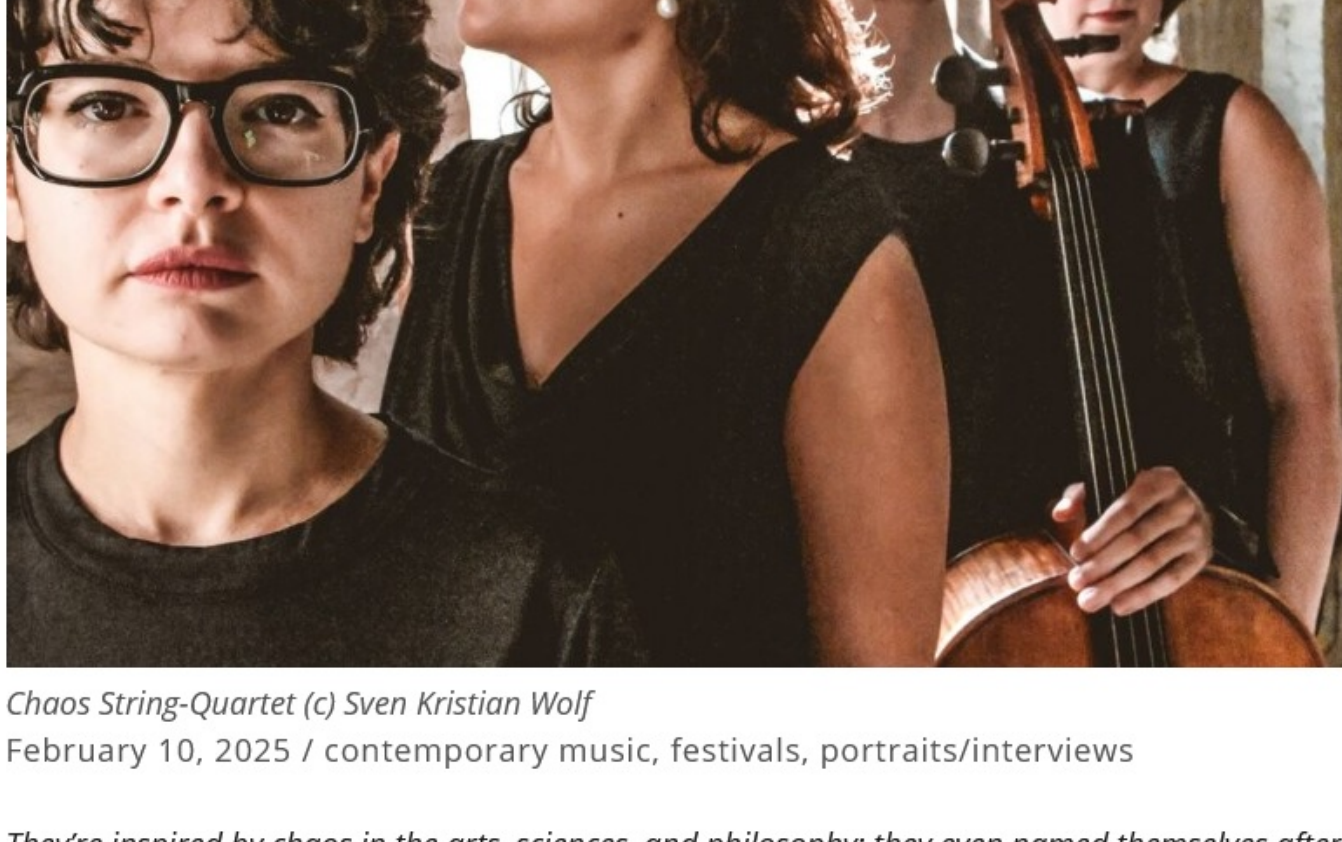


# “YOU CAN AROUSE PASSION WITH EXACTLY THAT COMBINATION OF HEART AND INTELLECT” – ESZTER KRUCHIÓ & SUSANNE SCHÄFFER (CHAOS STRING QUARTET)

02/10/2025



Chaos String-Quartet (c) Sven Kristian Wolf

February 10, 2025 / contemporary music, festivals, portraits/interviews

*They're inspired by chaos in the arts, sciences, and philosophy; they even named themselves after it: the **Chaos String Quartet**, founded in Vienna in 2019, is known for its unique repertoire and its affinity for improvisation. Their debut CD was hailed by listeners and nominated for the German Record Critics' Award, and they'll be appearing at the **impuls Festival** in Graz in February. The quartet's two violinists, Susanne Schäffer and Eszter Kruchió (Sara Marzadori and Bas Jongen complete the ensemble) recently spoke to Theresa Steininger about what chaos means for their repertoire, the role of improvisation in their concerts, and the idea that chamber music doesn't always have to be "deadly serious".*

## How did you arrive at the name **Chaos String Quartet**?

**Susanne Schäffer:** We found a quote in a book by Vito Mancuso that “chaos plus logos equals pathos”. That really appealed to us, so we did some reading on chaos in different contexts – such as Greek mythology, according to which everything was created out of chaos. We also studied what chaos means in physics; the thing we liked about all those scientific perspectives was that the smallest change can result in something very large. We try to bring that into every concert; we take it as a goal that small details can make big differences.

