**JULY 23**

**Wednesday, July 23, 8:00 p.m., Stent Family Hall, Menlo School**

**PROGRAM OVERVIEW**

The four string quartets of Alexander von Zemlinsky represent one of the most powerful cycles of the modern quartet literature. Composed over a period spanning four decades, the cycle chronicles critical points of the composer's life and career. Following the Romantically Brahmsian First Quartet, the Second, written in response to a spurned marriage proposal, turns turbulent. In his Third Quartet, Zemlinsky departs from his earlier tonal language towards an Expressionist idiom influenced by his famous brother-in-law, Arnold Schoenberg. The final quartet is written as an homage to Zemlinsky’s dear friend and colleague, Alban Berg.

**SPECIAL THANKS**

Music@Menlo dedicates this performance to Darren H. Bechtel and also to William F. Meehan III with gratitude for their generous support.

**ALEXANDER VON ZEMLINSKY** (1871-1942)

**String Quartet no. 1, op. 4** (1896)
- Allegro con fuoco
- Allegretto
- Breit und kräftig
- Vivace e con fuoco

**String Quartet no. 2, op. 15** (1913-1915)
- Sehr mäßig – Heftig und liedenschaftlich – Andante mosso – Etwas rascher
- Adagio
- Schnell (die Achtel)
- Andante – Allegro molto – Langsam – Andante

**INTERMISSION**

**String Quartet no. 3, op. 19** (1924)
- Allegretto: Gemachlich, innig bewegt
- Thema mit Variationen: Geheimnisvoll bewegt, nich zu schnell – Variationen I–VII
- Romanze: Sehr mäßige Achtel, Andante sostenuto
- Burleske: Sehr lebhaft, Allegro moderato

**String Quartet no. 4, op. 25** (1936)
- Präludium: Poco adagio
- Burleske: Vivace
- Adagietto: Adagio
- Intermezzo: Allegretto
- Barcarole (Thema mit Variationen): Poco adagio
- Finale: Doppelfuge: Allegro molto energico

Escher String Quartet: Adam Barnett-Hart, Aaron Boyd, violins; Pierre Lapointe, viola; Dane Johansen, cello
ALEXANDER VON ZEMLINSKY  
(Born October 14, 1871, Vienna; died March 15, 1942, Larchmont, New York)

The string quartets of Alexander von Zemlinsky, composed over a span of nearly four decades, depict the tonal advancement and social change at the crossroads between the late Romantic era and the early twentieth century. Though he was overshadowed both during his lifetime and posthumously by such prominent figures as Schoenberg and Stravinsky, the Austrian composer and conductor’s life and career reflect the transition from the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition of Brahms to the aesthetic of the Second Viennese School. In particular, his four string quartets, presented here as a complete cycle, capture this immense cultural shift during the early twentieth century.

Zemlinsky displayed a strong aptitude for the piano by age four. In fact, he encountered the instrument by a stroke of pure luck. A family friend invited young Alexander to accompany him to piano lessons; he soon surpassed his friend, warranting private study on his own. He joined the local temple choir, and when his voice broke in 1884, he became its organist. Upon completing his primary education in 1886, Zemlinsky was admitted to the Vienna Conservatory to study harmony and composition with brothers Robert and Johann Nepomuk Fuchs.

In 1893, near the end of his time as a student at the conservatory, the twenty-two-year-old Zemlinsky conducted the premiere of his Symphony in d minor. Johannes Brahms, a regular visitor to the conservatory (and one known to express his opinions candidly about each student’s performance), was in attendance. Brahms would encounter Zemlinsky’s music again three years later, when Robert Fuchs invited him to the premiere of Zemlinsky’s String Quintet in d minor. In March 1896. Following the performance, Zemlinsky recalled:

Brahms asked for the score and with a brief and somewhat ironic interjection—“Of course, only if you are interested in discussing it”—invited me to call on him. It was a decision not to be taken lightly...a conversation with Brahms was no easy matter. Question and answer were curt, gruff, seemingly cold, and often highly sarcastic. He read my quintet through at the piano, at first making light corrections, examining one passage or the other in greater detail, but with no actual word of praise or encouragement, eventually growing more vehement. Having reduced me to a state of utter despair, he soon restored my good humor, asked about my material needs, and offered me a monthly grant, which would enable me to reduce my teaching schedule and spend more time composing.

Brahms’s financial support enabled Zemlinsky to focus on a new string quartet. The summer of 1896 was devoted exclusively to its completion. In the fall, Zemlinsky’s String Quartet no. 1 in A Major, op. 4, received its first performance at the conservatory. A critic wrote, “The work is more clearly articulated and less encumbered by juvenile utterances than the string quintet introduced last year.”

