



CLEVELAND
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PROGRAM NOTES

Apollon Musagète Quartet
February 4, 2020 – 7:30 p.m.
Plymouth Church, UCC

String Quartet in D major, Op. 64, No. 5 (“The Lark”)

Joseph Haydn

Born: Rohrau, Lower Austria, 1732

Died: Vienna, 1809

Composed: 1790

It is said that Haydn received Johann Peter Salomon’s invitation to go to England while at work on the set of quartets that was later published as Op. 64. Dedicated to the Viennese musician-businessman Johann Tost (just as the previous set had been), these quartets—especially the last two: the popular “Lark” and the quartet in E flat, Op. 64, No. 6—were already written with London performances in mind. As soon as Haydn reached England, the quartets were in fact played there, and when the critic of the *Morning Chronicle* heard one of them, he found it “exceedingly beautiful, and...well executed.”

Op. 64—the ninth set of six quartets in Haydn’s catalogue—shows the composer at the height of his powers. Haydn had reached the point where he was able to speak freely in the language he himself had created, and to say new things every time, confident that audiences would understand every word.

The “Lark” Quartet got his nickname

from the opening melody which, played by the first violin, soars high on the E-string while the other three instruments play “down-to-earth” staccato notes as an accompaniment. A beguilingly uncomplicated start; soon, however, things will get a little more intricate as Haydn playfully shifts accents and treats us to a few surprising harmonic clashes. Yet none of that changes the fundamentally sunny physiognomy of the movement.

The “Adagio cantabile” is a single outpouring of warm lyrical expression, darkened by a brief passing cloud when the music switches to the minor mode. When the major tonality returns, the lyrical melody is lavishly ornamented by the first violin.

A folk-inspired yet rather sophisticated minuet follows, with a trio section in the minor mode that develops one of the minuet’s motifs in an unexpected new way with some poignant chromatic counterpoint. There will be some more elaborate polyphonic writing, once again in

the minor, in the central portion of the whirlwind finale, a brief but extremely energetic “Vivace” movement in which the

rapid sixteenth-note motion never stops until the very end.

String Quartet No. 3 (“Leaves of an Unwritten Diary”) **Krzysztof Penderecki**

Born: Dębica, Poland, 1933

Composed: 2008

Penderecki's Third Quartet, commissioned by the Shanghai Quartet, received its first performance during a special festival honoring the Polish master's 75th birthday. The string quartet repertoire has been enriched by a splendid new work that has already been adopted by many groups and performed in concert all over the world. Due to the work's great success, Penderecki also issued an alternative version as string quintet with double bass. (Since then, Penderecki has composed a Fourth Quartet, which was premiered in 2016.)

Penderecki rarely gives his works programmatic subtitles. The fact that he chose to do so in this case shows that this quartet meant something special to him. Returning to the genre after a forty-year hiatus (his first two quartets were written in the high modernist style that made the young Penderecki a leading composer of his generation), Penderecki reconnects with some old memories, and with earlier “confessional” quartets such as Sibelius's *Voces intimae* (1909) or Janáček's *Intimate Letters* (1928). Although Penderecki hadn't written a quartet in decades, in 1991 he

composed a String Trio, and in the present quartet he expanded on some of the musical ideas in that work. But there are other reminiscences as well, such as a modified folk melody, of which Penderecki said that it is a gypsy tune, perhaps from Romania, that his father used to play on his fiddle.

The quartet is in a single movement, divided into several sections. Violinist Amanda Wang, who has devoted an entire doctoral dissertation to the work at Boston University, has identified five major divisions—a brief introduction; a *Vivace* section; a central slow nocturne, prefaced by a languid quasi-waltz; a second *Vivace* where the gypsy tune appears; and a brief, slow coda.

This outline is filled out with music in turn passionate, intensely lyrical and tragic. A wild ostinato consisting of the constant repeat of a single minor-third interval, returns periodically as a dramatic force propelling the quartet forward. After many mood changes amounting to an emotional journey of rare power, the quartet concludes with some ethereal, dreamlike sounds.

String Quartet No. 14 in A-flat major, Op. 105

Antonin Dvořák

Born: Nelahozeves, Bohemia, 1841

Died: Prague, 1904

Composed: 1895

After his return from the United States, where he had served for three years as the director of the newly founded National Conservatory in New York, Dvořák completed the present quartet and its companion piece in G major. These quartets turned out to be the last works Dvořák ever composed without an explicit literary program; in the years that followed, the composer devoted himself exclusively to operas and symphonic poems. One is tempted to see this pair of late quartets as a summing-up of a lifetime of experience; yet while they look backward in some respects, they also possess many novel features. There is no doubt that Dvořák had many new things left to say in his final quartets.

The choice of key is noteworthy in itself: A-flat major is rarely chosen in music for strings, because it offers few opportunities to use open strings. (It is the only string quartet ever written by a major composer in that key.) Due to this choice of tonality, the sound tends to be somewhat dark, as if covered by a veil, even though much of the thematic material is rather serene and cheerful in nature. While Dvořák remained faithful to classical string quartet form, he moved within the established structural framework with the utmost freedom. The work abounds in sophisticated key changes, and one occasionally finds changing time signatures and polyrhythms (for instance, four against three or five against four), which were far from common at the end of the 19th century.

After a rather gloomy slow introduction, the “Allegro appassionato” first movement lives up to its tempo character by introducing a lively pair of

themes, subjected to a vigorous development. A much-abridged recapitulation is followed by a coda in which the tempo momentarily slows down and the main theme is recalled in a hesitant, pensive manner before the energetic closing chords.

The second movement revisits some elements of the *furiant*, the Czech folk dance which appears in so many of Dvořák’s previous works. Yet the music feels slightly “on the edge,” with some unusual harmonic twists; there seems to be a self-consciousness that doesn’t allow the dance to unfold with the usual abandon. The trio section, likewise, is not as uncomplicated as it initially seems; in addition to containing the above-mentioned polyrhythms, its delicate scoring gives it an almost otherworldly aura.

The third movement is an intimate instrumental song, with some intensely dramatic moments and a mysterious, highly chromatic middle section. In the recapitulation, the opening theme acquires a new, extremely active accompaniment with the viola and the cello playing *pizzicato* (plucking the strings) and the second violin adding a lively rhythmic figure marked *scherzando*. Eventually the music subsides and ends with a quiet, peaceful coda.

Like the scherzo, the finale turns what might have been a simple, light-hearted dance into a rather elaborate musical statement, including some passages using imitative counterpoint, some slower and darker episodes and, in general, a more complex musical structure. Yet all complexities disappear at the end, during the faster coda that joyfully reaffirms the A-flat

major tonality.

-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.