

Dallas Chamber Music Society presents
Takács String Quartet
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Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2014

String Quartet in B-flat major, Hob.III:67 (Op. 64 No.3)
Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

The year 1790 was momentous for Haydn. His employer of nearly thirty years, Prince Nikolaus Esterhazy, died in September. Within three months, Haydn was *en route* to England in the company of the violinist and impresario Johann Peter Salomon, for the first of two historic trips to the British Isles. Haydn's London sojourns would yield rich fruit: twelve magnificent symphonies, his finest solo keyboard compositions, and a wealth of chamber music.

Surmising that the English would be keenly interested in his newest chamber works, Haydn took with him, in manuscript copy, three quartets from a set he had written during the months following Prince Esterhazy's death. Before departing from Vienna, he entrusted the sale of six quartets to Johann Tost, who had played violin in the Esterhazy court orchestra from 1783-88. Tost arranged for publication by Leopold Koželuch, a Czech composer who moved to Vienna and established a publishing house. Koželuch issued Opus 64 in April 1791 with a dedication to Tost. The Opus is one of three by Haydn that have become known as the 'Tost' Quartets.

Haydn arrived in London on New Year's Day, 1791. He was approaching his 59th birthday and, by the standards of the day, had reached a ripe old age. He was also at the top of his game. Opus 64 is a mature group of quartets that focuses on varieties of texture possible among four string players. Haydn also shows a propensity for asymmetrical phrasing, particularly in the B-flat major quartet.

From the opening measures, irregular phrase structure characterizes the *Vivace assai*. Haydn is also meticulous about dynamics and articulation, marking sudden changes between *forte* and *piano*, and between detached vs. legato playing. The first movement is noteworthy for its profusion of themes. Haydn frequently derives his second theme from the rhythmic and melodic contours of his opening theme, a technique called monothematicism. Not so here: the second melody is surprisingly different, and he even introduces a third idea for the closing theme.

For much of this first movement, the cello functions in an *ostinato* capacity, sometimes like a drone. While there are some virtuosic scales for first violin, most of the *Vivace assai* reflects a fine balance among the four players.

Haydn's *Adagio* is a ternary structure: A - B - A'. Given the slow tempo, it can be a challenge to sustain forward momentum. The composer's solution is to place his emphasis on interaction between and among the four players. Mostly he focuses on dialogue between the two violinists, supported by viola and cello in accompanying roles.

The middle section switches from E-flat major to the astonishing key (at least for 1790) of E-flat minor. Yet the music of this minor mode interlude is essentially a variation on the main idea. Here, Haydn is decidedly in monothematic mode. We are never bored, however. His return to the A section introduces triplets. Sometimes those triplets are shared between cello and viola, or viola and second violin. The delicacy and subtlety of Haydn's accompaniment adds to the magic of this movement.

The Menuetto plays games with accents, irregular phrases, and trills. Its central trio section remains in the home key of B-flat major, but disrupts the rhythmic pulse with repeated accents on the third beat.

Haydn concludes his quartet with another movement in sonata form, complete with designated repeat of the exposition. His themes are dance-like, and subtly related to those of the Menuetto/Trio. Syncopations add to the feeling of a country dance, and Haydn leaves us with smiles that have crept onto our faces without our noticing.

String Quartet No. 2 ("Intimate Letters") Leos Janáček (1854-1928)

If Bedřich Smetana is regarded as the great-grandfather of Czech music and Antonín Dvořák as the grandfather, then Leos Janáček must be dubbed the logical heir to their tradition and, in his turn, the father of modern Czech music.

Born in Hukvaldy, Moravia in 1854, Janáček was a late bloomer. Although his musical talent manifested itself quite early on, most of his youthful works were cloaked in the forms and style of the late 19th-century romantics, garb that ill-suited Janáček. Eventually he abandoned those models, seeking more personal expression. Like his younger contemporaries Bartók and Kodály in Hungary, he became absorbed with the folk music of his native land, developing a highly individual musical language. His mature style derives in large part from the speech cadences of Slovak tongues, and the rhythms and melodies of Moravian folk music.

