

MUIR STRING QUARTET

PETER ZAZOFSKY, VIOLIN

LUCIA LIN, VIOLIN

STEVEN ANSELL, VIOLA

MICHAEL REYNOLDS, CELLO

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2005

— PROGRAM —

String Quartet in D Major, Op. 20, No. 4

FRANZ JOSEF HAYDN (1732-1809)

Allegro di molto

Un poco adagio affettuoso

Menuetto (Allegretto alla Zingarese)

Presto (Scherzando)

String Quartet No. 14 in F-sharp Major, Op. 142

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)

Allegretto

Adagio

Allegretto – Adagio

— INTERMISSION —

String Quartet in A-flat Major, Op. 105

ANTONIN DVORÁK (1841-1904)

Adagio ma non troppo: Allegro appassionato

Molto vivace

Lento e molto cantabile

Allegro non tanto

FRANZ JOSEF HAYDN (1732-1809)
String Quartet in D Major, Op. 20 No. 4, 1772

It was uncannily fitting that Haydn's Opus 20 string quartets should have been published with a rising sun on the cover (thus the sobriquet "Sun Quartets"), for with their appearance a new day dawned in the history of Western Music. These were not the world's first string quartets but they were the first great ones, and the first in a masterful series which would thrust this medium into its position as the most exalted expression of musical thought. It was with these Opus 20 quartets that the form of the string quartet as we know it today was established with regard to overall structure (four movements), the order of the movements, and the nature of the individual movements themselves. The genius of Haydn's conception proved flexible enough that despite its orderliness, it would accommodate the creative genius of his successors for the next two hundred and fifty years, up to the present.

For Houstonians who are almost daily treated to reflections "on how inventive minds work" it is worth noting that only one year separated this collection of quartets from Haydn's previous group (Opus 17) which, while containing music of interest, did not by any yardstick demonstrate equivalent dimensions of greatness. What happened? The year was 1772. Haydn had just turned forty; he was financially secure as kapellmeister to one of the richest families in Austria-Hungary; he had, only a few years before, found himself physically removed from the musical influences of Vienna and far from fellow musicians, having moved with his patron to the distant Esterhazy Estate, across the Austrian border into Hungary. For ten months of the year he was isolated, with no distractions; even his wife had stayed behind in Vienna. He had always been his own best teacher, and now could give full reign to his endless industry and ingenuity.

The first movement of tonight's work, *Allegro di molto*, announces itself with a theme equally rhythmic and melodic. It gets off to a false start, is repeated in its entirety, and thereafter contains odd key changes from one passage to the next in a somewhat awkward and guileless manner, providing a modal flavor in odd contrast to the generally refined, Rococo style of the whole. The expected sonata form is evident, but the presentation of musical ideas is richly unconventional. The phrase lengths are not even, the writing is surprisingly contrapuntal, there are stops and starts. And Haydn very quickly proceeds to confuse. The development section arrives and just when we are surprised that it is so short, the music takes a turn into a contrapuntal world of themes playing off of each other, making use of each of the four instruments to elaborate the ideas. In fact, a complex, polyphonic development is well under way when, quite on the sly, Haydn slips at an unexpected moment, into the true recapitulation—the note-for-note restatement of the opening section. We soon realize, however, that instead of a straight-forward repeat, the themes continue their development, appearing with richer texture and more ornate contour, thus blurring the expected formal structure. This is "Haydn's thirty-year-long lesson on what to do instead of Sonata Form while retaining Sonata Form in the background."

One would not know from looking at the marking *Un poco Adagio affettuoso*, that the second movement is a beautiful serenade presented as a set of extraordinary variations—a first for Haydn. Each instrument has an opportunity to play a singing role

(the viola less than the others) until the end, when the voices interweave. This movement shows how with these Opus 20 quartets, conceived as music for four more-or-less equal voices, Haydn brought musical composition back to the richness of the Baroque period. For a generation in the mid 18th Century, part writing had been abandoned in favor of the Galant Style. Now it would reappear in Haydn's quartets, tempered and modified by the more crystalline sounds of the Galant. One hears, in the fourth variation of this movement, the combining of these two styles, as the melody and accompaniment dissolve, in the last four measures, into a completely Baroque treatment of classic counterpoint.

The *Menuetto* is "in the Gypsy style" – a bow, no doubt, to the popular music of his patron's countryside. The rhythmic accents have been deliberately placed to confuse: the upper strings are in one meter, the lower in another.

The final movement is *Presto e Scherzando*—fast and funny. And funny it is, with unique, peculiar, comically meaningless rhythmic gestures and asymmetrical phrase lengths. It is music which bounces its way along, turning and tumbling, flitting about without going any where, even including a brief passage with Baroque overtones thrown in along with some country dance music, all seemingly for the sake of passing the time and amusing the audience, until it graciously fades away like the court jester.

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DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 14 in F# Major, Opus 142 (1973)

The fourteenth string quartet is a late work, composed two years before Shostakovich's death. He dedicated it to the cellist Sergei Shirinsky, one of only two remaining founding members of the group which had premiered all but the first of his string quartets over the preceding thirty years. At the time of its writing, Shostakovich was already very ill with a never-diagnosed neurological disorder and the mortal consequences of a lifetime of heavy smoking. Yet he still had plans to write a complete cycle of quartets, one in each key. He told a friend that even if his right arm should become so weak he could no longer use it, he would hold a pen between his teeth to continue composing. Nothing but death itself was going to stop him....

