

Program Notes

MONTANA CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

October 28, 2015, 7:30pm

Reynolds Recital Hall, MSU Bozeman, MT

MUIR STRING QUARTET

Peter Zazofsky, *violin*

Lucia Lin, *violin*

Steven Ansell, *viola*

Michael Reynolds, *cello*

with guest

Michele Levin, *piano*

Quartet in E-flat Major for Strings, Op. 12 (1829)

FELIX MENDELSSOHN [1809-1847]

Duration: ca. 24 minutes

"Mendelssohn is the Mozart of the 19th century, the most illuminating of musicians, who sees more clearly than others through the contradictions of our era and is the first to reconcile them." [Robert Schumann (1810-1856)]

Mendelssohn was born to a wealthy and cultured family. His father was a prominent banker, his grandfather an acclaimed philosopher (Moses Mendelssohn, 1729-1786), and his mother's affluent family provided a cultural environment that was crucial to Felix's artistic development. As a young child he displayed astounding musical ability and a phenomenal musical memory. The young Felix also showed an outstanding creative gift for composing. When the most distinguished musicians of the day assured Mendelssohn's father that the boy was a true genius, nothing was spared to bring him to artistic maturity at an astonishingly early age. A prodigy often compared to Mozart, his early days in Berlin put him in close contact with the finest literary, artistic and musical minds of the time. Mendelssohn's first public performance was at age nine. The piano was Mendelssohn's principal instrument, though he was also an accomplished violinist and organist. Mendelssohn's artistic talents were not only discernible with musical achievements (composer, conductor, pianist, violinist), but also through exceptional drawings and paintings and poems, as well as the ability to speak several languages fluently. He is one of the leading Romantics who utilized Classical chamber forms, perceptively referred to as "the poetic guardian of Classicism." Mendelssohn placed great importance on melodic integrity, formal organization, polyphonic textures and details of tone color and scoring. His creative accomplishments were molded by a variety of experiences, styles and influences. Prevalent in his compositions is an adherence to clarity and the Classical tradition, guided by Classical and pre-Classical techniques and forms. To quote Mendelssohn biographer Karl-Heinz Köhler, "the towering achievement of the young prodigy consists above all in having outgrown a reliance on classical models and developing a personal style." Mendelssohn challenges strict musical classification, but, considering his connection to the 18th century, it is appropriate to describe him as a neo-Classicalist.

Despite the academic and social obligations of Mendelssohn's years at university (1825-1829), he continued the remarkable outpouring of creative work that had marked his youth. Early in 1829, Mendelssohn became immersed in preparations for the revival of Bach's St. Matthew Passion (March 1829). Soon after, he set out on his three-year post-university tour of Europe, a graduation gift from his family. The first stop on the journey led him to London; he wrote the following to his

beloved sister, Fanny: "London is the grandest and most complicated monster on the face of the earth. How can I compress into one letter what I have been seeing during the three days since I arrived? I hardly remember the chief events, and yet I must not keep a diary, for then I should see less of life, and that must not be. On the contrary, I want to catch hold of whatever offers itself to me. Things whirl and roll round me and carry me along as in a vortex." Mendelssohn—elegant, witty, educated, handsome, well-mannered, almost fluent in English—made an immediate impression upon London's cultured society. His public debut was on May 25, 1829 at a concert of the London Philharmonic Society; Mendelssohn created a sensation. This was the beginning of the artistic love affair between Felix Mendelssohn and the musical cognoscenti of Britain. Mendelssohn would visit England 9 more times during the remaining 18 years of his life.

One of the compositions of Mendelssohn's first visit to England was this E-flat String Quartet, completed in September 1829. (The A minor Quartet, though written two years earlier, was published after this work, as Op. 13.) Mendelssohn greatly revered Beethoven and that admiration influenced the E-flat quartet. Shortly after the score's premiere, Mendelssohn wrote to his former teacher Carl Friedrich Zelter: "In your last letter you seemed to be anxious lest, following my predilections for one of the great masters (Beethoven), I might be led into imitation. Such, however, is certainly not the case. Naturally, nobody can forbid me to enjoy the inheritance left by the great masters nor to continue to work at it, because not everybody has to begin at the beginning. But then it must be continued creation according to one's ability, and not a lifeless repetition of what is already there."

