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PROGRAM NOTES

Bennewitz Quartet
March 14, 2023 – 7:30 p.m.
Plymouth Church, UCC

String Quartet in C major, Op. 54, No. 2

Joseph Haydn

Born: Rohrau, Lower Austria, 1732

Died: Vienna, 1809

Composed: 1788

In his early quartets, Haydn laid down the rules for what became one of the most beloved forms of classical music. He established a consistent four-movement structure complete with a minuet or scherzo, with sophisticated motivic transformations and a wide array of moods and musical characters in all movements. The first violin was considered the “leader,” but in reality, all four players in the group were equally important. From the late 1780s on, Haydn was able to build on the strong foundations he had created, and—one of the surest signs of genius—was ready to break his own rules whenever he felt it necessary to do so.

Haydn usually composed his quartets in groups of six that were published under a single opus number. The six works that he wrote in the summer and early fall of 1788 were, however, split up into two groups, and published with two different opus numbers (54 and 55), with three quartets in each

group. The dedicatee of all six quartets was Johann Tost, a violinist who played under Haydn in Prince Esterházy’s orchestra until March 1788. Having married into some wealth, Tost became a successful businessman who actively promoted Haydn’s music in Paris and London. (Haydn dedicated his next set of six string quartets, Op. 64, to Tost as well.)

The C-major quartet from the first Tost set is one of the most unusual that Haydn ever wrote, exuding a spirit of experimentation that never left this composer during his 50-year active career. Two keys—C major and C minor—alternate throughout the work (the first movement being all in major, the second all in minor, and the last two divided between both tonalities). The opening *Vivace* stands out by some surprising general rests and a subsequent jump into a distant key right at the beginning. Mr. Tost must have been a

musician of remarkable gifts if he in fact played the piece, for the first violin climbs to dizzying heights and in general requires a high degree of virtuosity. Equally demanding is the second-movement *Adagio*, in which an eight-measure theme is surrounded by the most extravagant, quasi-improvisatory embellishments. This movement is followed *attacca* (without a break) by the minuet, which also abounds in unexpected turns. The middle section, or trio, is based on a minor-mode variant of the

minuet melody. But the most significant departure from the rules is the slow finale—essentially a lyrical duet between the first violin and the cello, with the other two instruments providing accompanying chords. One expects this *Adagio* to be merely an introduction to a fast concluding movement, but in this case, the introduction completely overshadows the brief *Presto*, and then—most unusually—returns to end the work in a hushed *pianissimo*.

Theme and Variations

Hans Krása

Born: Prague, 1899

Died: Auschwitz, 1944

Composed: 1936

In the 1960s, a musician who had been friends with Hans Krása described him as “a gentle person, a bit decadent, yet pleasant when talked to, albeit quite shy at the same time.” Krása, whose name shows up in several of Franz Kafka’s letters to Milena Jesenská, was an active member of the Prague musical community in the 1920s and ’30s. Today, he is remembered mainly as the composer of *Brundibár*, a children’s opera performed at the Theresienstadt concentration camp, where Krása was deported in 1942. Yet he wrote a great deal of other music that deserves to be discovered. He had studied in Prague under Alexander Zemlinsky, Schoenberg’s friend and former teacher (also his brother-in-law). Later he worked with Albert Roussel in Paris, adding a French touch to his essentially Germanic training. One sign of his growing international recognition was a performance of his *Symphony for Small Orchestra* by the Boston Symphony, under Serge Koussevitzky, in 1926.

Krásá, who had composed a full-length string quartet at the beginning of his career, wrote the present set of variations on an original theme in 1935-36. The theme came from a comedy entitled *Youth at Play* by Adolf Hoffmeister; known as “Anne’s Song,” this number quickly became a hit in Prague. Its straightforward melodic line is presented with some rather unusual harmonies, and this tension between simplicity and sophistication persists throughout the six variations. At first, the tempo increases and the sudden key changes multiply. Then, the cello transforms the theme into a kind of lullaby, a lyrical tune later taken over by the first violin. In the fourth variation, the theme takes on the character of a serenade, as the viola and the cello accompany the melody of the violins with guitar-like *pizzicato* (plucked) chords. But the mood changes after a while; a mysterious and foreboding transition takes us to the fifth variation, marked *quasi fantasia*. It starts out as a fugue, but later it sounds jazzy in one moment, Eastern European the next, to end in a broad and solemn manner. The final variation starts

out as a more sustained fugato that segues into a more agitated section before settling into a quiet conclusion.

The first documented performance of this piece was at Theresienstadt. Along with fellow composers Pavel Haas, Gideon Klein

and Viktor Ullmann, Krása played a major part in the camp's astonishingly intense musical life, before all four of them were taken to Auschwitz to be murdered in the gas chamber.