String Quartet no. 1 in A Major, op. 4  
Composed: 1896  
Other works from this period: Detailed in the notes below  
Approximate duration: 21 minutes

While the late-Romantic language of his early work is indeed reminiscent of Brahms, Zemlinsky adds his own signature rhythmic and harmonic complexities. The opening measures of the first movement of the First String Quartet, marked Allegro con fuoco, momentarily establish the key of A major before a series of rapid modulations. The rhythmic quality of the music is equally dense; in the first subject alone, nine distinct rhythmic figures are expanded, reversed, and contracted. The writing, however, still adheres to a traditional sonata form culminating in a robust recapitulation.

The first six measures of the second movement Allegretto provide thematic context for much of Zemlinsky’s literature at large. The first two measures present a phrase (C-sharp, D-sharp, F-sharp) Zemlinsky calls his “self” motif. Recalling Bach’s frequent use of his musical signature (B-flat, A, C, B-natural—in German notation, B-A-C-H), as well as the fascination with gematria evident in much of his music, Zemlinsky’s “self” motif is numerologically self-referential.

Zemlinsky was born on October 14, 1871; he later inexplicably changed his legal birth date to October 4, 1872. The integers of the supposed birth date summate to twenty-three: (1+0)+(4)+(1+8+7+2) = 23; adding those integers (2+3) summates to five. Zemlinsky’s “self” motif is made up of the second, third, and fifth degrees of the major scale. Zemlinsky, born to a father of Slavonic-Catholic descent and a mother of Sephardi-Muslim heritage, was moreover familiar with Kabalistic text, in which each Hebrew word, number, and accent contains an esoteric meaning. The Kabalistic analysis of the numbers two, three, and five creates the sentence “Logic is the mother of imagination and awareness,” as if Zemlinsky himself is rewarding a thorough analysis of his tediously hidden identity.

In measures five and six, the motif is reduced and inverted (C-sharp, E, B-sharp), and measures eight through eleven provide further variations of the motif.

*Bolded terms are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 100.
As a musical counterpart to the “self” motif, Zemlinsky incorporates what he describes as the “motif of the world,” created by inverting the “self” (scale degrees four, three, and one). Throughout his lifetime, Zemlinsky compares and contrasts these two motifs, evident here in the slow movement of the First Quartet (A, G, E).

The final movement, a resplendent Vivace e con fuoco in sonata form, displays the pinnacle of the Romantic style of Zemlinsky’s early music. Unlike the preceding movements, the exposition is more deeply rooted in the key of A major. The movement is largely a dialog between the cello and first violin, which alternate reciting the theme throughout. The development modulates frequently and is relieved by the return of the cello and first violin, which alternate reciting the theme throughout. The movement closes with a dramatic recapitulation, reiterating the theme in full and closing with an exuberant unison chord.

String Quartet no. 2, op. 15
Composed: 1913-1915
First performance: April 9, 1918, Rosé Quartet
Other works from this period: Detailed in the notes below
Approximate duration: 39 minutes

In 1895, Zemlinsky accepted a teaching position at the Vienna Conservatory, where he founded the Polyhymnia, an amateur orchestra whose immediate success ended abruptly in bankruptcy in October 1896. The short-lived enterprise served to introduce the now well-established Zemlinsky to Arnold Schoenberg, a young amateur self-instructed cellist and composer. Zemlinsky later recounted in a journal, “The orchestra was not large…at the one desk of cellos sat a young man who maltreated his instrument with more fire than accuracy…none other than Arnold Schoenberg.” Only three years his elder, Zemlinsky became Schoenberg’s first and only composition and counterpoint teacher.

In 1897, Zemlinsky worked with Schoenberg on his first string quartet, in D major, which was soon followed by the string sextet Verklärte Nacht in 1899, Schoenberg’s earliest acknowledged masterpiece. Their relationship soon blossomed into a deep friendship; in October 1901, Schoenberg married Zemlinsky’s younger sister, Mathilde. The relationship between these two composers moreover manifested itself artistically, with the student’s innovations influencing the teacher, thus catalyzing much of Zemlinsky’s later stylistic development.

Zemlinsky, too, became involved in a significant relationship, with his pupil Alma Schindler. Zemlinsky asked for her hand in marriage; Schindler declined the proposal, ultimately marrying Zemlinsky’s fellow composer-conductor Gustav Mahler. This heartbreak precipitated a radical change in both Zemlinsky’s lifestyle and composition. He took a post at the Schwarzwald School, where his pupils included Alban Berg, Karl Horwitz, and Anton Webern, and began to compose in response to his failed marriage proposal. The first work to surface from this period was Die Seejungfrau, a brooding symphony completed in 1903. The feverous emotion resulting from this heartbreak continued through 1922 and affected everything from his operas to his chamber music, specifically his Second String Quartet.

