

Thirty-sixth Season — Second Concert

THE MOIR STRING QUARTET

David Zaretsky, violin

Wai-Tin Kuo, violin

Samuel Arnold, viola

Michael Reynolds, cello



Houston Friends of Music
The Shepherd School of Music

Chamber



Music

Series

1996
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1997



Thirty-seventh Season — Second Concert

THE MUIR STRING QUARTET

Peter Zazofsky, violin

Wei-Pin Kuo, violin

Steven Ansell, viola

Michael Reynolds, cello

Stude Concert Hall

Alice Pratt Brown Hall

Rice University

October 15, 1996

8:00 p.m.

PROGRAM

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Quartet in F Major, Op. 18, No. 1

Allegro con brio

Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato

Scherzo: Allegro molto

Allegro

Béla Bartók
(1881-1945)

Quartet No. 3, Sz. 85

Prima parte: Moderato

Seconda parte: Allegro

Recapitulazione de la prima parte: Moderato

Coda: Allegro molto

INTERMISSION

Johannes Brahms
(1833-1897)

Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 67

Vivace

Andante

Agitato (Allegretto non troppo)

Poco allegretto con variazioni

The Muir Quartet is represented by Arts Management Group, Inc., 150 5th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011

The concert this evening is dedicated to the memory of Glen E. Razak, Jr., and is made possible through the generosity of family and friends.

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PROGRAM NOTES

Quartet in F Major, Op. 18, No. 1 Ludwig van Beethoven

Beethoven's Opus 18 Quartets were written towards the end of his first decade in Vienna. In 1792 he had arrived from Germany days before his 22nd birthday with an entree into the homes of the most prominent members of the music-loving Viennese nobility, who welcomed him into their substantial musical lives. At the end of four years, he had published, among other things, the three Piano Trios of Op. 1, three Trios for Strings, Op. 9, as well as the three Op. 10 Piano Sonatas—small sets by the standard of the day, but already imprinted with his formidable inventive and dramatic genius, and well received by his publishers and the public. In the meantime, his former teacher, Franz Josef Haydn, found himself newly inspired by Mozart's last quartets, and taking up residence in Vienna, set himself to writing two final sets of six quartets each, the Apponyi Quartets (Opp. 71 and 74) of 1793, and the Op. 76 of 1797. The significance of making his mark in this medium was thus not lost on Beethoven. His sketchbooks show that from 1794 until 1799, the year in which most of the writing was done, he was working with great care on this first set of quartets. During this time he was a regular at the Friday gatherings held at Prince Lichnowsky's home where the Schuppanzigh Quartet played Mozart, Haydn, and others now perhaps unjustly neglected (Beethoven was especially fond of Cherubini). It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of Beethoven's association with this quartet, which ultimately gave him valuable advice about the numbering of the quartets, premiered them, and remained enthusiastic supporters of his music for the duration of his life. These Opus 18 Quartets are dedicated to another important patron, Prince Lobkowitz.

The Quartet in F Major, a technically challenging work, was actually the second in the group to be written (the first being No. 3). Beethoven sent it to his close friend, theology student and violinist Karl Amenda, warning him a year later not to show it to anyone because he had greatly changed it, "having just learned to write quartets properly, as you will see when I send it to you." It is from a written account by this friend of his conversation with Beethoven that we know Beethoven had in mind the tomb scene from *Romeo and Juliet* when he wrote the heart-wrenching second movement (the Adagio marked initially "Les derniers soupers" in a preliminary sketch).

The first movement, *Allegro con brio*, begins with a terse unison motto. The one-bar germ cell on which it is based is repeated 104 times during the course of the movement. A more lyrical two-note, syncopated theme is introduced by a forte scale passage of simplicity and power, followed by a third which combines the main components of the two previous motifs. The exposition closes with the unison scales of the earlier bridge passage. Beethoven deals dramatically with these thematic ideas in the terse development section before melting with masterful economy back into the recapitulation. The second movement, *Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato*, is one of Beethoven's great early tragic statements. It begins in D minor with a long, melodious outpouring in 9/8 rhythm played by the violin to an accompaniment of pulsating lower strings. The interruption of the lilting rhythm in a few climactic places gives the effect of a skipped heartbeat, while a slashing forte periodically intrudes on the lamentations, with which the movement ultimately winds down. The *Scherzo: Allegro molto* which follows, is rollicking throughout. Although technically possessed of a trio section, one can see that already Beethoven has abandoned the traditional minuet-trio of Mozart and Haydn: there is no hint of courtly dance here! The final *Allegro* is a virtuosic work in sonata/rondo form, based on a plummeting scale-like motif bounced from instrument to instrument in a witty game of musical volleyball. Beethoven took full advantage of the good nature and technique of the Schuppanzigh Quartet in presenting them with this movement, for here the lower strings are expected to be fully as versatile as the violins. A feast of thematic material moves along rapidly and the movement ends in a coda-like distillation of the early descending motif played by the middle voices while the cello holds the harmonic line below, as the first violin expands on an exuberant, rising two-note phrase also extracted from the opening theme.