**Eszter Kruchió:** “Chaos plus logos is pathos” also means for us that you need both the creativity of chaos and the organizing intellect to evoke feelings. You can arouse passion with exactly that combination of heart and intellect. That's true in life and in music as well.



Video: mdw Artist Portrait: Chaos String Quartet

## Some would call the combinations you play in your concerts unusual. What do you think?

**Eszter Kruchió:** Unusual in the sense that we actually play everything from early Baroque to contemporary music – including from the period where string quartets didn't yet exist. We want to avoid being pigeonholed or fenced in. We've arranged Schubert lieder for our group as well, just because we love them.

**Susanne Schäffer:** A friend once said to us, “when you take the stage, one never knows what's going to happen – you make it exciting and impossible to predict.” We've always been successful with that concept, and we aren't afraid to subvert the framework of a classical concert – with interludes, or with concepts that focus on a single theme. Sometimes we use movement and theatrical effects. We're open for new things; that's what makes us different.

**Eszter Kruchió:** We're trying to rediscover the immediacy of chamber music. To put it provocatively, it's not about sitting and watching fat old white men do something that you only understand if you have a degree in musicology. Chamber music is supposed to be about *us*. It's the most direct, intimate form of making music; you can get a lot closer to the audience than with an orchestra. You can really affect your listeners.

## What role does improvisation play in that?

**Eszter Kruchió:** Improvisation has become an integral part of our work. We've created a real “chaos program”, with improvised interludes between pieces. For the Beethoven Fest in Bonn, we improvised set pieces on Opus 131, together with the sound artist Samu Gryllus. We generally don't shy away from spontaneity outside of the works that we dedicate ourselves to learning, so improvisation has become something of a trademark for us.

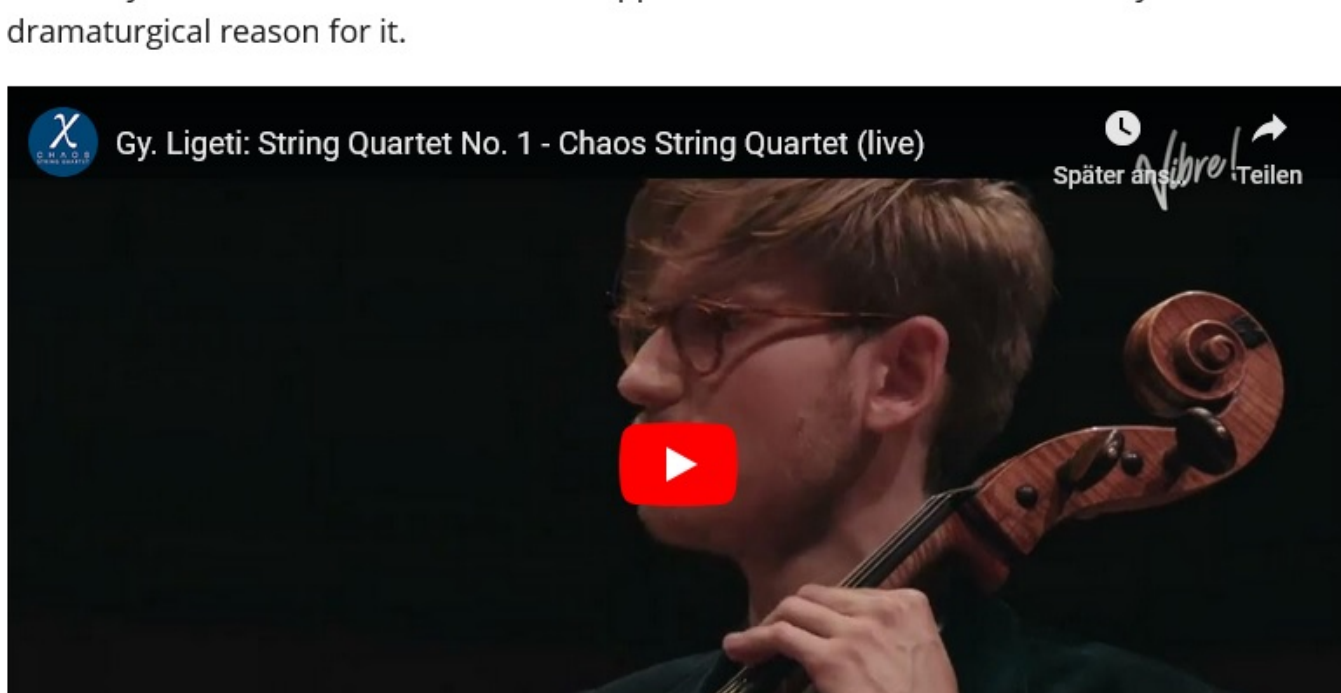
**Susanne Schäffer:** Each of us has things they would like to play, and we try to be creative and give everything a chance. In improvisation, we react to the audience – and the audience is free to react to us. We're even pleased when something comes back from the audience.