Five Pieces for String Quartet

Erwin Schulhoff

Born: Prague, 1894

Died: Wülzburg concentration camp, Germany, 1942

Composed: 1923

Erwin Schulhoff (who, like his compatriot Krása, was killed in the Holocaust) was another fascinating figure on the musical scene of the young Republic of Czechoslovakia after World War I. He enjoyed a blossoming international career as a composer-pianist and, at different times during his life, he was influenced by Dada, jazz, atonality and neo-classicism. His political sympathies gradually moved from left-wing liberalism to a growing commitment to Communist ideas. He had a special passion for dancing, as he confessed to Alban Berg in an oft-quoted letter; there are many signs of this throughout his vast catalog of works.

The *Five Pieces for String Quartet* were completed in Prague on December 5, 1923, and first performed on August 8, 1924, at the Festival of the International Society for New Music in Salzburg. The published score was dedicated to Darius Milhaud.

Each of the five pieces takes a dance form or (in one case) a musical genre from a different country and distorts it with a lot of humor. The first movement is called a “Viennese waltz,” but it is notated in 4/4

time as the waltz rhythm is frequently tripped up by extra beats. And Schulhoff used harmonies that one would be hard pressed to find in the works of Johann Strauss, Jr. The second movement, a “Serenade” in 5/8, contains some distant echoes of Spanish music, with its free-flowing melody and a frequently repeated, characteristic cadential formula; some of the plucked chords might allude to guitars. Yet the delicate string writing, with its special techniques such as *col legno* (with the wood of the bow) or *sul ponticello* (near the bridge) transcends geographical boundaries. The third movement, by contrast, takes us back to Schulhoff’s homeland: it is a preciously bitonal Slavonic Dance that would raise the eyebrows of Antonín Dvořák (who, the story goes, once gave a piece of chocolate to the 7-year-old Schulhoff to reward the pianistic prowess of the young prodigy). In the fourth movement, Schulhoff pays homage to Argentinian tango with a personal take on the *milonga*, filled with languorous sensuality. The set ends with what starts out as a dashing, chromatic Italian tarantella, with some unexpected adventures along the way.

String Quartet No. 11 in C major, Op. 61

Antonín Dvořák

Born: Nelahozeves, Bohemia, 1841

Died: Prague, 1904

Composed: 1881

All too often, Dvořák is pigeonholed as a “nationalistic” composer. He was certainly a staunch Czech patriot at a time when the Bohemian lands were not an independent country, and he wrote many works that are emphatically Czech in their inspiration, subject matter, and musical style. And yet, we can’t do this great composer justice if we view him exclusively through a nationalistic lens. Prague lies farther west than Vienna, and Dvořák is, next to his friend and mentor Brahms, perhaps the only other authentic heir to the classic German tradition of symphonic and chamber music. Who else cultivated these forms with such devotion and imagination during the second half of the 19th century? Dvořák’s music is like a tree that, while firmly rooted in his native Czech soil, grew branches that transcended all national boundaries.

One reason for the relative neglect of a masterpiece like the Quartet in C major may be precisely that it doesn’t fit any nationalistic stereotypes. Without a doubt, there are many passages that are immediately recognizable as Czech, based as they are on melodic or rhythmic patterns of folk music. But in this piece, such patterns appear at a remove, as it were, as the harmonic language of the work is exceptionally complex, involving frequent modulations into remote tonalities. This is not to say that a nationalist composer cannot use complex harmonies, only that this work connects at least as firmly and audibly with

the world of Beethoven and Schubert as it does with the music of the Czech lands.

The opening Allegro abounds in grand dramatic gestures and thematic contrasts. It is very organically constructed, with an intense development of the material presented right at the beginning. An exquisitely romantic Adagio follows, with lush textures and some harmonic progressions that look into the future as few passages in Dvořák do. The opening motif of the third-movement Scherzo is derived from a similar turn in the first movement. Interestingly, it is not in the home key of C major but rather in the darker A minor, with a spirited Trio section in A major. The latter is the most folk-like section in the quartet so far, but even here, the harmonic developments are unusually sophisticated. The finale continues in this glorified folk-music vein, with light-hearted melodies in a very serious setting—entirely in the spirit of Beethoven and Brahms who, after all, also turned to folk music for inspiration in many of their works. There is an exceptionally beautiful and intensely chromatic violin solo just before the end, where Dvořák, within a couple of measures, touches on all twelve tones of the scale in a moment of introspection before the energetic ending.

The strong Viennese characteristics of this quartet surely have something to do with the fact that it was written for the Hellmesberger Quartet, the foremost chamber group in the imperial capital at the time. Writing this work was an exceptionally difficult task for Dvořák, who

discarded an entire movement only to start over from scratch, and finished the quartet only a month before the scheduled premiere. In the event, the performance had to be cancelled due to a fire at the Ringtheater in Vienna, and quartet was first played,

instead, by the Joachim Quartet in Berlin, almost a year later. And for whatever reason, Hellmesberger never seems to have found the time to perform the work that was written for him.

-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.