



PROGRAM NOTES

Belcea Quartet
October 17, 2023 – 7:30 p.m.
Plymouth Church, UCC

String Quartet in C Minor, Op. 18, No. 4 **Ludwig van Beethoven**

Born: Bonn, 1770

Died: Vienna, 1827

Composed: 1798-1800

When the young Beethoven left his native Bonn for Vienna in 1792, his patron, Count Waldstein, sent him on his way with the words: “With the help of assiduous labor you shall receive Mozart’s spirit from Haydn’s hands.” What the count meant was that, even though Mozart had died the previous year, Beethoven could still study with Haydn, the other great Viennese composer. Things didn’t quite work out that way, though, for Haydn and Beethoven, for a number of reasons, did not get along very well and the composition lessons never really got off the ground. Yet Waldstein’s words were prophetic on another level, as they implied that Beethoven could someday inherit the mantle of the two older masters. And in fact, once installed in Vienna, Beethoven lost no time in claiming his place as *im Bunde der Dritte* (to quote a famous phrase from Beethoven’s favorite poet, Schiller, meaning “the third in the alliance”).

Having absorbed the style of Haydn and Mozart during his first Viennese years, he immediately began to put his own personal stamp on that style. With his first twenty opus numbers, published between 1795 and 1801, he thoroughly assimilated and carried on the genres of concerto, piano sonata, and chamber music; by 1799-1800, he was ready to write his First Symphony. The six string quartets of Opus 18, written around the same time as the First Symphony, exemplify these simultaneous acts of taking possession and making profound changes at once. (It is somewhat like moving into an old house and starting to remodel right away.) The influence of Beethoven’s predecessors can frequently be felt, and scholars have shown that there

is much in these quartets that goes back to compositional essays from the Bonn period. Yet the set as a whole is nothing less than revolutionary: it includes movements (such

as the slow movement of the F-major Quartet or the mysterious “La Malinconia” from the B-flat major) that have no precedents whatsoever in the history of the string quartet, and in general, it makes obvious on every page that a major new voice has appeared on the scene.

The fourth quartet in the set is written in the ominous tonality of C minor. Mozart had endowed this key with deeply tragic connotations that would stay with Beethoven in such works as the Pathétique Sonata, the Fifth Symphony, and the last piano sonata (Op. 111). In the string quartet (as often in Beethoven’s other C-minor works), dramatic excitement is expressed by frequent offbeat accents, harsh chordal sonorities, and other surprising gestures. Yet there are also playful moments, as in the second theme of the first movement which, as has often been pointed out, shares its melodic outline with one of Beethoven’s most cheerful works, the “Duet for two obbligato eyeglasses” for viola and cello.

In many of his works, Beethoven replaced the Mozartian minuet with a scherzo. In the C-minor quartet (as in a few

other of his works) he included both scherzo and minuet, eliminating the slow movement instead. It is true, though, that the scherzo has the form, if not the tempo, of a slow movement; with its fugal beginning, it would appear to be a close cousin of the Andante from the First Symphony. Scored in a bright and sunny C major, it also has the wit and ingenuity of many a Beethovenian scherzo.

With the Minuet, we are back in C minor and, accordingly, it is a serious and brooding piece, whose atmosphere is only temporarily relieved by a more light-hearted Trio in A-flat major. The way the conclusion of the Trio is left open to prepare for the return of the minuet is a thoroughly modern touch.

The last movement is a spirited Rondo, but the dark C-minor tonality is preserved all the way through (except for one brief episode). The Mozartian models from the C-minor Piano Concerto (K. 491) and the C-minor Serenade (K. 388) are very much in evidence, yet only Beethoven could have written the “Prestissimo” coda with its entirely unexpected ending.

String Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 51

Antonín Dvořák

Born: Nelahozeves, Bohemia [now Czech Republic], 1841

Died: Prague, 1904

Composed: 1879

Antonín Dvořák was never one to wrestle with Fate like his much-admired fellow Slav, Piotr Tchaikovsky; nor did he feel he had to carry the weight of the entire history of music on his shoulders, like his mentor and friend Johannes Brahms. This fact has led to a one-sided evaluation of Dvořák as an easygoing Bohemian musician who lacked the depth of some of his contemporaries.

If Dvořák had done no more than combine the best classical traditions with beautiful melodies of a distinctive Czech flavor,

his accomplishment would be considerable. Yet he did far more than that. He certainly introduced the voice of his nation to the international music world from Vienna to London and New York. But he did so in his own personal voice that rings loud and clear, proving that even after Beethoven and Wagner, it was still possible to create great music that wasn’t tragic and heaven-storming. In any case, who, besides Brahms, produced a body of chamber music in Europe in the second half of the 19th century that is comparable to Dvořák

both in quantity and quality?

The quartet in E-flat was written at a time when Dvořák was just beginning to be known beyond the boundaries of Bohemia. The composer obviously tried to make the most of the widespread interest in the Bohemian manner, an interest he had sparked with his wildly successful Slavonic Dances and Rhapsodies. Jean Becker, a German-born violinist who had settled in Florence, had requested a specifically Slavonic work for his quartet, and Dvořák was happy to oblige.

We would do less than justice to this beautiful composition if we saw only the “Bohemianisms,” which would have been far less effective without Dvořák’s virtuosic handling of the string-quartet texture. The work is listed as Quartet No. 10 in the catalog, but as the earlier quartets have remained little known, one might believe that the mastery of Op. 51 had arisen all at once in the composer’s workshop.