Janáček considered his operas to be his most important compositions. Yet instrumental works figured prominently during the last decade or so of his life, and contributed considerably to his reputation. The astonishing creative efflorescence of his old age can be attributed to two principal factors. The first was the independence of Czechoslovakia at the close of the Great War. Three provinces that formerly belonged to the Habsburg empire -- Bohemia to the west, central Moravia, and eastern Slovakia -- were merged to form a modern nation. Janáček's intense nationalistic pride found magnificent expression in his late works.

The other reason for his enormous productivity was Kamila Stosslová, a young woman 38 years his junior with whom Janáček fell headlong in love. Married to a Moravian antique merchant who had helped Janáček with daily provisions during the war, Kamila met the composer in 1917. He was strongly attracted to her. She became his obsession,

inspiring an almost unceasing stream of letters, a "Kamila diary" in the last year of his life, and, most important, an autumnal rainbow of major compositions. These include the operas *Kát'a Kabanova* (1919-21), *The Cunning Little Vixen* (1921-23), and *The Makropoulos Affair* (1923-25) (all with heroines for whom Kamila served as the model); a wealth of instrumental music such as the Piano Concertino (1925), the Sinfonietta (1926), the wind quintet *Mladi* (1927), and the two string quartets (1923 and 1928, respectively).

Though there is no evidence to suggest that the affair was ever consummated, or indeed that it was more than one-sided, Kamila and her husband (to whom she appears to have been happily married) enjoyed a friendship with Janáček until his death. There is no question that she provided spiritual support and artistic inspiration for him, and a companionable haven from his own unhappy marriage to Zdenka Schulzová, which soured shortly after the union in 1881.

Janáček is essentially a programmatic composer, meaning that his music takes its impetus from nature, literature, painting, or some other extramusical source (or 'program'). His two string quartets are representative. The first, subtitled "The Kreutzer Sonata," is based on the eponymous Tolstói story of love, adultery, and jealousy: highly charged material for a man enamoured of a woman young enough to pass for his granddaughter -- and who was another man's wife. The second quartet, subtitled "Intimate Letters," is Janáček's more direct declaration of his love for Kamila. He was 74 years old.

Originally the quartet was to have been entitled "Love Letters," but in February 1928 Janáček changed the title, writing to Kamila, "I don't deliver my feelings to the tender mercies of fools." He planned to use the *viola d'amore*, a member of the Baroque viol family that was widely played in the 18th century. The instrument probably attracted him as much for its name as for its particular tuning and timbre. Eventually he abandoned that plan because the older, gentler instrument could not sustain its tone against three modern instruments. But viola remains the dominant voice in "Intimate Letters."

Letters to Kamila reveal that, in the opening movement, Janáček sought to capture his impression upon seeing her for the first time. A sort of free rondo, the movement begins with a dramatic fortissimo trill from the cello, with a response in thirds and sixths from the two violins. Thereafter viola has the most prominent role, its themes taking on an eerie quality by extensive playing *sul ponticello* [on the bridge]. Janáček was perhaps thus attempting to approximate the sound of the older *viola d'amore*. Rapid shifts in mood and texture contribute to the emotional charge of this music. One can almost imagine the composer's heart racing.

The second movement is marked *Adagio*, at least initially, and centers on B-flat minor. But its structure is as free as the preceding movement, with tempo markings changing rapidly. The tempo listings are actually *Adagio - più mosso - Maestoso in espressione - Vivace - Andante - Adagio - Adagio - Grave - Allegro - Vivo - Adagio*, making it very similar in quixotic spirit to the preceding movement. This time, it is more variations than rondo. Once again the viola is awarded an ardent melody, though the second violin has a brief cadenza marked *flautato* [literally "flute-like," but actually an instruction to bow the instrument over the fingerboard] that is built on whole tone scales.

Poignant and graceful in 9/8 meter, the third movement has a Russian flavor, with accompaniment in octaves and thirds. Janáček wrote to Kamila: "I want to make it particularly joyful and then dissolve it into a vision like your image." This is the love music, the emotional heart of the work. After he completed it, he wrote: "Today I have written down my sweetest longings. . . . Today I have succeeded in writing a piece in which the earth begins to tremble. This will be my best. Here, I can find a place for my most beautiful melodies."

