



CLEVELAND  
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SOCIETY

## PROGRAM NOTES

**Juilliard String Quartet**  
**November 27, 2018 – 7:30 p.m.**  
*Plymouth Church, UCC*

### **String Quartet in D major, Op. 18, No. 3**

#### **Ludwig van Beethoven**

*Born: Bonn, 1770*

*Died: Vienna, 1827*

*Composed: 1798*

In 1798-1800, when Beethoven was composing his first set of string quartets—published as Op. 18—Mozart had been dead for nearly a decade, but Haydn, in his late sixties, was still actively composing. Haydn and his rebellious former student even found themselves in direct competition as both had been commissioned by Prince Franz Joseph Lobkowitz to write a set of quartets. But Haydn only finished two quartets out of six that had been planned (these were eventually published as Op. 77), and left the field to the young genius whom he used to call, jokingly, the “Grand Mogul.”

The “Grand Mogul” had learned a great deal from his elders, yet even in his earliest Viennese works, there can be no doubt that a new and completely individual voice had appeared on the scene. Even in the D-major Quartet, which comes third in the published set but was actually the very first string quartet Beethoven ever wrote, the

composer was surprisingly innovative, perhaps even more so than in the other quartets of Op. 18. Its opening, with its unaccompanied leap of a minor seventh, is like nothing we could find in Haydn or Mozart, and everything that follows is equally unprecedented. Beethoven’s ability to develop entire movements from tiny motivic ideas is already in evidence here, as that minor seventh (or its rhythm, with even, long-drawn-out whole notes) pervades almost the whole Allegro. The number of keys visited is also greater than usual: tonalities not closely related to the central D major are used freely, resulting in an exciting and utterly unpredictable harmonic plan.

Similar observations can be made of the other movements as well. The second movement is based on a gentle theme proceeding in equal eighth-notes; yet it can become quite dramatic in the course of its

development. The choice of key (B-flat major, a significant distance from D major) foretells more harmonic adventures, which do not fail to occur. The third movement is marked neither Minuet nor Scherzo but simply Allegro. It is closer to a scherzo character since it is not particularly dance-like and abounds in offbeat accents that appear in so many of Beethoven's scherzos. Its first phrase oscillates between major and minor in a most unusual fashion. The tonality eventually settles in D major, only to be displaced by an agitated trio (middle

section) in D minor. In an unusual move, Beethoven wrote out the return of the scherzo in full, with large portions placed an octave higher than the first time. The vivacious finale again unfolds from a single rhythmic idea (that of a swift eighth-note motion in 6/8 time) with occasional interruptions and other surprises. The ending is probably the only point where Beethoven clearly follows Haydn's lead. The way he turns the first three notes of the theme into a *pianissimo* ending is an obvious bow to the older master.

## **One Hundred Years Grows Shorter Over Time**

### **Lembit Beecher**

*Born: 1980*

*Composed: 2018*

The composer has provided the following comments on his piece, commissioned for the Juilliard Quartet in honor of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of South Mountain Concerts:

As I began writing I thought about the span of 100 years: how, over time, our lives turn into stories told by our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, the complications and subtleties of life crystalizing into anecdotes as actual memories fade. The three movements of this quartet are like successive generations retelling the same story. Musical material is passed from movement to movement, but along the way it is reinterpreted and reshaped into something quite different. The movements all share a similar obsessiveness

of character, moments of exuberance, and a tendency for long lines to emerge out of faster, restless music, but each movement is shorter, slower, and more focused than the previous one. As I wrote, I kept thinking about a melody, a waltz written by my Estonian granduncle Ilmar Kiiiss, now in his mid-90s. He had written the waltz in the 1950s after the Soviet occupation of Estonia and I had first played this music with my violinist brother when we were teenagers. Over the years we have kept returning to it and I gradually let the waltz into this piece. It is hidden or just hinted at in the first two movements but in the third it appears fully realized if a bit scratchy, as if an old recording, both beautiful and out-of-context, was re-discovered by a future generation.

## String Quartet in F major, Op. 96 (“American”)

**Antonín Dvořák**

*Born: Nelahozeves, Bohemia, 1841*

*Died: Prague, 1904*

*Composed: 1893*

From 1892 to 1895, Dvořák served as the director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York. He spent the summer vacation of 1893 in Spillville, Iowa, a village that was home to a sizable Czech community. Dvořák obviously went there to be in the company of his own compatriots, but at the same time he was very interested in whatever he could learn about American traditional music. He felt that his mission in America was to help create a distinctly American style of musical composition, and he was convinced that American art music had to be based on the country’s folk music. He wanted to get to know Negro spirituals—his student Harry T. Burleigh was of great help in this endeavor. In addition, he attended a performance of Native American songs and dances during his stay in Iowa. Traces of these experiences—and others, since the third movement contains the near-quote of a birdsong Dvořák had heard at Spillville—may be found in his “American” Quartet. The most recognizable folk element is the use of the pentatonic scale, used in all the most important melodies of the work. Yet pentatonicism could also be found in European folk traditions and had been present in Dvořák’s music before the American trip. It goes to show that one often responds most strongly to experiences that relate to what one already knows. (As

an interesting coincidence, we might mention that a younger contemporary that Dvořák would never have heard of, a Frenchman by the name of Claude Debussy, wrote his own string quartet, one that also famously uses pentatonicism, in the very same year, 1893.)

What makes the “American” Quartet a masterpiece is the fact that Dvořák was able to express himself perfectly through the use of the pentatonic idiom adopted from outside sources. Although the melodies are fairly simple in themselves, they were subjected to some fairly sophisticated thematic development, and the accompaniments (whether figurative or contrapuntal) show great care and extreme variety, as does the planning of key changes, which always avoids the commonplace. In other words, Dvořák assimilated the folk-inspired materials into the art-music idiom he had inherited from Beethoven, Schubert and Brahms, and in this sense, the “American” Quartet is a thoroughly “European” creation.

Dvořák was one of the last composers to speak with an individual voice while using the conventional forms of the Romantic era. In this sense, his work stands at the end of that “golden age” in music where there was as yet no gulf whatsoever between artists and their audiences.

*-Peter Laki*

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*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.*

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