This is the sixth time this work has been performed on a Friends of Music program; it was last played by the Orford Quartet in January 1987.

Program notes by Nora Arns Klein, based in part on those by Harris Goldsmith, with his gracious permission, September, 1996.

Quartet No. 3, Sz. 85 Bela Bartók

Those living today who knew Bartók speak of his personal integrity with reverence. Not himself Jewish and not in any personal danger, he nevertheless removed himself and his family from Hungary in 1940, refusing ever again to speak or write the German language in protest against the spreading political and cultural devastation of Hitler and his collaborators. At great financial cost to himself, he moved to the United States where, unable because of the war to access European funds which were his, he had at times to survive by doing any music-related work he could find, such as arranging his orchestral music for piano. A research position at Columbia University, lecturing at Harvard, and a few concert tours (he was a splendid pianist), kept him going until a small group of colleagues including Benny Goodman, Fritz Reiner, Joseph Szigeti, and Serge Koussevitzky were able to find ways of providing a measure of stability. That he stubbornly rejected all attempts to provide him with monetary gifts is well known. In his wonderful book *Best Regards to Aida*, Hans Heinsheimer, the Director of Symphonic and Operatic Music for Boosey & Hawkes in New York, describes the row which occurred when Bartók discovered a successful plot by his desperate supporters to funnel funds into a royalties account Bartók held with the publisher. It is perhaps a sense of this ferociously uncompromising integrity and purity which permeates Bartók's quartets, making them compelling even to the classically-disposed ear.

What is the origin of his complex and original musical language?

Bartók was born in 1881, within a few years one way or the other, of Stravinsky, Ives, Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, and Varese. His musical education was completely oriented in the Germanic tradition of the Austro-Hungarian Empire: Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, Mozart, Haydn. In his teens he was greatly influenced by Brahms and Dohnányi (studying with the latter). Upon finishing his secondary education, he won a rare scholarship to the Vienna Conservatory, which he turned down in favor of the Music Academy in Budapest, primarily as an act of Hungarian nationalism (or rather, anti-Austrian sentiment) and in part on advice of Dohnányi. At the conservatory, the music of Wagner, Liszt, and Strauss became his intense subjects of study (he would later "discover" Debussy); by his mid-twenties, announcing his intention to serve "the good of Hungary and the Hungarian Nation," he wrote a well-received patriotic symphonic poem "Kossuth" (named for the leader of the failed Hungarian rebellion of the mid 19th century) in the style of Strauss. But he very soon became disenchanted with the "excesses of the Romantics" and made a decisive turn instead towards the study of the peasant music of Hungary, which he had first heard from a family nursemaid. Starting in 1905, together with Kodály, he set out to record in the field the little-known music of the villages and hamlets of Hungary, then Romania, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Turkey. In this music he recognized surviving remnants of the old Greek church modes with their freely changing metrical and rhythmic patterns which he admired not only for the sound of the ancient scales but for their "unique terseness of expression and inexorable rejection of all unessentials." His total immersion in this project gave rise to the inner voice which generated the music we now associate as his. Although musicologists may describe his music as characterized by bi-modality and modal chromaticism, Bartók himself claimed that his entire music was determined by instinct and sensibility, rather than a system. At his Harvard lectures in 1943 he said, "I never created new theories in advance, I hated such ideas. This attitude does not mean that I composed without set plans and without sufficient control. The plans were concerned with the spirit of the new work and with technical problems (for instance, formal structure invoked by the spirit of the work), all more or less instinctively felt, but I never was concerned with general theories to be applied to the works I was going to write." As time passed, and thanks in part to the research which put him in contact with the village folk of all of Eastern Europe, Bartók became much less a nationalist and much more a humanist. Although never politically active, he remained deeply aware of and pained by the social realities around him; as early as 1909 he wrote, "In music only enthusiasm, love, grief and distress have figured as motivating causes—that is, the so-called exalted ideals. Whereas vengeance, caricature, sarcasm are only going to live their musical lives in our times." In his passionate commitment to humanity, he would appear to have shared a faded spirit with Beethoven.