Each of the quartet's four movements is in a different key: E-flat major - G Minor - B-flat major - C Minor. The intimate first movement opens with a slow, thoughtful introduction. The cantabile main theme, in quicker tempo, is a flowing melody expertly balanced with quieter gestures as the melody unfolds. This introduction becomes a cyclical reference as Mendelssohn returns to both the key and thematic mood of the opening in the coda of the finale. Early in the development section, the second violin introduces a new melody; for the remainder of the development section and through the recapitulation, Mendelssohn skillfully maintains the tender quality of the thematic material. It is a movement of rare poetic beauty. The charming second movement is fashioned on a *canzonetta* (a 16th century vocal genre, light by nature with a dance-like character), replacing the more traditional scherzo. Structured in ternary (ABA) form, the outer sections are delicate and mysterious. The center is occupied by an engaging trio of brighter harmonies. It is distinguished by the delicately etched pizzicato accompaniment. The *Andante*, without a formal structure, is based on the opening theme from the first movement, becoming more elaborate as it evolves. A tranquil coda returns the mood of the beginning phrases. Despite its brevity, it covers an enormous emotional range. The *Andante* leads without pause into the spirited finale. It is a tarantella, the traditional Italian dance whose power is said to rid the body of the poison of the tarantula spider's deadly bite. As an early example of cyclical form, the important motives of the first movement are used to form a significant coda, bringing the quartet to its close.

"[Mendelssohn] A romantic who felt at ease within the mold of classicism." [Renowned cellist Pablo Casals]

String Quartet No. 3, BB93 / Sz. 85 (1927)
BELA BARTÓK [1881-1945]
Duration: ca. 15 minutes

"My own idea — of which I have been fully conscious since I found myself as a composer— is brotherhood of peoples, brotherhood despite all wars and conflicts. I try, to the best of my ability, to serve this idea in my music." [Bartók, 1931]

Throughout his career, Bartók gradually developed an individual language, through the blending of existing musical languages — folklore, Impressionism and Schoenberg's (1874-1951) atonality at its core. The logic and clarity of thinking involved in his sequence of musical ideas is exceptional. Along with Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) and Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), Bartók is considered a central figure of 20th century music, both as a composer and as an ethnomusicologist. A significant part of his musical development was associated with his early exposure to the music of Brahms (1833-1897), Liszt (1811-1886), Wagner (1813-1883) and Richard Strauss (1864-1949), reflecting his descent from the 19th century. Bartók's intimate connection with the folk music of his native Hungary, the surrounding areas of Eastern Europe and North Africa was a source of inspiration for his own writing. The rhythmic and intervallic traits and structural patterns of folk music became a part of Bartók's musical imagination. "In my youth," wrote Bartók, "Bach and Mozart were not my ideals of the beautiful, but rather Beethoven." Bartók self-imposed the greatest demands possible in the field of instrumental music with a break from the late-Romantic style, an alliance with folk music, his continuous search for new forms and his absorption in the late works of Beethoven. As a result, demands on performers and listeners are considerable. Regarding harmonic associations, Bartók favors the intervals of the augmented fourth, minor third, and assorted groupings of major and minor seconds. The principle of tonality is achieved through the perception of a tonal center rather than traditional harmonic structure. The folk-music influences are most evident with the rhythmic design and the propensity for melodies characterized by modal scales, quartertones and the pentatonic (a scale based on a system of 5 different pitches to the octave) system. Bartók assigned himself a strict set of compositional rules, which he deviated from time and again in the constant reworking of his style.

In the 1920s, following the First World War, composers came to new music with an eagerness to stretch the musical forms and language of the past, challenging listeners with daring visions. Bartók, not immune to the spirit of experimentation, shifted his professional concentration from ethnomusicology (folksong research) to his career as a composer and pianist. He was particularly interested in Stravinsky and in the recent developments in atonality and motivic structure posited by Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) and his disciple Alban Berg (1885-1935). A decided modernism pervaded Bartók's music — String Quartets Nos. 3 and 4 were part of this period and probably the most daring he ever wrote. In fact, Bartók was reluctant to program them for any but the most sophisticated audiences.

Quartet No.3, his shortest quartet, is tightly constructed — a large single span divided into four sections. It is the only one written in one continuous movement, consisting of a First Part (slow music), a Second Part (quick), a Recapitulation of the First Part and a Coda. The harmonically mysterious first section is largely based on extensive transformations of the main thematic motif through various processes (imitation, inversion, augmentation, diminution). Part II, which follows without pause, is a free, continuously unfolding variation of a folk-dance melody presented in pizzicato multiple stops by the cello. A brutal dissonance serves as a bridge to Part III, which is a reworked version of Part I. The Coda starts as a vague hum but soon develops into a furious altered restatement of the folk dance of Part II. The Quartet culminates in a powerful, viscerally compelling cadence.