After an undetermined argument between Zemlinsky and Schoenberg in 1913, Schoenberg wrote in a letter, “Perhaps it would be as well if we were to avoid contact for a while. Maybe we shall soon calm down and resume friendly relations.” Zemlinsky responded with a letter of reconciliation, which included a hastily sketched string quartet bearing a dedication to his brother-in-law.

Completed in 1915, Zemlinsky’s String Quartet no. 2, op. 15, starkly contrasts with the style of his First Quartet in all aspects of structure, harmony, and form. Instead, the quartet recalls the structure of Schoenberg’s String Quartet no. 1 (that is, Schoenberg’s first published quartet, completed in 1905, eight years following his earlier D Major Quartet) and abandons Classical form in favor of a single movement divided into four continuous sections. As a nod to Schoenberg, an amateur cellist, Zemlinsky incorporates sections of complete chaos, above which the cello rises to return to thematic material. The cello seems to maintain a sense of reason amongst the fracas of the other strings, perhaps indicative of Zemlinsky’s apology to his closest friend.

In letters and journals, Zemlinsky informally subtitled the Second Quartet his “personal Inferno”—likely a reference to August Strindberg’s autobiographical novel of the same title, published in 1898, which reads:

The intolerable pressure...! The heavy burden...! What dreadful pains...! Burning desire...! Murder, robbery, blood, wounds...! Possession, beauty, sweet contentment...! Buoyant creativity and fortunate issue...! A work is completed, a child is born, a woman kisses, a man rejoices...and grows numb once more... and sinks back...

Given his heartbreak over Alma, the crippling of his closest friendship with Schoenberg, and the recent passing of his mother, Clara, it is no wonder Zemlinsky identified so strongly with this writing.

Musically, the quartet maintains the same calculated precision found in Zemlinsky’s first quartet. Of utmost significance are two numbers that are hidden in the rhythmic and harmonic fabric of the work, thirteen and fourteen. Both Schoenberg and Zemlinsky made use of these numbers throughout their lives, thirteen belonging to Schoenberg (coinciding with his birth date, September 13, 1874) and fourteen to Zemlinsky (actually born on October 14, 1871). It is also notable that later in life, Schoenberg developed triskaidekaphobia—fear of the number thirteen—and died on July 13, 1951, at age seventy-six (7+6 = 13). The opening theme contains a rising major ninth (fourteen semitones) and descending minor ninth (thirteen semitones). The “self” and counterpart “world” motifs reappear, this time accompanied by a new “math” motif. Named after Zemlinsky’s sister (and Schoenberg’s wife) Mathilde, “math” is created by adding a fourth degree to the sequence of the “self” motif.

Indeed, the dedication was sufficient for the two composers to mend their friendship, although it was not long until their relationship would be tested once again.

String Quartet no. 3, op. 19
Composed: 1924
First performance: October 24, 1924
Other works from this period: Detailed in the notes below
Approximate duration: 22 minutes

In 1908, Schoenberg began to explore a personal interest in Expressionist painting and made the acquaintance of Richard Gerstl, a popular Viennese painter. Gerstl privately instructed Schoenberg and his wife, Mathilde, until the summer of 1908, when Schoenberg discovered an affair between them.
Mathilde, in turn, decided to leave Schoenberg to live with Gerstl until Anton Webern, Schoenberg's student and fiancé, persuaded her to return home. Soon thereafter, Gerstl committed suicide and Mathilde, traumatized, became permanently ill. The event plagued the Schoenbergs' marriage, evidenced by the journal of Louise Sachsel, Zemlinsky's student (whom he later married), which described Mathilde almost a decade later as “the silent woman.”

Mathilde's sudden death on October 18, 1923, left Zemlinsky in shock. Mourning his wife, Schoenberg set to work on a poem, “Requiem,” which he intended to set to music. He wrote to Zemlinsky, “Let it be a monument that for many hundred years name of Mathilde be spoken with all the admiration due to a woman who, like her, had the capacity for arousing such great love.” The text of the poem was published in 1925, but Schoenberg never composed the music. Rather, at a New Year's Eve party two months following her wife's death, Schoenberg met Gertrud Kolisch, a brash twenty-five-year-old sister of a friend. He announced their marriage ten months later to Zemlinsky, who was outraged that Schoenberg did not respect the statutory Jewish twelve-month mourning period. Upon hearing the news on August 21, 1924, he furiously completed his own tribute to his sister, his Third Quartet.

By 1920, Zemlinsky's style had deviated from his earlier Romantic tendencies towards a more Expressionistic idiom. Though he did not denounce the tonal tradition, as Schoenberg and his students had, he was often considered a close relative of the school. Zemlinsky's Third Quartet opens with a quote from Berg's Lyric Suite.