The Third String Quartet of 1927 was written in Bartók's "expressionist" period

which also saw the appearance of *The Miraculous Mandarin* and the two violin sonatas. It is the shortest of the six string quartets, and follows the first by nineteen years. In it, Bartók used for the first time in his quartet writing several instrumental techniques: attacks on the tailpiece of the instrument with the wooden part of the bow, playing over the bridge and fingerboard, and sliding up and down the string with a single finger held down, which combined to conjure up unworldly and combative, percussive sounds making this quartet perhaps the most difficult to assimilate. In form it is compressed into a single movement divided into four sections. Two basic formal units with inscriptions *Prima parte* and *Seconda parte*, each fundamentally different in material and character, are joined to two smaller sections—the *Recapitulazione della prima parte* and the *Coda*, the former a sort of brief resume of the first part, the *Coda* serving as something of a recapitulation of the second part. The sections follow each other in fast-slow-fast-slow order. Short ideas (motivic cells) are treated with constant variation of key and presentation, appearing as canons, in inversion and imitation. The second part, making repeated use of rising fourths and descending minor thirds, has buried within it the equivalent of sonata form. The piece ends with three strident blows simultaneously in the keys of C sharp and D sharp major.

Bartók subsequently wrote three more string quartets and had planned a seventh at the time of his death from leukemia, in 1945.

This is the tenth performance of this work on a Friends of Music program; it was last played by the Emerson Quartet in September 1992.

Program notes © by Nora Avins Klein, September, 1996

Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 67 Johannes Brahms

By his own account, Johannes Brahms composed and discarded more than twenty string quartets before finally creating something that could survive his rigorous judgment. The quartet on tonight's program is the third and last of his published quartets, written in 1876, five years after the publication of the first two.

The most genial of the three, it was composed as Brahms was in a particularly jolly frame of mind. He had recently given up his burdensome post as music director of one of Vienna's leading orchestras, he had come to terms with his first symphony after fourteen years of gestation—both the symphony and the quartet were completed during the same summer—and he was at the threshold of the most masterful and productive period of his life.

In a teasing letter to his publisher, he sent him the work with a request for the astounding sum of 5,000 taler, gradually reducing the sum in the course of the letter: "From this you will deduct 1000 taler out of innate meanness; for keeping you waiting 500; for only two key signatures in B flat 250 tlr.; for cigars, tobacco, oedekolonie [read aloud to decipher and don't forget the soft j] 750 tlr.; because of mistakes in tallying and calculating another 1000 will be lost, and 200 tlr. you had loaned to me, that leaves a remainder of 800 tlr." He hinted at laundry bills for shirts and pocket handkerchiefs yet to come, and asked for the rest to be paid "punctually in quarterly installments of at least 10 tlr. in Hanoverian bank notes," a currency they both knew was worthless, commenting that he had only accepted it at a discount.

In this high-spirited mood he dedicated the quartet to his good friend, Prof. Dr. Theodor Wilhelm Engelmann, amateur cellist and one of the discoverers of bacterial photosynthesis. "I will probably publish a string quartet shortly and may need a physician in attendance (like the first) [a reference to the dedication of Op. 51 to the surgeon, Dr. Theodor Billroth] no question of a forceps delivery, but merely a matter of standing by. There is no violoncello solo in it, but a viola solo so tender that you may well change your instrument for its sake!"

Soon after, the work was premiered by the quartet of Brahms's long-time friend, Joseph Joachim, who was also entrusted with the bowings and even the fingerings of the first edition.

It is not easy to know how to describe this piece. In outward form a perfectly ordinary quartet, constituted of four traditional movements, there is nevertheless almost nothing ordinary about this work. For one thing, it features the viola, normally the most difficult of the four for the ear to pick out; until the Bartók quartets, it is the most glamorous work for that instrument in the repertoire. And then there is the first movement. It starts innocently enough in B flat, 6/8 time, sounding for all the world like Mozart's "Hunt" quartet. Eight measures later, we are jolted into remembering that this is Brahms, not Mozart: six eighth notes can be ordered in two ways, either in two groups of three, or in three groups of two. After the opening phrase, Brahms pushes the music abruptly from the first grouping to the second, then switches back and forth in a dazzling display of metric ambiguity so that the listener hearing this work for the first time can be forgiven for wondering what is going on. Throughout the movement Brahms toys with the many ways these two groupings can be juxtaposed; there are even times when the musicians play in differing but coinciding time signa-

tures—a common practice in 20th century music, but rare for the 19th century. It is worth remembering the opening phrase of this movement, as well as the sinuous second subject (in F minor) played by all four strings in unison eighth notes but in contrary motion, for we shall encounter them again.

