



CLEVELAND
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PROGRAM NOTES

Cuarteto Casals
March 5, 2019 – 7:30 p.m.
Plymouth Church, UCC

String Quartet in B-flat major, K. 458 (“Hunt”)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Born: Salzburg, 1756

Died: Salzburg, 1791

Composed: 1784

What do we get if a genius, who can write masterpieces faster than a copyist can copy them, makes a conscious effort to outdo himself and to show an esteemed older colleague – and the musical world – the full extent of his abilities? Answer: the six Mozart quartets dedicated to Joseph Haydn.

For once, Mozart took his time with these string quartets. It was in 1783 that he announced his decision to write a series of six quartets (quartets were usually composed and published in groups of six); but only one work – the quartet in G – had been written by that time. The set was not completed until a year and a half later, in January 1785. It had taken Mozart that long to formulate an artistic response to Haydn’s Op. 33 quartets which were published and 1781 and written, in the composer’s own words, “in a new and special way.” Haydn was referring, among other things, to the absolute equality of the four instruments and a more rigorous way of developing the themes. It was quite a lesson to digest, and

it involved “long and arduous work,” as Mozart himself admitted in his famous dedicatory letter to “my dear friend Haydn.”

The quartet in B flat, the fourth in the set of six, received the nickname “Hunt” on account of its opening theme, which resembles a horn-call. It is a lighthearted melody, but in its elaboration, playful and serious elements are mixed so thoroughly that no single adjective can possibly describe the mood of the piece. The way Mozart splits off and plays with what was originally just a tiny ornament of the main theme is an amazing example of musical wit. With a knowing smile, Mozart reveals some unsuspected connections among different ideas here and builds a movement that maximizes both coherence and diversity.

In three of the six “Haydn” quartets, Mozart placed the minuet in second place instead of third, as is more usual in the classical repertoire at large. The present

minuet is serious and dignified – a far cry from the “scherzos” of Haydn’s Op. 33. Only the central “Trio” section strikes a lighter note, with its more pronounced dance character and its jaunty *staccato* accompaniment (short, separated notes) in the second violin and viola parts.

The third movement is one of Mozart’s most profound Adagios (the slow movements of the other five “Haydn” quartets all have the faster “Andante” tempo marking). The lyrical melodies of the movement, passed back and forth between the first violin and the cello, are accompanied by some achingly beautiful harmonies in the middle voices. The formal conventions of the time call for a repeat of the same material, the first time ending outside the home key, the second time returning to the initial tonality; as a happy result, we get to hear the same heavenly music not once but twice.

The last movement is built on a contradance-like theme, started by the first

violin without any accompaniment. In a playful move, Mozart delays assembling the usual four-part harmony, and often contrasts full and incomplete instrumental textures throughout the movement. Yet in the central development section, he includes a brief episode where the main theme is treated as a fugue, touching upon several foreign keys. Then the dance-like opening returns in its original form, and the playful mood continues to the very end.

Haydn was very touched by Mozart’s quartets. During one of his stays in Vienna, he heard the new works performed by Mozart, his father Leopold, and two friends. Afterwards, Haydn said to Leopold Mozart: “I tell you before God as an honest man that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by reputation. He has taste, and what is more, the most profound knowledge of composition.” It was probably the highest praise ever given by one great composer to another.

String Quartet No. 6 in F minor, Op. 80

Felix Mendelssohn

Born: Hamburg, 1809

Died: Leipzig, 1847

Composed: 1847

One can say without exaggeration that the F-minor quartet is unlike any other work Mendelssohn ever composed. The dark tragic tone of this work is extremely rare in the music of this master who was typically drawn to the sunny side of life. But on May 14, 1847, his beloved sister Fanny Hensel died of a stroke at the age of 41. She was an extremely talented composer and pianist and a true soul mate to her brother. Felix was devastated. This tempestuous and visionary string quartet remained the last piece of music he completed, for he was to share his sister’s fate before the year was out, succumbing to a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 38 on November 4.

