



CLEVELAND
CHAMBER
MUSIC
SOCIETY

PROGRAM NOTES

Dover Quartet

March 12, 2024 – 7:30 PM

Plymouth Church, UCC

La oración del torero (“The Bullfighter’s Prayer”), Op. 34

Joaquín Turina

Born: Sevilla, 1882

Died: Madrid, 1949

Composed: 1926-27

In every major bullring in Spain, there is a small chapel behind the arena. The *toreros*—bullfighters—often retire there before a fight to pray. (Usually, a priest is also on hand, in case the extreme unction has to be administered.) The eminent composer Joaquín Turina stepped inside one of these chapels one day, and immediately knew he had found his inspiration for a piece:

Behind a small door, there was a chapel, filled with incense, where toreadors went right before facing death. It was then that there appeared, in front of my eyes, in all its plenitude, this subjectively musical and expressive contrast between the tumult of the arena, the public that awaited the fiesta, and the devotion of those who, in front of this poor altar, filled with touching poetry, prayed to God to protect their lives.

The basic idea of the piece, then, is the contrast between “inside” and “outside:” the emotions of the torero before he puts his life on the line, and the excited crowd, waiting for the fight to begin. This explains the many abrupt changes in tempo and musical character.

As a young man, Turina had spent some formative years in Paris, where the music of Claude Debussy changed his life. Debussy, of course, had been deeply influenced by Spanish music; now the debt was repaid. Exposure to his works enabled Turina (as well as his older contemporaries Albéniz, Granados and de Falla) to create the new Spanish music of the 20th century, and Spanish music began to enjoy an international success it hadn’t had since the Baroque era.

Debussy’s influence is unmistakable in *La oración del torero*, but Turina used an original formal structure that didn’t follow established European models. He had

originally scored his piece for a quartet of *laúdes*, a type of lute used in Spanish folk music, and something of this special sound

survives even in the more conventional versions for string quartet and string orchestra that the composer later prepared.

String Quartet No. 2 (“Intimate Letters”)

Leoš Janáček

Born: Hukvaldy, Moravia [Austrian Monarchy], 1854

Died: Moravská Ostrava, Czechoslovakia, 1928)

Composed: 1928

In his seventies, Leoš Janáček was younger at heart than many people half his age. Many of his greatest works were written at a point in life when other composers slow down if they don't stop working altogether. This late efflorescence had a lot to do with an encounter in the summer of 1917 that changed Janáček's life forever. The composer, who had just begun to emerge from many years of neglect with the sensational Prague premiere of his opera *Jenůfa*, met a young woman named Kamila Stösslová at a spa in Moravia. He was 63, she 26. They were both married—she had two young children. Janáček fell passionately in love. Rejuvenated by his feelings, he completed, in the space of a single decade, four operas, two piano concertos, the *Sinfonietta*, the *Glagolitic Mass* and two string quartets. The second of these, *Listy důvěrné* (“Intimate Letters”), is the most direct reflection of this remarkable relationship, in which correspondence played a major part. There are hundreds of surviving letters from Janáček to Stösslová—an amazing group of documents that, in the words of translator and editor John Tyrrell, “go to the heart of Janáček's inner life and...contain a great love story.”

However, the four musical letters contained in the present quartet's four movements go to emotional regions that words can never reach. This is music of uncommon intensity. Just as a person in love can't find rest, so the music keeps

changing tempos and instrumental textures in a totally unpredictable, yet by no means illogical, way.

Janáček wrote this quartet in January and February 1928. His original plan was to replace the viola with the Baroque *viola d'amore* (“viola of love”). This turned out to be impractical in the end and the regular scoring was retained, but the viola part often carries special meaning and plays many important solos. The very first time it enters, it plays *pianissimo* and *sul ponticello* (near the bridge, resulting in a special, mysterious timbre). The two contrasting themes of the opening (do they represent two people in a relationship?) undergo their respective evolutions in the course of the movement. Sometimes they are stated with blunt simplicity; other times, they are developed with great sophistication. At the end of the movement, the viola takes over the energetic opening theme in a passionate “Allegro” at whose conclusion the first violin plays it once more, at half speed, as a grandiose final gesture.

The second movement opens with a tender melodic figure played, once more, by the viola. In the course of the movement, this figure will be heard in many different harmonizations and instrumentation, now expressive and mysterious, now sweeping and powerful. At one point, the first four notes of the melody are turned into a rapid accompaniment figure, set against the same melody, played in a powerful *fortissimo* and

in slow motion. Then, as an utter contrast, a playful, folk-like tune appears, and turns from folk-dance to lament in a matter of seconds. The recapitulation is combined with a surprise return of the twin motifs from the first movement. In the words of the eminent Janáček scholar Jaroslav Vogel, the movement ends “in a loud, festive [manner] and a mood of solemn thanksgiving.”

The third movement starts like a lyrical intermezzo, with all four instruments playing in harmony in the same rhythm. The idyll is soon disrupted by a more agitated second theme, which appears in many forms, in changing tempos and different registers. Finally it is stated with extreme force by the first violin at the top of its range. Janáček told Kamila about this movement that it was “very cheerful and then dissolve[d] into a vision which would resemble your image, transparent, as if in the mist.” The first theme returns and, surprisingly, takes on the agitated rhythmic quality of the second—the two people in a relationship are affecting and influencing one another. A *pianissimo* recall of the second theme, and a few sudden *fortissimo* measures, end the movement.