"Intimate Letters" concludes with an earthy peasant dance. Presently a four-note pattern interrupts, becoming more dominant. Emphasizing the conflict between the two ideas, Janáček calls for the cellist to play alternate notes *pizzicato* vs. *arco* [bowed], changing on every beat. Near the end, all four players are *sul ponticello*. Janáček told Kamila that this movement reflected the anguish he felt about her. Throughout the Second Quartet, Janáček's musical language is diatonic, with an emphasis on chords built on fourths. Its significance lies as much in its meaning to the composer as its intrinsic musical value.

Quartet No. 8 in E minor, Op. 59, No.2 Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Beethoven turned to the medium of the string quartet in 1804 after a hiatus of almost six years. The commission came from Count Andreas Kirillovich Rasumovsky, who had been Russian ambassador to the Austrian court since 1792. Immensely wealthy and cultured, Rasumovsky built a splendid residence in Vienna which he filled with a superb library and art collection. Rasumovsky was married to a sister-in-law of Prince Karl Lichnowsky, another important patron of Beethoven. A violinist himself, he maintained a household filled with music. From 1808 to 1816, he employed an in-house string orchestra that included many of Vienna's finest players, including the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh.

We know relatively little about Rasumovsky's commission, except that he apparently requested Beethoven to incorporate some Russian folk tunes into some string quartets. The three works Beethoven composed for him show astonishing growth from their predecessors, the six quartets of Opus 18. Conceived on a vastly larger scale, their themes are broader and more extended, and a sense of spaciousness permeates each one.

A curious fact about all of Beethoven's compositions in the key of E, whether major or minor, is that he placed all movements in either the parallel major or minor, not choosing to travel to a more distantly related key for his inner movements. Clearly the tonality of E/e was riveting for him, demanding a measure of tonal unity not so binding in other keys. Within the broad confines of tonal centering, he sought variety of mood, of texture, of rhythm; at the same time, he succeeded in stretching the boundaries of tonal convention further than they had ever been challenged before.

The opening *Allegro* of Op. 59 No.2 is an anomaly. No sooner does Beethoven establish E minor in the first few measures than he echoes the opening phrase--in F! The sonata form journey to G major at the end of the exposition is at once conventional and

iconoclastic. A pulsing undercurrent drives this movement, the most nervous and edgy of the Op. 59 set.

Beethoven marks the second movement, a *Molto adagio* in E major, with the instruction, "*Si tratta questo pezzo con molto di sentimento*" [This piece is to be played with great sentiment]. *Adagios* are unusual in Beethoven, and two of them occur in Op. 59. This one has a romantic story to accompany it. As relayed by Beethoven's contemporaries Carl Czerny and Karl Holz (a member of the Schuppanzigh String Quartet), the inspiration for this movement came while Beethoven gazed at a night sky brilliant with stars; he was struck by the notion of "music for the spheres." Whether apocryphal or not, the tale lends a delightful, uncharacteristic programmatic aside to Beethoven's slow movement.

Count Rasumovsky's *thème russe* is incorporated into the third movement of this quartet, marked *Allegretto* but a scherzo for practical purposes. The theme, "*Slava Bogu no Nebe, Slava!*" is familiar from the coronation scene in Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov* and in a number of works by Rimsky-Korsakov, but Beethoven's adaptation came, of course, upwards of a full century beforehand. Double repetition of both the minor and trio sections, specified by the composer in the score, distinguish the movement.

Ambiguous tonality introduces the finale. The key signature and tradition tell us it will be in E minor. Beethoven goes to some lengths to establish C major in our ears, much in the same way that Schumann flirts with G minor (instead of E-flat, the home tonality) at the beginning of his finale in the Piano Quintet. Nervousness and uncertainty, recalled from the first movement, resurface here, underscoring the high-strung character of the entire quartet. Compact and somewhat abrupt in its comparative brevity, this second Opus 59 quartet leaves one practically gasping for breath.

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