Following the quartet's premiere in Leipzig on October 24, 1924, Webern raved, “What unimaginable richness, what beauty, what sonic effects—all overwhelming.” The Third Quartet demonstrates Zemlinsky's matured Expressionist writing, while remaining extraordinarily calculated and without coincidence. Despite the deeply felt pathos of his sister's death, the “math” motif used in the Second Quartet is absent from all four movements. Zemlinsky includes his secret number—fourteen—and introduces a new figure, twenty-two, presumably referring to Mathilde's death on her twenty-second wedding anniversary. This appears in the second movement, a theme with seven variations and a coda. The sixth and seventh variations are each twenty-two bars in length.

More remarkable than the numerical significance of this movement is the way Zemlinsky treats the second movement's theme and variations structure. Rather than each variation reverting to the original theme, each takes thematic and harmonic material from the preceding variation. As the movement unfolds, the original theme becomes unrecognizable even by the third variation, like a traditional game of Chinese Whispers.

Of the work's four movements, musicologist Antony Beaumont says, “Where the first and second movements were addressed, respectively, to Mathilde and Schoenberg, the addressee of the finale is clearly Zemlinsky himself, with the “self” motif presented in every conceivable variant and every appropriate key.” Indeed, the finale culminates in a boisterous, seemingly folk-inflected portrait of Zemlinsky. Now growing beyond the anxious sprite typical of his “Alma” period, Zemlinsky is writing in a refined and unfettered style.

At this tragic juncture, Zemlinsky and Schoenberg parted ways. In 1925, Schoenberg left for Berlin, where his seven-year tenure at the Akademie der Künste brought him to international fame. After some time in Prague, where he made the acquaintance of Erwin Schulhoff and Paul Hindemith, Zemlinsky also departed for Berlin, in 1927, but the rift between Schoenberg and him had grown too large. At the dawn of the Second World War, Schoenberg took refuge in Hollywood, California.

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String Quartet no. 4, op. 25

Composed: 1936

First performance: April 21, 1967, LaSalle Quartet

Other works from this period: Detailed in the notes below

Approximate duration: 23 minutes

Both Zemlinsky and Schoenberg regarded composer Alban Berg with natural affinity. Studying with both men, Berg inherited Schoenberg's harmonic language and Zemlinsky's bold instrumental textures. Following the long-awaited premiere performance of his Lulu Suite by the Vienna Symphony Orchestra, Berg passed away from a poorly diagnosed case of furunculosis on Christmas Eve, 1935. His death left Schoenberg, Zemlinsky, and Webern stunned. Schoenberg was unable to attend the funeral; Zemlinsky was scheduled to conduct in Barcelona early in the new year and canceled his appearance to attend the funeral. To cope with his death, and to memorialize Berg, Zemlinsky began work on a new string quartet.

In the spring of 1936, Universal Edition, Alban Berg's publisher, approached Zemlinsky to orchestrate the full score of Berg's opera Lulu, left unfinished at the time of Berg's death. Though he was at first intrigued, Zemlinsky declined the offer, as did Schoenberg and Webern, suggesting that the work be performed as far as Berg brought it to completion.

Emulating the compositional language of Berg, Zemlinsky wrote his final string quartet as an homage, remaining careful to maintain that “genuine Zemlinsky tone” which Berg so loved. The work is set in the same framework as Berg's Lyric Suite. Movements are grouped by thematic content, and each section is overflowing with thematic ideas and motifs.

Zemlinsky's fourth and final quartet diverges immensely in harmonic style and tonal complexity from his early works. It demonstrates his fully matured compositional language and illustrates how remarkably distant this new age of music was from the late Romanticism of Brahms. Though Zemlinsky never formally denounced tonality, his four quartets chart the momentous progression of one era to the next.

In December 1938, under the impending Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia, Zemlinsky and his family fled to America. During their first year in New York, Zemlinsky fell ill, suffering a cerebral hemorrhage in the autumn of 1939. Schoenberg wrote to him from Hollywood, “I am absolutely sure that you will be the same old fellow, namely the youngster that you always were. Do you remember in 1924...how the two of us jumped into the orchestra pit...I am quite certain that after a week of California climate we shall both be jumping again.”

Zemlinsky replied to his old friend, “I, too, am glad to recall...Until I am sufficiently restored to health for the strenuous journey to California, my doctor advises me to spend the coming months here.” A few telegrams between the two reveal their making amends and hope of Zemlinsky’s improving condition. A second stroke following the sudden death of his brother, Otto, depleted his health, and on March 15, 1942, Zemlinsky breathed his last. He was known to have said, “My time will come after my death,” and Schoenberg’s farewell words to his closest lifelong friend are equally remarkable, if not entirely telling: “Zemlinsky can wait.”

—Andrew Goldstein

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