**Eszter Kruchió:** Humor is also very important to us; it has to arise in the moment, not be forced. People like to laugh, after all, and they're grateful when we play a humorous encore, for example. Chamber music doesn't always have to be deadly serious.

## Speaking of chaos: how much do science and philosophy affect your programming?

**Susanne Schäffer:** We try now and then to create multidisciplinary programs; we hope to work with science in the future. Also, our cellist Bas Jongen is studying physics.

**Eszter Kruchió:** We feel strongly that it's not about rehearsing something to perfection and then just serving it up to the audience. We try instead to be really open for spontaneity in the moment – and that brings us closer to chaos. One of the first pieces we worked on as a quartet was Ludwig van Beethoven's “Grosse Fuge”, a piece so complex that it sometimes seems chaotic – although Beethoven actually constructed it very carefully. Every note has a reason for being where it is, but you can't always perceive the order. Six months ago, we took up György Ligeti's second string quartet; it's very inspired by mathematics and physics – he consciously composed chaos in it, with things like overlapping rhythms. We also play our own arrangements of works that have to do with chaos, like the introduction of Chaos from Haydn's “Creation”. So when chaos appears in our concerts, there's always a dramaturgical reason for it.



Video: Gy. Ligeti: String Quartet No. 1 – Chaos String Quartet (live)

## Your debut CD includes works from Haydn, Ligeti, and Fanny Hensel. What made you choose that combination?

**Eszter Kruchió:** The basic idea may seem boring: we wanted to present a broad palette of pieces we're close to from different eras. Ligeti was a fixed point: we've been performing his first string quartet for a long time and played a lot of variations on it. We've learned to love his musical language. Haydn is also close to our hearts, in particular the last movement of that fugue that begins so quietly and then embraces life. Ligeti venerated Haydn a great deal; when he didn't know what to do next, he would go to Haydn to find out how he solved compositional problems – so that connection is clear. With Fanny Hensel, we wanted to get into Romantic music a little and also put music by a woman on the CD. Her quartet goes through a very interesting metamorphosis in the course of the movements – she plays with the fact that the work is actually in E-flat major but doesn't really arrive there until very late. We saw that as a nice connection to Ligeti, and we think this CD is a good visiting card for us.

## You've won a number of awards, including at the ARD Music Competition in Munich, the International String Quartet Competition in Bordeaux, the Bartók World Competition in Budapest, the Premio Rimbotti in Italy, and the Joseph Haydn Chamber Music Competition in Vienna. How important were they to your progress?

**Susanne Schäffer:** We learned a lot of repertoire while preparing for each of them – and we learned a lot about what's important in the music business. Those experiences were enriching. Awards help you to reach bigger venues more quickly, of course, and you become known more quickly. A lot of times, someone will tell us they heard us on the radio, or at this or that competition, even if it was several years ago. Awards have a fairly wide range.

