



CLEVELAND  
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## PROGRAM NOTES

### Ehnes Quartet

November 13, 2018 – 7:30 p.m.

*Plymouth Church, UCC*

#### **String Quartet in C minor, Op. 18, No. 4**

##### **Ludwig van Beethoven**

*Born: Bonn, 1770*

*Died: Vienna, 1827*

*Composed: 1799-1800*

When the young Beethoven left his native Bonn for Vienna in 1792, his patron, Count Waldstein, sent him on his way with the words: “With the help of assiduous labor you shall receive Mozart’s spirit from Haydn’s hands.” What the count meant was that, even though Mozart had died the previous year, Beethoven could still study with Haydn, the other great Viennese composer. Things didn’t quite work out that way, though, for Haydn and Beethoven, for a number of reasons, didn’t get along very well and the composition lessons never really got off the ground. Yet Waldstein’s words were prophetic on another level, as they implied that Beethoven could some day inherit the mantle of the two older masters. And in fact, once installed in Vienna, Beethoven lost no time in claiming his place as *im Bunde der Dritte* (to quote a famous phrase from Beethoven’s favorite poet, Schiller, meaning “the third in the alliance”). Having absorbed the style of Haydn and

Mozart during his first Viennese years, he immediately began to put his own personal stamp on that style. With his first 20 opus numbers, published between 1795 and 1801, he thoroughly assimilated *and* carried on the genres of concerto, piano sonata, and chamber music; by 1799-1800, he was ready to write his First Symphony.

The six string quartets of Op. 18, written around the same time as the First Symphony, exemplify these simultaneous acts of taking possession and making profound changes at once. (It is somewhat like moving into an old house and starting to remodel right away.) The influence of Beethoven’s predecessors can frequently be felt, and scholars have shown that there is much in these quartets that goes back to compositional essays from the Bonn period. Yet the set as a whole is nothing less than revolutionary: it includes movements (such as the slow movement of the F major quartet or the mysterious “La Malinconia” from the

B-flat major) that have no precedents whatsoever in the history of the string quartet, and in general, it makes obvious on every page that a major new voice has appeared on the scene.

The fourth quartet in the set is written in the ominous tonality of C minor. Mozart had endowed this key with deeply tragic connotations that would stay with Beethoven in such works as the *Pathétique* sonata, the Fifth Symphony and the last piano sonata (Op. 111). In the string quartet (as often in Beethoven's other C-minor works), dramatic excitement is expressed by frequent offbeat accents, harsh chordal sonorities and other surprising gestures. Yet there are also playful moments, as in the second theme of the first movement which, as it has often been pointed out, shares its melodic outline with one of Beethoven's most cheerful works, the "Duet for two obbligato eyeglasses" for viola and cello. In many of his works, Beethoven replaced the Mozartian minuet with a scherzo. In the C-minor quartet (as in a few other of his

## String Quartet in E minor, Op. 83

### Edward Elgar

*Born: Broadheath, nr. Worcester, England, 1857*

*Died: Worcester, 1934*

*Composed: 1918*

One hundred years old this year, the E-minor string quartet—together with its companions, the Violin Sonata, Op. 82 and the Piano Quintet, Op. 84—represents a rare foray into chamber music by a composer better known for his orchestral and choral works. In his early sixties, Sir Edward Elgar was acutely aware of a younger generation of radical-minded composers emerging on the scene. He wanted show the world that the musical idiom of 19th-century Romanticism had lost neither its appeal nor its ability to do things "that had never been done before," as he told a friend, speaking of

works) he included *both* scherzo and minuet, eliminating the slow movement instead. It is true, though, that the scherzo has the *form*, if not the tempo, of a slow movement; with its fugal beginning, it would appear to be a close cousin of the Andante from the First Symphony. Scored in a bright and sunny C major, it also has the wit and ingenuity of many a Beethovenian scherzo.

With the Minuet, we are back in C minor and, accordingly, it is a serious and brooding piece, whose atmosphere is only temporarily relieved by a more light-hearted trio in A-flat major. The way the conclusion of Trio is left open to prepare for the return of the minuet is a thoroughly modern touch.

The last movement is a spirited Rondo, but the dark C-minor tonality is preserved all the way through (except for one brief episode). The Mozartian models from the C-minor Piano Concerto (K. 491) and the C-minor Serenade (K. 388) are very much in evidence, yet only Beethoven could have written the "Prestissimo" coda with its entirely unexpected ending.

the middle movement of the Quartet.

Tinged with modal inflections and filled with subtle rhythmic and harmonic gestures, the first movement opens in an atmosphere that Elgar himself described as "phantom-like." The mystery eventually gives way to some moments in turn intensely lyrical and passionately extroverted, as Elgar transforms traditional sonata form in highly original ways.