The texture of this quartet is uncharacteristically rich and warm. The music is lucid and powerful—seemingly straight from the heart of this man whose life under Soviet rule epitomized the arbitrary terror of the era. This is music written without an agenda, without an ulterior motive, and without commission, music which penetrates the soul of the listener. It strays from the outline of the classical string quartet in having only three movements, and with a second movement which merges into the third. On paper it is in F# Major, but its unstable harmony takes it to many other tonal regions and only rarely, at least in the first movement, does one hear a key one could call home. Even while sounding rich and full, the melodic lines are often actually sparse, solos for cello or for violin, or for both together, rather than simultaneous lines for four voices at once, so that the work seems at times to be a *duo concertante* for the outer voices, to the accompaniment of the inner.

The first movement starts as an *Allegretto*, but the cheerfulness inherent in this label is muted and soon there are signs of distress. The cello plays a prominent role. A long violin solo opens the dirge-like *Adagio* which constitutes the second movement. Here are echoes of other works—of Mahler, of Shostakovich's own past, and of musical devices from the past in the form of fugal treatments, a passacaglia, and Baroque-style writing for solo string instrument. It speaks, through hints of Russian Orthodox chants, of the endless sorrows endured by the composer and his compatriots. Without a break, the second movement blends into the third and final movement, again ambiguously marked *Allegretto*. And again one searches in vain for much that is light-hearted. Shostakovich, was not, however, without humor, and embedded in this movement is a quote, played on the cello, from his troubled opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. It is "Seryozha, my love!"—from the aria sung by the anti-heroine as she spies her former lover Sergei, during their trek in a prison gang en route to Siberia.

This music is essential Shostakovich, immediately recognizable as his, but shorn of "cultural correctness"—it is the stripped down distillation of a life of genius, hardship, danger and perseverance. The essential characteristics of Shostakovich's music are here—with the notable exception of his signature sarcasm and irony. Through its eloquent simplicity one feels the full blast of his expressive power and moral force, which seems to grow stronger with the passage of time.

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ANTONIN DVOŘÁK (1841-1904)
String Quartet in A-flat Major, Op. 105

Antonin Dvořák is known to almost everyone as composer of the "New World Symphony" but he was prolific in virtually all musical genres. Among his chamber compositions are fourteen string quartets, four piano trios, four piano quartets, two piano quintets, and a string sextet.

Although most of the string quartets are not commonly encountered (two exceptions are Op. 105, the piece on today's program, and the popular "American" quartet), all the other works are often programmed. The chamber works are "absolute" music in that they are not programmatic in intent and do not directly quote actual native melodies. But like all of Dvořák's music they are heavily colored by infectious rhythms and melodies inspired by Czech folk music. A favorite device in many of these works is the "dumka", a musical form characterized by slow, mournful sections interrupted by frenzied dance-like episodes, inspired by gypsy traditions. Good examples can be heard in the chamber pieces with piano.

Op. 105 was the last quartet that Dvořák completed but penultimate in order of publication. Besides the numerous Czech-inflected rhythms and melodies, the piece is characterized by a bucolic, outdoorsy flavor complete with hunting horn effects in the first movement. The second movement is a "furiant", a native Czech dance. Begun near the end of Dvořák's three year stay in the United States, the quartet was completed after his return to Prague, and it is viewed by many as an expression of thanksgiving for the composer's return to his homeland.

Program notes courtesy of AMG, Inc.

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The Muir String Quartet has long been acknowledged as one of the world's most powerful and insightful ensembles, distinguishing itself among audiences and critics with its "exhilarating involvement" (Boston Globe), "impeccable voicing and intonation" (San Francisco Examiner) and "unbridled musicality" (American Record Guide).

Winner of the 1981 Naumburg Chamber Music Award and 1980 Evian International String Quartet Competition, the Muir String Quartet first appeared on the scene in 1980, and was greeted with rave reviews and an extensive feature in the New Yorker. The quartet was also featured on the internationally acclaimed PBS broadcast, *In Performance at the White House* for President and Mrs. Reagan. Formed in 1979 following graduation from the Curtis Institute of Music, the Muir String Quartet's principal chamber music teachers were Felix Galimir and members of the Guarneri Quartet.

In its commitment to advancing contemporary American music, the Muir Quartet has had commissioned works written for them by such distinguished composers as Joan Tower (*Night Fields*), Sheila Silver (*From Darkness Emerging*), Richard Danielpour (*Shadow Dances and Psalms of Sorrow*—featured on *CBS Sunday Morning*), Richard Wilson (*Third String Quartet*), and Charles Fussell (*Being Music*—based on poetry of Walt Whitman). The quartet also gave the World Premiere performance of the Native American collaborative work, *Circle of Faith*, featured on National Public Radio. Recently premiered works include those by esteemed American composers Richard Danielpour (*Feast of Fools*—for bassoon and string quartet), Lucas Foss (*String Quartet #4*), Ezra Laderman (*String Quartets #9 and #10*), and Joelle Wallach (*String Quartet #3*). In the fall of 2004, the Muir Quartet returned to South Mountain Concerts to perform the world premiere of a new work by Ronald Perera. In 2005-06, in addition to their annual appearances at Rhode Island College, the quartet makes return appearances for the Houston Friends of Music, the Phoenix Chamber Music Society, the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, and gives performances on SUNY Buffalo's annual Beethoven cycle.

The Muir Quartet has been in residence at Boston University's College of Fine Arts since 1983, and gives annual summer workshops at the Boston University Tanglewood Institute (BUTI). The Muir Quartet has also given master classes at schools nationwide, including the Eastman School of Music, the Curtis Institute, Oberlin Conservatory, and the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University. Since 1989, the quartet has taught, coached, and administered the Emerging Quartets and Composers Program in Utah with eminent composer Joan Tower. This program is now part of the Muir's role as resident chamber ensemble with the Deer Valley Festival, in partnership with the Utah Symphony/Opera.

The Muir Quartet is in Residence at Boston University

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