Like the third movement, the finale opens with a theme of deceptive simplicity, this time a vigorous folk-dance; once more, the initial mood is disrupted by episodes in turn dramatic and painfully nostalgic. In the middle of the movement, the second violin plays a fiery cadenza all made up of trills; the trills are then transformed into nervous

figurations that remain present for the rest of the movement. The folk-dance reappears but it is not allowed to bring about a “resolution:” the quartet is left curiously open as it ends on a strong dissonance. The love between Janáček and Stösslová was not to find fulfillment on this earth.

Janáček died suddenly on August 12, 1928, without having heard a public performance of the quartet. But on June 27, he listened to the members of the Moravian String Quartet play it through for him. That day he wrote to Kamila:

Those cries of joy, but what a strange thing, also cries of terror after a lullaby. Exaltation, a warm declaration of love, imploring; untamed longing. Resolution, relentlessly to fight with the world over you. Moaning, confiding, fearing. Crushing everything beneath me if it resisted. Standing in wonder before you at our first meeting. Amazement at your appearance; as if I had fallen to the bottom of a well and from that very moment I drank the water of that well. Confusion and high-pitched song of victory. “You’ve found a woman who was destined for you.” Just my speech and just your amazed silence. Oh, it’s a work as if I carved out of living flesh. I think that I won’t write a more profound and a truer one.

String Quartet in D minor (“Death and the Maiden”), D. 810

Franz Schubert

Born: Himmelpfortgrund, nr. Vienna [now part of the city], 1797

Died: Vienna, 1828

Composed: 1824

In the last four years of his short life, Schubert began to concentrate on the major instrumental genres of piano sonata, string quartet and symphony in a way he had not done before. He was taking on the very genres in which Beethoven had excelled, and articulating his personal response to his older contemporary. It was a creative response, almost completely free from any direct influence; Schubert emulated Beethoven’s ambition and his uncompromising attitude but not his actual way of writing.

In 1824—exactly two hundred years ago—Schubert produced his Octet (which took its cue from Beethoven’s Septet), and the two string quartets in A minor and D minor, intended for the same Schuppanzigh Quartet who had made Beethoven’s quartets their specialty. (Schuppanzigh, though, only ever performed the A-minor work.) These works were written at a time when Schubert suffered his first major bout of illness, as a result of the syphilis he had contracted the year before. It was in March 1824, the very month of the D-minor quartet, that Schubert wrote his often-quoted letter to his friend, the painter Leopold Kupelwieser:

Imagine a man whose health will never be right again, and whose sheer despair over this ever makes things worse and worse, instead of better; imagine a man, I say, whose most brilliant hopes have perished, to whom the felicity of love and friendship have nothing to offer but pain, at best, whom enthusiasm (at least of the stimulating kind) for all things beautiful threatens to forsake,

and I ask you, is he not a miserable, unhappy being?

In the light of these desperate words, it is hardly surprising that Schubert chose one of his most tragic songs, *Der Tod und das Mädchen*, as the basis of a set of variations in the D-minor quartet. This song was one of twelve written in 1816-17 on words by Matthias Claudius (1740-1815), an eminent poet and essayist from Northern Germany. In two contrasted stanzas, we first hear the anguished plea of a young girl, followed by the eerie yet consoling voice of Death, assuring the girl that death is not punishment but gentle sleep. For his variation theme in the quartet, Schubert used the austere piano introduction to the song, slightly altered. All the other movements include their own relentlessly repeated rhythmic patterns, a technique that unifies the entire quartet and reinforces its dark, dramatic character.

The first Allegro is built upon the contrast of a dramatic opening theme and a contrasting lyrical melody. We hear many intriguing modulations and virtuosic fireworks as one of Schubert’s most eventful sonata movements unfolds before our ears.

The theme of the second movement (variations on the song) contains some material that is not in the song but was included here to expand the introduction to the song into a complete, self-contained melodic statement. The first two of the five variations feature the first violin and the cello, respectively, in soloistic roles. In the third, the fundamental rhythmic pattern of the movement is presented at four times its original speed, changing the solemn song of death into a wild gallop. The fourth

variation is similar to the first in that the first violin once more weaves virtuosic figurations around the melody, as played by the other instruments; yet the tonality is major, which makes all the emotional difference. The final variation begins *pianissimo*, works its way up to a furious *fortissimo* climax with rhythmic complexity reaching its highest level, only to fade back into *pianissimo* as the tonality unexpectedly changes back to major. The combination of the major mode with extremely soft volume creates a mysterious and transcendent effect at the end of the movement.

The third-movement scherzo has a descending bass line long associated with Baroque laments; yet the strong rhythmic accents and the frequent chromaticism (use of half-steps not normally part of the scale) give it a distinctly “modern” sound. The similarity of the main melodic idea to Mime’s motif in Wagner’s *Ring* cycle has frequently been commented on, yet a close variant of it also appears in one of

Schubert’s short German dances for piano. The trio, or middle section, switches to the major mode. Instead of repeating each of its halves literally, as tradition would demand, Schubert changes the instrumentation completely the second time around, and introduces elaborate flourishes for the first violin.

The finale is a breath-taking Presto based on the rhythm of the tarantella dance (which Schubert used in other finales as well, for instance in his Piano Sonata in C minor, dating from the last year of his life). As in the first movement, the rhythmic idea alternates with more melodic material as well as with a great deal of virtuoso writing. The “sweep” and a dynamic energy of the movement never let up until the very end, which—contrary to what happens in most classical finales in minor keys—does not modulate to the parallel major but remains unremittingly anchored in the tragic minor mode.

-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.