The second movement has *Piacevole* ("Pleasant") for its tempo marking, and it goes out of its way to project a gentle and peaceful image. Elgar's wife Alice called

the opening theme “captured sunshine,” and the music maintains its sunny disposition throughout, and even assumes the character of a romantic serenade at certain moments when the first violin and the cello play broken chords evoking a guitar.

Lady Elgar—the daughter of a general—had a striking metaphor for the last movement as well, when she likened it to the “Gallop of Squadrons” (as quoted by Diana McVeagh in her 2007 book *Elgar the Music Maker*). The closeness of World War I, which ended shortly before the quartet

was completed, may have something to do with this thought association, but it is more light cavalry than heavy artillery. The sharply profiled rhythm of the opening theme may evoke images of horseback riding, but there are plenty of lyrical, singing moments here as well. Written in the peaceful surroundings of a rented cottage in the countryside, the Quartet maintains a sense of classic equilibrium at a time when great revolutions, musical and otherwise, were taking place in the world.

## String Quartet No. 5

### Béla Bartók

*Born: Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary [now Sînnicolau Mare, Romania], 1881*

*Died: New York, 1945*

*Composed: 1934*

The string quartets of Béla Bartók have long been recognized as peaks of 20<sup>th</sup>-century chamber music. In these six masterworks, Bartók created a classical sense of harmony and balance using entirely new and non-classical means—an achievement to which few of his contemporaries can lay claim.

Each of the six quartets has a different movement structure. The Fifth follows a symmetrical five-movement layout, with a scherzo at the center, framed by two slow movements (Nos. 2 and 4) and two fast ones as Nos. 1 and 5. This scheme, which makes for a regular alternation of fast and slow tempos, actually results in a seven-fold symmetry, since the central scherzo is itself in an A-B-A form.

The main theme of the first movement grows out of a single note, repeated many times by the four instruments in rhythmic unison. Similarly to the first movement of the Fourth Quartet, this Allegro follows sonata form, and the contrast among the various themes (the opening ostinato, the angular rhythms of the second theme and the long legato lines of

the third) propels the movement on its path. Bartók’s fondness for mirror symmetries is further expressed in the thematic inversions during the recapitulation: in that section, all the themes return “upside down,” with ascending intervals substituted for descending ones and vice versa.

The second movement is one of Bartók’s so-called “night musics”—a gripping evocation of the mysterious noises of the night as heard by a solitary observer lost in contemplation. A theme of an almost Romantic tenderness, harmonized with conventional triads that sound entirely non-conventional in their 20<sup>th</sup>-century context, emerges out of the isolated trills of the opening, representing the voice of the individual. The tremolos and pizzicatos that soon appear, including pizzicatos with the nail of the left index finger, create an eerie atmosphere, which is relieved by a return of the pure chords of the earlier melodic section. True to his concept of symmetry that governs the entire quartet, Bartók returns to the opening trills at the very end.

The third movement is a scherzo in

“Bulgarian rhythm,” that is, in the characteristic mixed meters often found in the folk music of the Balkan nation. The basic pattern of the scherzo is one-two-three-four one-two one-two-three (in a rather fast tempo). Two different melodic motifs are made to fit into the “regular irregularity” of the rhythm: an idea that moves up and down in a chain of thirds, and another one that evokes Hungarian folk music with its melodic outline. The Trio section (which is the center of symmetry for the entire work) brings a particularly striking folk melody played by the viola in its high register, answered by the cello, against the agitated figurations of the first violin. The return of the scherzo is a free recomposition rather than a literal repeat, again involving inversion of the themes.

In many ways, the fourth-movement Andante harks back to the second movement: again we hear isolated gestures and mysterious noises gradually giving rise to more sustained melodies. But this time, Bartók includes an additional element: a powerful cry in the form of a terse motif of

only two notes—an ascending minor third. This motif becomes the basis of a passionate middle section that is the total emotional opposite of the quiet and meditative Adagio. A few slow pizzicato chords played by the cello serve to bring some calm to the final measures of the movement.

The music of the last movement is driven forward by rambunctious dance rhythms and playful imitations (as though the instruments were playing catch). The many repeated notes recall the ostinatos of the first movement (another symmetrical touch), but the earlier thematic contrasts have all but disappeared. A startling episode occurs just before the end: a passage marked “Allegretto con indifferenza” where the second violin plays an intentionally banal little melody to the “meccanico” accompaniment of the viola. When the first violin takes over the melody a jarring half-step higher, the joke becomes cruel, and is finally brushed aside by a return of a fast tempo and a mad rush which will last to the end.

-Peter Laki

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