The important phases of Bartók's creative development are concentrated in his masterful string quartets, monuments of music, from the earliest efforts to the last and unfulfilled plan for the seventh quartet. In the area of chamber music, many historians consider his six string quartets as the greatest contribution to the genre since Beethoven — fundamental documents of modern music.

Bartók died of leukemia in New York City, where he settled (1940) after fleeing Fascist-infested Europe. Quartet No. 3 was premiered on February 19, 1929, in London by the Waldbauer Quartet.

Quintet in A Major for Piano and Strings, Op. 81/B.155 (1887)

ANTONÍN DVORÁK [1841-1904]

Duration: ca. 39 minutes

“Dvořák must be placed among the most richly gifted and versatile composers of the 19th century. Truly, like Haydn, Mozart and Schubert, he was of the race of those divinely blest and naïvely inspired leaders whose thoughts and emotions manifest themselves spontaneously in musical forms, and whose musical imagination gives itself out in an inexhaustible wealth of pure, fresh and fascinating ideas, in melody, harmony and rhythm. He seemed to be a late offspring of the masters just mentioned, and his nature, fundamentally simple and unsophisticated, was nevertheless innately intelligent, perceptive and witty, robust and fresh, tenderly emotional and gifted. He had an ardent love of nature, a firm and simple faith in God, a joyous optimistic outlook on life. Such was his disposition, which during his whole life always preserved the typical features of the simple peasant origin that colored his personality and his work.” [Music Historian Otakar Sourek]

To quote musicologist Michael Beckerman, a Czech music scholar: *“Who was it that said, ‘We know what it is when you do not ask us, but when you ask us what it is, we cannot say?’ This is certainly true of the concept of Czech music. At first glance it seems to be solid, stable and real; a reasonable collection of chants, folk songs and symphonic compositions written by such undeniably Czech characters as Smetana, Dvořák, Janáček and Martinů, among others. When we begin to probe Czech music for further evidence of solidarity, it begins to crumble a bit. Why should the category “Czech” include a composer like Martinů, who spent almost his entire compositional career abroad, and not Mahler, who was born and raised in Czech lands? Do Jews or Roma (Gypsies) ever get to be Czechs? How can we, or should we, trust a conception of Czech music developed by 19th-century nationalists and updated to its present form on the heels of the brutal expulsion of ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia after World War II and under the cultural domination of the Soviet Union where it became entangled with Stalinist conceptions of denuded nationality?” [Abridged]*

Throughout his creative life, Dvořák exhibited a special interest in chamber music. Between 1861 and 1895 his contribution to the literature included fourteen string quartets, two piano quintets, four piano trios, two piano quartets, a viola quintet, a string sextet, a string trio and other miscellaneous chamber works. His practical experience as a viola player developed an invaluable appreciation for the importance of the individual voices in chamber music ensembles. Dvořák composed his first piano quintet (A major, Op. 5) in 1872, but was unhappy with the piece. After a period of about 15 years, following a request from his publisher for a new piece for piano and strings, he attempted to revise it, but, once again, he was discontent and decided to compose a completely new work. The result was his only other piano quintet, Op. 81. It is without question one of the masterpieces of chamber music literature, with its range of expression and melodic invention. At the time of its composition, Dvořák had achieved acclaim and acceptance as a composer—one of the most respected musicians in his native Bohemia and throughout Europe and America. This Piano Quintet in A Major reflects his devotion to the Bohemian folk idiom and Dvořák's nationalistic style, along with the E-flat Piano Quartet and the E minor Piano Trio (*Dumky*). The first movement is based on two contrasting themes. It opens with a marvelous lyrical theme in the cello with piano accompaniment, followed by a statement of the second theme by the viola. The second movement, a *Dumka* (Slavonic folk-ballad with alternating rhythms), presents a pensive melody separated by jubilant interludes. The generally elegiac tone alternates with abrupt changes in mood and tempo. Dvořák parenthetically adds a *furiant* (a Czech folk dance) to the third movement *Scherzo*, but the resemblance to the folk-dance form is distant. Actually, it is a lively waltz. The

Finale is high-spirited, energetic and playful. The repeated notes at the beginning of the movement present a sense of urgency. It includes a fugal section in the development and a chorale in the coda.

The A Major Piano Quintet had its premiere in Prague on January 6, 1888. It was first published in Berlin, later in 1888.

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