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For immediate release:

## Acclaimed Alexander String Quartet to Play Brahms at the Mondavi Center

*April 11, 2008; Davis, California*—Two special guest musicians will join the acclaimed **Alexander String Quartet** to play the chamber music of **Johannes Brahms** in the third and final ASQ concert in the 2007-08 **Classical Sundays Series** at the **Robert and Margrit Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts**. The concert will include performances of Brahms' String Quintet No. 2 in G Major featuring violist **Andrew Duckles** as well as the Quintet for Piano & Strings in F Minor with pianist **Lara Downes**. The event will include introductory remarks about the life and music of Brahms by renowned educator and composer **Robert Greenberg**.

There will be two performances, at 2 pm and 7 pm, on Sunday, May 11, in the Mondavi Center's Studio Theatre on the **UC Davis** campus. Tickets are available from the Mondavi Center Ticket Office at 530.754.ARTS (2787) or online at [MondaviArts.org](http://MondaviArts.org).

The Alexander String Quartet (**Zakarias Grafilo**, violin; **Frederick Lifszitz**, violin; **Paul Yarbrough**, viola; and **Sandy Wilson**, cello) captured international attention in 1985 as the first American quartet to win the London International String Quartet Competition, receiving both the jury's highest award and the audience prize. In the years since, the ASQ has performed on four continents and released numerous recordings, including an acclaimed nine-CD set of the **Beethoven** quartets on the Arte Nova label. At home in San Francisco, the ASQ is a major artistic presence, through a residency with San Francisco Performances and as directors of the Morrison Chamber Music Center at **San Francisco State University**.

The Alexander String Quartet has been a fixture of the Mondavi Center's programming since the opening season, as the ASQ has performed a three-season survey of the quartets of **Dmitri Shostakovich**, a two-season overview of the chamber works of **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**, and the cycle of Brahms' quartets and chamber music completed with the May 11 concerts. During the 2008-09 season, the Alexander String Quartet will return, embarking on a complete cycle of the string quartets of **Ludwig van Beethoven** projected to span the next three seasons.

Though many music lovers think of him as the composer of some of the world's greatest orchestral masterpieces, Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) often seemed most at home writing chamber music. His four symphonies, two piano concertos, violin concerto, and the monumental *German Requiem* for chorus, solo voices, and full orchestra are such a popular part of the orchestral repertoire that many listeners forget that

Brahms first made his mark writing for piano and small ensembles and that much of his greatest work lies in his chamber music.

Born in Hamburg in 1833, Brahms studied piano and composition from an early age and made his first concert tour at the age of 19. As a 20-year-old, he was touring as an accompanist for the violinist **Eduard Reményi** when some of the fledgling composer's own works found their way into the program, and the positive response to them led to meetings with famed musicians including **Franz Liszt** and **Robert Schumann**. The encounter with Schumann proved particularly important, as the great composer and critic immediately realized Brahms' immense talent and heralded the arrival of a new genius in the pages of his influential journal *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.

Brahms himself was notoriously self-critical, destroying dozens of compositions he deemed unworthy and struggling for more than 20 years to compose his first symphony. A self-taught scholar, he had acquired a profound knowledge of musical history at a time when most baroque and medieval music was unknown even to professional musicians, and he was keenly aware that his work would be compared to Beethoven, **Schubert**, and other masters. Unlike his contemporaries **Wagner** and **Liszt**, who believed that the "music of the future" would have to reject models from previous eras, Brahms' best work displays a profound respect for past achievements and mastery of traditional form that few composers could match.

The *Quintet for Piano & Strings in F Minor, Op. 34*, displays all of these characteristics. Composed in 1861-62, the work was conceived as a string quintet on the model of Schubert's masterpiece, the String Quintet in C Major, then doggedly reworked into a piece for two pianos before Brahms rewrote it yet again as a quintet for piano and strings on the model of Schumann's work in that genre. Yet the result is entirely Brahmsian, with a particular beauty and nobility to its melodies and finely crafted polyphony that audiences have loved almost since the piece's debut.

The *String Quintet in G Major, Op. 111*, was written during the summer of 1890 and was intended by Brahms to be his final piece of chamber music. (His plan to "retire" went temporarily awry after he heard clarinetist **Richard Mühlfeld** and was inspired to write four pieces featuring the clarinet.) As with all of Brahms' late chamber music, the quintet has the mellow, autumnal quality that many music lovers treasure as epitomizing Brahms' greatness, yet it finishes with a lively rondo that ends in an energetic Hungarian *czardas*.

Joining the Alexander String Quartet to perform the Piano Quintet will be pianist Lara Downes, who is director of the **Mondavi Center Young Artists Competition** and UC Davis **ArtsBridge**, and a Mondavi Center artist-in-residence. Her *Perspectives* series has been popular with Mondavi Center audiences, and she tours nationally with her series "88 Keys: Perspectives from the Piano." Downes has attracted attention as one of the most exciting and communicative of contemporary pianists, and has been called "a most delightful artist, with a unique blend of musicianship and showmanship" by **National Public Radio**. Her debut CD, *Invitation to the Dance*, was called "a magical little recording" by National Public Radio, and her second release, *American Ballads*, was featured on NPR's *Performance Today* and was ranked by Amazon.com as being among the four best recordings of American music ever made.

Canadian-born violist Andrew Duckles will join the ASQ to perform the String Quintet. Formerly principal viola of the **Houston Grand Opera** and **Houston Ballet** orchestras, Duckles holds degrees from the **Eastman School of Music** and the **New England Conservatory** and resides in Los Angeles, playing viola for the motion picture and television orchestras. Additionally, he has made guest appearances as principal viola of the **Hollywood Bowl Orchestra**, the **Pasadena Pops Orchestra**, and the **New West Symphony**. From 1999 to 2002, he spent three seasons performing, recording, and touring with the **Los Angeles Philharmonic**. An enthusiastic chamber musician, Duckles appears regularly as a guest artist on a number of chamber music series throughout the United States. He teaches viola at **California State University, Northridge**, and **California State University, Long Beach**.

The resident composer and music historian for National Public Radio's *Weekend All Things Considered*, **Robert Greenberg** received a BA in music, *magna cum laude*, from **Princeton University**, and a PhD in music composition with distinction from the **University of California, Berkeley**. Greenberg has composed more than 45 works for a wide variety of instrumental and vocal ensembles, and has performed, taught, and lectured extensively across North America and Europe. He is a professor at the **San Francisco Conservatory of Music**.

“The Alexander String Quartet’s survey of Brahms’ chamber music has been a delight for all concerned, and we look forward to an outstanding final concert in the series with their performances of the Piano Quintet with pianist Lara Downes and the String Quintet No. 2 with violist Andrew Duckles,” said **Don Roth**, the Mondavi Center’s executive director.

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**What:** Alexander String Quartet  
with Robert Greenberg  
Andrew Duckles, viola  
Lara Downes, piano

**When:** Sunday, May 11, 2008 • 2 pm & 7 pm

**Where:** Studio Theatre  
Robert and Margrit Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts  
University of California, Davis

**Admission:** \$39 Adults • \$19.50 Students & Children

**Tickets/Info:** 530.754.ARTS (2787)  
866.754.ARTS (toll-free)  
<http://www.MondaviArts.org>  
530.754.5402 [TDD]

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