The very opening of the F-minor is unusual, with its nervous tremolos, sudden accents and dramatic crescendos. All of these devices had a long history going back

to the time of Haydn and Mozart, but Mendelssohn took them to a whole new level of intensity and expressivity. Some rather daring harmonic progressions and piercing high notes in the first violin add to the effect. Many minor-mode movements contain a modulation to the major towards the end, and this first movement is no exception; however, in a move not often seen, the key changes back to minor for the final *stretto* (concluding section in a faster tempo).

A scherzo movement follows, though Mendelssohn of course did not use that word here, as jokes (which is what the word *scherzo* means) were the furthest thing from his mind at this time. Yet the fast $\frac{3}{4}$ meter and the sharp rhythmic and dynamic contrasts leave no doubt as to the stylistic origins of this *Allegro assai*. Even the trio, or

middle section, brings little relief. Mysteriously, it begins with the viola and cello playing an unaccompanied melody in unison to which the two violins subsequently add their counterpoint. More subdued and with no abrupt changes, the trio is nevertheless filled with some inner tension of its own. After the recapitulation of the scherzo, the movement ends with a brief return of the trio—a Beethovenian strategy that Mendelssohn made thoroughly his own here.

The sublimely beautiful Adagio follows conventional formal lines up to a point. At a given moment during the

otherwise regular recapitulation, however, Mendelssohn inserted a violently dissonant section, as if his emotions suddenly got the better of him. This moment passes rather fast, though, and the music regains its composure, ending with the same ethereal sounds with which it began.

In the fourth movement, the drama erupts again. The tremolos of the first movement return; the melody is characterized by agitated syncopations and arrow-like scalar passages. There is no major-mode relief at the end; the quartet ends with what truly sounds like a cry of despair.

String Quartet No. 14 in C-sharp minor, Op. 131

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: Bonn, 1770

Died: Vienna, 1827

Composed: 1825-26

In the fall of 1825, Beethoven completed the commission for three string quartets he had received from Prince Galitzin of Russia. (The “Galitzin” quartets are, in order of composition, Op. 127, 132, and 130.) Work on these magnificent compositions resulted in a proliferation of ideas for string quartets that compelled Beethoven to continue writing in this medium, and in the following year he proceeded to compose two more quartets, the present masterpiece in C-sharp minor and his final work in the genre, the F-major quartet, Op. 135. (His very last completed composition, then, was the substitute finale for Op. 130, one of the “Galitzin” quartets, which originally ended with the “Great Fugue.”)

Free from any considerations a commission might have imposed, Beethoven moved even further away from the conventions of quartet-writing than he had done in the “Galitzin” quartets. An external sign of this is the layout in seven movements, played without a break—certainly a major departure from the norms that leaves the listener totally unable to predict the course the work will take at the next turn. But form in Beethoven is always

inseparable from content, and the revolutionary structure of this quartet was made necessary by the exceptional emotional range of what Beethoven had to say.

Beethoven had ended his previous quartet, Op. 130, with the “Great Fugue.” Op. 131 *begins* with a fugue, though a very different one: whereas the “Great Fugue” contains many interruptions and tempo changes (to the point where it almost resembles a multi-movement composition), the opening movement of the C-sharp minor Quartet is characterized by a textural unity reminiscent of the fugues of Bach. The theme, whose accented notes outline the harsh interval of an augmented second, is developed according to the traditional rules of counterpoint, but a series of chromatic modulations carry it to tonal regions that would have been beyond any other composer’s imagination. Yet in Beethoven, it all seems to evolve naturally, just as the acceleration of the motion (from quarter-notes to eighths) happens in a totally seamless fashion. The tone remains serious and tension-laden as the contrapuntal development culminates in a restatement of the theme (which the cello

plays in an augmented form, that is, at half the original speed).

