



PROGRAM NOTES

Bennewitz Quartet

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String Quartet No. 16 in F major, Op. 135

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: 1770, Bon, Germany

Died: 1827, Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1826

Beethoven had much on his mind during the summer and fall of 1826, at the time he wrote what was to remain his final string quartet. Already plagued by severe illness, the 55-year-old master suffered the heaviest blow of his life when his nephew Karl attempted suicide and was subsequently hospitalized for two months. For years, Beethoven had fought his sister-in-law in court for custody of the boy, who was at this time the only human being he really cared about; but he exerted a tyrannical control over Karl that drove the young man to utter despair. It was during this traumatic period that Beethoven began work on the F-major quartet. The work was completed after the boy, just released from the hospital, accompanied his uncle to Gneixendorf, a two-day trip from Vienna up the Danube, where his other uncle, Johann van Beethoven, owned an estate.

The last movement of Opus 135 is preceded by an enigmatic line of musical notation by Beethoven, containing the themes of the Grave introduction and the Allegro section, with the underlaid question and answer “Muss es sein? – Es muss sein!” (“Must it be? – It must be!”). Above the line

appear the words “Der schwer gefasste Entschluss” (“The Difficult Decision”). There have been numerous attempts to explain what Beethoven was referring to. A humorous canon Beethoven wrote in the spring of 1826 uses the words “Es muss sein” with almost the same music as in the quartet; the occasion for the canon was that a certain Ignaz Dembscher had failed to pay for the parts of Beethoven’s quartet Opus 130 that he had ordered. In a letter to the publisher Moritz Schlesinger, Beethoven wrote:

Here, my dear friend, is my last quartet. It will be the last; and indeed it has given me much trouble. For I could not bring myself to compose the last movement. But as your letters were reminding me of it, in the end I decided to compose it. And that is the reason why I have written the motto...

Surely, however, there is more to this “decision” than these two rather mundane stories suggest. We can tell from the complex ways the characteristic descending fourth of the “Es muss sein” motif is woven into the fabric of the whole piece, starting from the very opening of the first movement. This innocent-looking Allegretto

has often, but somewhat misleadingly, been described as a nostalgic look back on the bygone days of Mozart and Haydn. The simple harmonies that evoke the memory of the older Viennese classics are combined with some extremely intricate textures. The melodic material is passed back and forth among the four instruments with great sophistication, and the sudden changes between motion in quarter-notes and sixteenth-triplets (the latter going six times as fast as the former) are extremely striking. There is a hidden, mysterious tension behind the Haydnesque façade, waiting to explode.

The explosion comes in the second movement scherzo, whose rough humor, once again, derives its power from the simplicity of the means employed. The first violin's theme goes down and up, outlining a three-note scale fragment, somewhat like "Three Blind Mice." The second violin plays a drone, the viola alternates between only two notes, and the cello intones a motif that, like that of the first violin, outlines a circular (rising and falling) motion. Then the note E-flat, foreign to the key of F major, appears, seemingly out of nowhere, and is repeated several times as the whole harmonic direction of the movement becomes uncertain before the previous motivic material re-establishes itself and, with slight development, completes the scherzo proper. The middle section is a wild romp where the first violin's ascending scales and wide leaps are offset by a pulsating quarter-note accompaniment in the other instruments. The ascent in keys (from F to G to A) is highly unusual and adds considerably to the excitement. The scherzo proper then returns after a retransition section in which the first violin's "Blind Mice" motif is mysteriously repeated by the four instruments in unison.

The sublime third movement brings us one of Beethoven's most heartfelt, hymn-

like melodies. On closer look, it turns out that its descending and ascending scale figures are almost identical to those in the scherzo, only in slow motion! Its middle section is even slower; the melody of the violin, accompanied by the other instruments in identical rhythm, seems to be choking back tears. Afterwards, the hymn-like melody returns, embellished by ornamental figures that, although marked *semplice*, actually verge on the ecstatic.

After three movements of such contrasting characters (that nevertheless share a great deal of motivic material) we arrive at the "Difficult Decision." The brief Grave introduction, which asks the question "Muss es sein?", functions as a recitative to the Allegro section's aria, in which the affirmation of "Es muss sein" is followed by a positively playful and humorous second theme, as if all doubts had been laid to rest once and for all. Yet that is not quite the case just yet: The question, in the minor mode, is restated as the Grave tempo returns. The repeat of the positive answer is interrupted before the end when the "Es muss sein" motif itself is turned into a question. Played at a slower tempo and its straightforward perfect fourth distorted into an anguished diminished interval, this momentary *Poco adagio* provides last-minute suspense. The dilemma is definitively resolved when the second theme appears *pizzicato* (with plucked strings), leading into a final confirmation on all four instruments: "Es muss sein, es muss sein!" Thus, Beethoven's last quartet ends on a positive and highly confident note. (It was almost his last completed composition, as it was followed only by the new, and even more exuberant, Allegro for the String Quartet in B-flat major that replaced the Great Fugue when that quartet was published as Opus 130.)

-Notes by Peter Laki

Five Pieces for String Quartet

Erwin Schulhoff

Born: 1894, Czechia

Died: 1942, Germany

Composed: 1923

Czech composer Erwin Schulhoff, one of the most gifted of a lost generation of composers to die in concentration camps, was born ahead of his time. His magpie-like interest in music of all sorts would make him right at home in today's culture. In the 1920s, when he wrote the Five Pieces, Schulhoff was a prominent pianist and composer, appearing regularly at international contemporary music festivals. His interests tended toward modernism, often combining Arnold Schoenberg's free atonality with the strong dance rhythms of folk music.

As a pianist, Schulhoff championed the quarter-tone music of his fellow countryman Alois Hába. He soaked up the neoclassicism of Igor Stravinsky. He followed developments in Paris and was an enthusiast of the music of Darius Milhaud and other members of Les Six. He also played in nightclubs and drew inspiration from the then new and exciting phenomenon of jazz and ragtime, integrating them into his music as successfully as any composer of the time. Like his almost exact contemporary Bohuslav Martinů, Schulhoff was something of an outsider. He wrote the first of his five works for string quartet while still a student.

The Five Pieces are the first of his mature works for the medium and had immediate success when given their premiere at the International Society for Contemporary Music festival in Salzburg in 1924. These short pieces show considerable technical skill and confidence, great variety with economic means, and rhythmic ingenuity. Together, as a series of complementary dance movements, they bring a modern face to the tradition of the Baroque suite.

The first piece is a Viennese waltz with an edge, cunningly notated. Next comes a 5/8 serenata, a stylized dance with a Spanish flavor whose recurring rhythm ranges from the exuberant to the ghostly. The rhythm and energy of the third dance bring to mind the music of Béla Bartók in a rhythmically driven piece reminiscent of the Czech skocná. The two closing pieces are again finely drawn dances, deriving from the Argentinean tango and Neapolitan tarantella respectively. Speaking of his passion for dances of all types, Schulhoff said, reasonably enough, "If Bach and his contemporaries—not to mention Mozart, Brahms, and Schubert—wrote and loved the dances of their day, why shouldn't I love and write these dances of my own time?"

-Notes by Keith Horner