## You're BBC 3 Radio New Generation Artists at the moment – what does that mean for you?

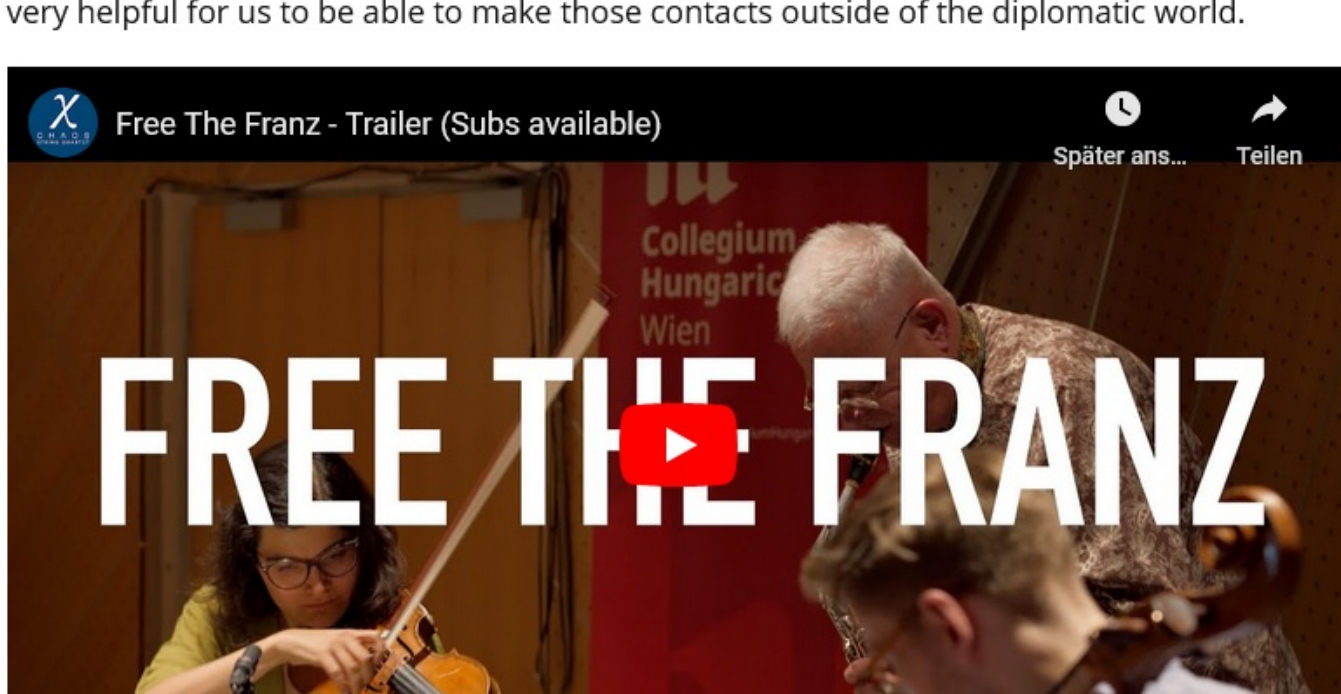
**Susanne Schäffer:** That, too, has brought us a lot of opportunities for concerts and exposure; all the concerts for the BBC were recorded and broadcast later on.

**Eszter Kruchió:** At the same time, I want to emphasize: we want to reach people. As much as we love playing in beautiful halls, it's important to us to go back and play in a school for children who might not otherwise experience classical music.

## At the end of December, your period as **NASOM (New Austrian Sound of Music) artists** – where young musicians receive support from the Austrian Cultural Forums, embassies, and consulates – ended. How was that for you?

**Susanne Schäffer:** NASOM allowed to play in a lot of great places – we toured Mexico, for example, and our travel costs and accommodation were paid for. We played concerts in many cultural forums and in other supported venues – in Berlin, Milan, Brussels, Budapest, Athens, and in the United States. The official NASOM period is over, but it will continue – our upcoming tour of China was made possible with the help of the cultural forum in Beijing.

**Eszter Kruchió:** They say, “once a NASOM artist, always a NASOM artist”. It was very helpful to be able to play in the cultural forums and receive their support with travel costs. It also brought us into contact with a lot of local festivals who probably wouldn't have contacted us if they had had to bear the costs themselves – like in Ottawa, Canada, and Mexico. It was very helpful for us to be able to make those contacts outside of the diplomatic world.



Video: Free the Franz – Trailer

## How could young string quartets in Austria be better supported?

**Eszter Kruchió:** It would be good if more venues would feature young ensembles as highlights. There are lots of series with young soloists, but seldom for quartets. For instance, it would be nice if we could play more “pre-concerts” for more exposure. More presence in radio and television would also be great.

**Susanne Schäffer:** It took a long time for people to become aware of us here. Of course, the fact that we got together shortly before the pandemic didn't help. Even when we were already playing quite a bit in Austria, the opportunities in Austria were limited. Still, even if it took a while, our future in Austria looks good now, too.

## Thank you for the interview!

Theresa Steininger

## DATES:

Tuesday, February 18, 2025, 7:00 p.m.

**impuls Festival**, MUMUTH . György Ligeti Hall, Lichtenfelsgasse 14, 8010 Graz

Wednesday, February 26, 2025, 5:00 pm

**impuls Festival**, TiP . Theater im Palais, Leonhardstraße 19, 8010 Graz

3x4 . String Quartets – with Chaos String Quartet, Kandinsky Quartet and Quatuor Diotima

## → LINKS

Translated from the **German original** by Philip Yaeger.

CHAOS STRING QUARTET, IMPULS FESTIVAL, IMPULS FESTIVAL 2025