In the opening “Allegro ma non troppo,” Dvořák elaborates his melodic material harmonically and contrapuntally in a rather subtle way. The rhythmic shapes of the two principal themes are close enough to preserve a unity of tone but diverse enough to avoid monotony. In the development section, both themes are combined when the first melody is played in slow motion while a variant of the second is heard at the original speed. And that is only one of the myriad subtle tricks Dvořák

plays in this remarkable movement.

The second movement (“Andante con moto”) proclaims its Slavic origins in its title “Dumka”—one of many instances where Dvořák alluded to this melancholy song type whose various forms are at home in several Slavic countries. The subtitle “Elegy” expresses the same idea in terms that would be more familiar to non-Slavic audiences. The plaintive minor-key melody, played in alternation by the first violin and the viola, gives way to a middle section in a fast tempo (“Vivace”), evoking the typical rhythm of the Czech furiant (mixing “one-two-three one-two-three” with “one-two one-two one-two”). After this lively folk dance, the *dumka* returns. Its sad mood seems to rub off on the furiant as well, for the fast dance returns a second time in minor instead of major. Also, the tempo becomes gradually slower and slower until the final measures restore the “Vivace.”

The third-movement “Romanza” is based on a single, peaceful melody that projects a feeling of motionlessness, a respite after two movements that were much more hectic. The last movement is an undisguised folk dance whose model was the *skočná* or leaping dance in the Czech folk tradition. Its engaging main theme is taken up later as the starting point for a brilliant *fugato*. The second theme is in a slightly slower tempo that contrasts with the “Più allegro” (faster than Tempo I) of the quartet’s final measures.

String Quartet No. 5

Béla Bartók

Born: Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary [now Sînnicolau Mare, Romania], 1881

Died: New York, 1945

Composed: 1934

In his six string quartets, Béla Bartók created a classical sense of harmony and balance using entirely new and non-classical means—an achievement to which few of his contemporaries can lay claim. His non-traditional harmonies can sound harsh and dissonant at first hearing, but he used them in

such a coherent and logical way that the ear soon accepts them as a natural idiom, organically evolving from the past.

The Fifth Quartet follows a symmetrical five-movement layout, as does its predecessor. Yet while the Fourth Quartet has a central slow movement flanked by two scherzos, this time

the scherzo is in the central position, framed by two slow movements (Nos. 2 and 4). In both quartets, two fast movements serve as bookends. In the case of No. 5, this scheme actually results in a seven-fold symmetry, since the central scherzo is itself in an A-B-A form.

The main theme of the first movement grows out of a single note, repeated many times by the four instruments in rhythmic unison. Similarly to the first movement of the Fourth Quartet, this Allegro follows sonata form, and the contrast among the various themes (the opening ostinato, the angular rhythms of the second theme and the long legato lines of the third) propels the movement on its path. Bartók's fondness for mirror symmetries is further expressed in the thematic inversions during the recapitulation: in that section, all the themes are heard "upside down," with ascending intervals substituted for descending ones and vice versa.

The second movement is one of Bartók's so-called "night musics"—a gripping evocation of the mysterious noises of the night as heard by a solitary observer lost in contemplation. A theme of an almost Romantic tenderness, harmonized with conventional triads that sound entirely non-conventional in their 20th-century context, emerges out of the isolated trills of the opening, representing the voice of the individual. The tremolos and pizzicatos that soon appear, including pizzicatos with the nail of the left index finger, create an eerie atmosphere, which is relieved by a return of the pure chords of the earlier melodic section. True to his concept of symmetry that governs the entire quartet, Bartók returns to the opening trills at the very end.

The third movement is a scherzo in "Bulgarian rhythm," that is, in the characteristic mixed meters often found in the folk music of the Balkan nation. The basic pattern of the scherzo is *one-two-three-four one-two one-two-*

three (in a rather fast tempo). Two different melodic motifs are made to fit into the "regular irregularity" of the rhythm: an idea that moves up and down in a chain of thirds, and another one that evokes Hungarian folk music with its melodic outline. The Trio section (which is the center of symmetry for the entire work) brings a particularly striking folk melody played by the viola in its high register, answered by the cello, against the agitated figurations of the first violin. The return of the scherzo is a free rewrite rather than a literal repeat, again involving inversion of the themes.

In many ways, the fourth-movement Andante harks back to the second movement: again we hear isolated gestures and mysterious noises gradually giving rise to more sustained melodies. But this time, Bartók includes an additional element: a powerful cry in the form of a terse motif of only two notes—an ascending minor third. This motif becomes the basis of a passionate middle section that is the total emotional opposite of the quiet and meditative second movement. Some calm is restored only in the final measures, with a few slow pizzicato chords played by the cello.

The music of the last movement is driven forward by rambunctious dance rhythms and playful imitations (as though the instruments were playing catch). The many repeated notes recall the ostinatos of the first movement (another symmetrical touch), but the earlier thematic contrasts have all but disappeared. A startling episode occurs just before the end: a passage marked "Allegretto con indifferenza" where the second violin plays an intentionally banal little melody to the "meccanico" accompaniment of the viola. When the first violin takes over the melody a jarring half-step higher, the joke becomes cruel, and is finally brushed aside by a return of a fast tempo and a mad rush which will last all the way to the end.

-Peter Laki

Mr. Laki is a musicologist and Visiting Associate Professor of Music at Bard College. He has been the annotator for

the Society's program booklet since 2012, having previously served as annotator for the Cleveland Orchestra from 1990 to 2007. He is a native of Budapest and holds a Ph.D. in music from the University of Pennsylvania.