



CLEVELAND
CHAMBER
MUSIC
SOCIETY

PROGRAM NOTES

Cuarteto Casals
February 22, 2022 – 7:30 p.m.
Plymouth Church, UCC

String Quartet in G minor, Op. 20, No 3

Joseph Haydn

Born: Rohrau, Lower Austria, 1732

Died: Vienna, 1809

Composed: 1772

The six quartets published as Op. 20 mark Haydn's first maturity as a quartet composer. The cycle has long been linked to Haydn's so-called *Sturm und Drang* ("storm and stress") period—a period in the early 1770s during which he wrote more work in a dark, dramatic mood than at any other time in his life. One sign of that dramatic quality is the frequent use of the minor mode, which helps generate a more intense harmonic idiom and express feelings that anticipate the Romantic era.

Op. 20 is the only set of Haydn quartets to contain not just one but two quartets in a minor key. What is more, both are in the minor key all the way through, without a modulation to the major before the end as we would find in many of Haydn's later works. Here as elsewhere, the minor mode goes hand in hand with more complicated harmonies and many surprising rhythmic and metric effects.

In 1772, what we now know as "Viennese Classical style" was still in the early stages of its evolution. A movement like the opening "Allegro con spirito" of Op. 20, No. 3 is already a full-fledged classical sonata form in the usual three sections, with a fairly substantial development section between the exposition and recapitulation. Yet the organization of these sections is not quite the same as we would find in later Haydn: the inner boundaries of the form are not as clear-cut. There is no real second theme to contrast with the first one: instead, the opening theme (which has an asymmetrical, seven-measure structure) dissolves into short motives and figurations whose highly unpredictable succession results in a string of separate (but motivically related) musical events.

The asymmetry continues in the second-movement minuet, which would be quite impossible to dance to. It is a rather dark

movement (a type sometimes referred to a *minuetto serio*, serious minuet) whose phrases are not four but five measures in length. In addition, the first phrase contains a dissonance so harsh that later editors believed it was a mistake and changed it; however, there is no doubt that Haydn really wanted an F natural in the first violin against an F sharp in the second! The *serio* mood continues even in the central Trio section in spite of the switch to a major key. The slow movement is much more than a respite, which may be its function in other quartets; here Haydn gives us an extended instrumental aria, with a development section that is no less complex than that of the Allegro. The first violin and the cello alternate as leaders, yet there is also an

important viola solo, of which there are not many in the early quartets. The last movement resembles the first in that in both the music follows an utterly unpredictable course with asymmetrical phrases, sudden interruptions and unusual modulations. At this point, these devices produce not only “storm and stress” but, as Hans Keller noted in his book *The Great Haydn Quartets*, also introduce “an element of playfulness....profound and pure wit now gains the upper hand.” Yet the ending is more mysterious than humorous with its subdued pianissimo, although, somewhat like the famous “Joke” at the end of the E-flat major Quartet (Op. 33, No. 2), it plays with our expectations of closure and the last note catches us completely off guard.

Cypresses

Antonín Dvořák

Born: Nelahozeves, Bohemia, 1841

Died: Prague, 1904

Composed: 1865/1887

Cypresses (Cypřiše) started life as a cycle of love songs Dvořák wrote at the age of 24. The cycle originally comprised eighteen songs on poems by a contemporary Moravian poet, Gustav Pflieger-Moravský (1833-1875), of which only four were published during Dvořák’s lifetime. Yet the composer put these early efforts to good use two decades later: he reworked eight of them under the title *Love Songs*, op. 83 (1888), and arranged twelve (including the

eight *Love Songs*) for string quartet. These twelve short movements, which were not published in their form for string quartet until 1957, show Dvořák’s exceptional melodic gifts and his ability to present very definite musical characters in the space of only a few measures. There is great diversity in tempo, mood and instrumental texture as well, and plenty of nostalgia for a youth that the composer, at the age of 46, felt was already irretrievably lost.

String Quartet No. 3 in D major, Op. 44, No. 1

Felix Mendelssohn

Born: Hamburg, 1809

Died: Leipzig, 1847

Composed: 1838

With eight completed works for string quartet, Mendelssohn contributed more to

the genre than did any other major composer between Beethoven and Bartók. Obviously,

his significance is not merely a quantitative one, however; Mendelssohn brought the same consummate artistry to the string quartet that he lavished on every genre he touched during his all-too-brief career. Mendelssohn was fortunate enough to be born into a wealthy and music-loving family, and he never had to struggle for his survival like so many others had to do. The year 1838 was a particularly happy one in his life. Recently married, the composer and his wife Cécile had their first child in February, and commentators have linked that event to the exuberant spirit of the D-major quartet, written soon afterwards. The opening theme of the first movement shoots up like a rocket; its extraordinary energy pervades the entire movement, except for a few brief moments of introspection. One of the themes stands out in particular: it is a simple melody that keeps repeating the same few notes over and over again, yet its effect is magical. All four instruments play *pianissimo*, in the same rhythm, and time seems to stand still for a moment, before the intense activity resumes.

As a total contrast, the second-movement minuet is surprisingly subdued. Once more, the melody is simple, the harmonies subtle, and the dynamics soft. The same is true of the middle section, although both the key and the texture change there: the tonality shifts to minor, and the first violin theme is

fast-moving and delicate. After the recapitulation of the minuet, there is a coda based on the material of the middle section. In third place comes a movement marked *Andante espressivo ma con moto*—neither too slow nor too fast, but moving at a comfortable, gentle speed. The tender melody of the first violin is accompanied by gossamer figurations in the second, and *pizzicato* (plucked) notes in the viola and cello. The entire movement is gentle and preserves a delicate balance that is only called into question once, before the end, when the rhythmic continuity is suddenly interrupted and the first violin plays a brief cadenza. Then the music returns to its initial state of calm.

Presto con brio—the finale picks up where the first movement left off, with even more zest if that is possible. With a profusion of melodic material that sometimes recalls the Italian Symphony (1831-33), the movement proceeds with unflagging energy. The development contains an extraordinary episode when the triumphant main theme is suddenly played *pianissimo*, and another where Mendelssohn indulges his love of counterpoint. Yet the independent melodic lines of the four instruments soon merge together for the glorious conclusion.

-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.