welcome third local appearance in four years.

DOORS

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For most of the actors they not only have to navigate the labyrinthine plot but must act both older and younger variations on their characters, especially Matt Smith who must play his character Reece from youth to crippled old age. Mr. Smith is another actor new to the Garvin stage, but he can “hold” the space well, which not every actor can do in such a large theater.

“The demands on the actors are very different in this play,” Ms. Laris adds.

But with this cast, she feels confident.

The last time she worked with Leslie Kang, Howe was last year in the wrenching drama “Rabbit Hole,” but here the actor gets to flex her comedic muscles, which are just as strong.

“It gets better every time we work together,” Ms. Laris says, noting their first collaboration was “The Man Who Came to Dinner,” back in 2006.

“She completely inhabits a character and brings intelligence and heart to the work,” Ms. Laris notes.

Mr. Acklesbourn has intentionally never written for TV or film, (there have been plenty of adaptations however). He writes for theater and he’s a master of the conventions of the stage. On top of that, he’s a master storyteller.

Though delightful and funny, “Communicating Doors” does have a lesson for viewers. “People do have the capacity to change,” says Ms. Laris. “And you never know where you’re going to find your best friend. It could happen at any moment.”

STAGE