The *Adagio* is one of Brahms's gorgeous instrumental songs-without-words, cast quite normally in ABA form. What is unusual here is the A section when it returns: instead of repeating the instrumentation of solo violin versus accompaniment, the entire quartet plays as one instrument, with solo and accompaniment so intertwined that one can scarcely disentangle them. It is a remarkable *tour de force*.

But the most striking movement is the *Allegretto*, with its solo viola throughout. It is curious that in his letter to Engelmann, Brahms referred to it as "tender." By the time of publication, he had changed the designation to read *Agitato* (*Allegretto non troppo*), and indeed the violist must convey agitated melancholy. The ABA *intermezzo* is a genre perfected and probably invented by Brahms.

With the fourth movement we have returned to unadulterated sunshine. This is a theme and variations, a choice for a last movement which harks back to the classical era of Haydn and Mozart, and in keeping with the mood of the beginning of the first movement. In this case, we have a set of seven variations and long coda on a folk-like theme in 2/4 time. At least, it begins by sounding like a folk tune, but the Brahms in it peeks out irrepressibly by virtue of the chromaticisms and distant harmonies of the second half of the theme, and the abrupt end of the theme with virtually the same two bars as the beginning—a sort of musical palindrome. The variations proceed in the usual way, with increasing complexity and choice of more distant keys. By the sixth variation we are in G flat major, with syncopated legato upper strings against a pizzicato cello and then viola, all played piano, and *molto dolce*: a veil has obscured the sun. A sudden change in tempo and key signature restores the sun, and we are in the last variation. But now, instead of a simple 2/4 time, we are in 6/8, also a duple time but one which easily allows for the triple division of the beat. The theme is presented in outline form only, but somehow the inner voices sound vaguely familiar—soon these inner voices become the outer voices, still sounding awfully familiar—and it will dawn on the listener that the first movement has insinuated itself into the last with perfect ease, and that the themes of the first movement are in fact worked out in such a way that both movements are compatible with each other and represent alternate versions of each other.

The work ends in a joyous celebration of both movements simultaneously, and one feels sure that the famous surgeon, Theodor Billroth, was correct when he wrote ruefully to the famous scientist, Theodor Engelmann, that Brahms's dedications of his quartets to them would keep their names alive far longer than would any of their own work.

This is the fourth performance of this work on a Friends of Music program; it was last played by the Colorado Quartet in December 1986.

Program notes © 1996 by Syra Avins, cellist and author of the forthcoming Johannes Brahms, Life and Letters. Oxford University Press (1997), which will be the first comprehensive collection of the letters of Brahms in English. Her discovery that Brahms studied cello as a child is developed in an article appearing in the October 1996 issue of The Strad.

The Muir String Quartet

Now in its sixteenth season, the Muir String Quartet is acknowledged as one of the world's most powerful and insightful ensembles. Winner of the 1980 Evian competition and the 1981 Naumburg Award, the quartet has performed in major venues throughout America and Europe. In keeping with its namesake, the great naturalist and Sierra Club founder, John Muir, the quartet donates proceeds from its recordings for EcoClassics to a variety of environmental and conservation organizations. Its recording of two Beethoven quartets on this label received a 1995 Grammy nomination. The Muir can also be heard on recordings for ADDA/Qualiton and EMI, for which it received two Grand Prix du Disque awards. The Muir has commissioned and premiered new works by important composers such as Sheila Silver, Richard Danielpour, Joan Tower, and Richard Wilson. The members of the Muir String Quartet are all graduates of the Curtis Institute of Music where they studied chamber music with Felix Galimir and members of the Guarneri Quartet. The quartet is now in residence at Boston University's School for the Arts.

Peter Zazofofsky plays a violin made by Carlo Bergonzi in 1744; Wei-Pin Kuo's violin is from the school of Storioni (early 19th century); Steven Ansell's viola was made by Xavier Siloni in 1805; and Michael Reynolds plays the "Oliver" cello by one of the Amatis, dated 1615.