



PROGRAM NOTES

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

String Quartet in E-flat major, D. 87

Franz Schubert

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

Died: Vienna, 1828

Composed: 1813

In the dozen or so string quartets (not all of them completed) that the teenage Schubert wrote for “home consumption,” a genius is learning his craft before our very eyes. Only a few years after Haydn’s death and well before Beethoven wrote his late quartets, Schubert worked at a time when the music of those older composers was still “new music.” The conventions, established by Haydn and Mozart, were binding, yet there was nothing “old-fashioned” about following them.

After five years at a boarding student at the *Stadtkonvikt* (Imperial and Royal Seminary), Schubert moved back with his family in the Vienna suburb of Lichtenthal, and began to help out his father Franz Theodor, a teacher, at his elementary school. In their free time, the family loved to play string quartets at home: the father played cello, his two older sons Ignaz and Ferdinand were violinists, and Franz picked up the viola. The four Schuberts were eager to try out the string quartets that flowed from young Franz’s pen. It is hard to say exactly how many quartets he composed as

a teenager as some works are lost; twelve have survived from the years before 1820.

In his book *Schubert: The Music and the Man*, Brian Newbould calls the present quartet “arguably the finest” of the early works. Yet there is no denying that it is still a student piece. The song *Gretchen at the Spinning-Wheel*, with which the composer’s artistic maturity would arrive almost overnight at the age of seventeen, was still a whole year away. The writing is rather cautious, the melody and the texture are kept simple, and Schubert doesn’t stray too far from his models. Still, there are premonitions of what was to come: Schubert’s unique voice is already clearly present in a characteristic turn of phrase in the slow movement, or in the inimitably graceful second subject of the finale.

After the expansive melodies of the first movement, the extreme brevity of the second-movement scherzo (*Prestissimo*) is surprising. The double drone of the trio section, played by the cello, indicates that Schubert was well acquainted with Haydn’s folk-inspired minuets.

A warmly lyrical Adagio and a spirited finale round out the work.

Like many of Schubert's compositions, this quartet was not published during Schubert's lifetime. When it was finally printed, it became "Op. 125, No. 1," but that high opus number is misleading—after all, it is a very early work. It is better to use O. E.

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

Deutsch's chronological catalog, in which the E-flat major quartet received the number 87. Some composers don't reach their eighty-seventh work until late in life (if at all), but for Schubert, who would write almost a thousand compositions before his death at age 31, it was only a beginning.

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.