The long tonal voyage having ended on the C-sharp on which it began, Beethoven simply moves it up a half-step to D, the key of the second-movement “Allegro molto vivace.” Here is music of great vitality and classical grace; some commentators have even detected the influence of folk music. And yet there are a few moments of hesitation and introspection even here. Also, it ends in a surprisingly understated manner, breaking into a short instrumental quasi-recitative that, with a cadenza-like flourish for first violin, makes up movement 3, which lasts less than a minute. It leads, however, to the longest of the quartet’s movements, a 14-minute set of variations that occupies the central position, not only literally (being No. 4 in the seven-movement structure) but also in terms of its musical significance.

Like many of Beethoven’s late variation sets (such as the *Diabelli Variations* or the last movement of the final piano sonata, Op. 111), a theme of extreme simplicity becomes the vehicle for a “brilliant chain of revelations,” to borrow a felicitous expression from William Kinderman’s book on Beethoven. The melody is shared by the two violins in its first presentation, followed by an ornamented repeat as first variation, with no change in tempo or meter. Variation 2, however, begins to speed up the tempo in a gentle and playful way; the melody is carried by the first violin and the cello as the two middle voices provide a soft chordal accompaniment. Variation 3 contains an unmistakable allusion to the first movement of the A-minor quartet (Op. 132); only here the same dotted theme is heard in the major mode, marked *dolce* (“sweet”) and *lusinghiero* (“alluring”). The voices follow the strict contrapuntal rules of a canon; the first half of the theme is developed in two parts (cello-violin), the second half in four. In Variation 4, the tempo slows down to Adagio; the ornamentation is lush and the polyphonic relationships of the instrument extremely complex.

By contrast, in Variation 5 the theme is “deconstructed” to its bare essentials; little more than a harmonic skeleton remains, enlivened by a faster tempo (“Allegretto”) and the syncopated entries of the instruments. The climax of the movement is the hymn-like Variation 6 (“Adagio ma non troppo e semplice”), which begins *sotto voce* (in a subdued voice); eventually, an unassuming little rhythmic figure appears in the cello that, in Kinderman’s words, “threatens to disrupt the discourse of the other instruments” and eventually invades the other parts as well. The variation culminates, to quote Kinderman one more time, in “an elaborate cadenza-like passage for each of the four soloists in turn (reminiscent of the vocal cadenzas for four soloists in the Credo of the *Missa solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony).” A short recall of the theme in its original form leads into a final variation, in which the theme, played by the second violin and the viola, is surrounded by constant trills in the first violin. (The trill is a particularly important expressive device in many of Beethoven’s works.) However, this variation breaks off before the entire theme has been heard, and most unexpectedly, a new movement begins.

This movement (No. 5), a jocular Presto in E major, is a total contrast to the preceding slow movement in every respect. Another distinguished writer on Beethoven, Martin Cooper, qualifies its theme as “simple to the point of grotesque” and notes that it is “treated comically” in the course of its development. In fact, the sudden halts and abrupt changes in instrumental technique (connected legato notes one moment, brief and playful staccatos the next) unmistakably designate this movement as a scherzo, although Beethoven did not choose to use that name. One of the most extraordinary effects is the *sul ponticello* (playing close to the bridge) appearing towards the end of the movement; it is a technique that doesn’t occur anywhere else in the classical quartet repertoire. Although the movement lacks a distinct “trio” section, it does introduce an element of contrast by juxtaposing a *staccato* and a *legato* theme that are rhythmically

similar but quite different in their musical personality.

A short "Adagio" movement (No. 6), a lament that alludes to the fugue theme of the first movement, serves as a bridge to the tempestuous finale (No. 7), which opens with a characteristic "riding theme." A little later, the same fugue theme is transformed into a passionate dramatic utterance. The finale has its own contrapuntal episodes,

but rapid passagework and variations on the "riding theme" predominate. After a more contemplative passage containing many *ritenutos* (where the tempo momentarily slows down), the momentum rises again, and the agitated motion continues to the end, despite a brief moment of last-minute hesitation just a few seconds before the final chords.

-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.