

**CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF FORT WORTH PRESENTS**  
**Balourdet Quartet: "Quartet Building Blocks"**  
**Saturday 14 September 2024 - Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth**  
**Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2024**

**Quartet in D, Op.64, No.5; Hob.III:63 ("Lark")**  
**Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)**

1790 was an eventful year for the city of Vienna, and particularly for its most prominent musical citizen, Joseph Haydn. The Emperor Joseph II died on 20 February, ending a twenty-five-year reign; he was succeeded by his brother Leopold II. On 25 February Princess Elizabeth Esterhazy died. She was the wife of Haydn's long-time employer, Prince Nikolaus Esterhazy. Bereft, Prince Nikolaus only survived her by eight months. On 28 September he, too, died, bequeathing his title and estate to his son Prince Anton. Unlike his father, Anton had no great love for music. Under the terms of Prince Nikolaus's will, Haydn retained a pension and the title of *Kapellmeister*, but his duties were significantly reduced. For the first time in nearly four decades, he found himself with some time on his hands and the freedom and financial wherewithal to make choices about using that time.

A few hundred miles away in the German city of Cologne, the entrepreneur Johann Peter Salomon read of Prince Nikolaus's death in the newspapers. Immediately grasping the significance of the change in Haydn's circumstances, he altered his itinerary posthaste and made for Vienna, where he contracted with Haydn for the first of two historic trips to London. Salomon and Haydn left for England on 15 December 1790, but not before Haydn had completed the set of six quartets published as Opus 64.

Though Op.64 are not Haydn's final quartets, they are fully mature works, written when he was 58. Haydn scholar H.C. Robbins Landon considers Op.64 to be works of consolidation rather than innovation. He describes them as having an "easygoing amiability and a marked tendency to re-examine and re-use old ideas." Haydn was building upon skills and ideas he had already mastered. Rather than breaking new ground, he was exploring familiar territory more thoroughly. (The same observation could be made about most of Mozart's music, particularly the ten late string quartets.)

The "Lark" Quartet may well be the most frequently performed of all the Haydn quartets, which is saying a great deal, since Haydn wrote more than 80 of them. Its nickname derives from the soaring first violin melody of the opening movement. But the appeal of the *Allegro moderato*, and its melodic genius, is that it has *two* main themes, so beautifully integrated that we barely realize Haydn's cleverness in merging them. The effect is deceptively simple, for this is a highly contrapuntal movement with an embarrassment of melodic riches.

Switching to the dominant key of A major for the *Adagio cantabile*, Haydn awards the *arioso*-style melody to the first violin. He is more democratic in the third movement, whose scales and arpeggios are shared among all four players. The Menuetto is marked by an unusually long second section that shifts the emphasis somewhat from simple ternary form [A-B-A] to something more akin to development.

D major is the most violinistic of keys – witness the remarkable number of violin concerti written in D – and Haydn fully exploits its violinistic potential in the finale. A *moto perpetuo* movement, it spotlights the first violinist's technique. Even more than in the first movement, Haydn experiments with *fugato* sections. A passage in D minor is particularly striking, allowing all three of the lower instruments a chance at the dizzying runs. When the tonic major returns, the players are now in playful competition with one another, bringing the quartet to a lively and satisfying close.

### **String Quartet No. 3, Sz.85 (1927)**

#### **Béla Bartók (1881-1945)**

The six quartets of Béla Bartók constitute a chapter in the history of the string quartet exceeded in importance only by the quartets of Haydn and Beethoven. As in the case of both those composers, Bartók turned to the string quartet regularly throughout his composing career. The dates of completion for his six quartets are 1908, 1917, 1927, 1928, 1934, and 1939, a span

ranging from his earliest published compositions to within a few years of his death. The Third and Fourth quartets were written only one year apart, and the implied kinship between them exists on more than one level; the two works are closely related and stand somewhat apart from the other four quartets.

The immediate catalyst for the Third Quartet was a performance of Alban Berg's *Lyric Suite* that Bartók heard in July 1927 at Baden-Baden. Bartók had not written for string quartet in a decade. He set to work immediately, completing the new work in barely two months; the autograph is dated September 1927. Apparently, he had so many ideas for the medium of the string quartet that they could not be contained in a single piece. That is one explanation for the Fourth Quartet following so closely on its heels.

In December 1927, Bartók embarked on his first American concert tour and brought the quartet manuscript with him. In Philadelphia, he submitted the piece anonymously to a composition competition sponsored by the city's Musical Society Fund. Months later, the jury – which included the conductors Willem Mengelberg and Fritz Reiner – awarded first place honors jointly to Bartók and the Italian composer Alfredo Casella. Bartók's share of the prize was \$3000, a substantial sum at the time.

The late 1920s was an abrasive period in Bartók's music, in the sense that he strayed farther from identifiable tonal and modal centers than at any other time in his career. The compositions from these years, including the Third Quartet, sound jarring and dissonant. The structure is terse and compressed. The quartet is played without pause, but divides into four

distinct, closely related sections arranged slow-fast-slow-fast. They are unified by consistency of motivic material. They are differentiated by pronounced expressive extremes, as if the cerebral observer were at war with the atavistic participant.

An arsenal of percussive and other string techniques highlights Bartók's characteristic rhythmic aggression. In the *Seconda parte* alone, he calls for *sul ponticello* [bowing near the bridge], *col legno* [tapping the strings with the stick of the bow rather than bowing them], and glissandi; multiple stops and *sulla tastiera* [bowing near the fingerboard]; *a punta d'arco* [with the point of the bow], sliding pitches, and pizzicati. At times the music sounds eerie and otherworldly, then Bartók will switch abruptly to strident, fierce dissonance. Considerable tension results. A sinuous chromaticism, devoid of lyricism, permeates the quartet. All these characteristics made the quartet somewhat inaccessible to the listening public when it was composed. Critics praised it, however, drawn to its Beethovenian economy and echoes of Hungarian song and dance that are rarely absent from Bartók's music. Nevertheless, of his six quartets, the Third remains the least frequently performed.

### **Quartet in E minor, "Z meho zivota" ("From my life") (1876)**

#### **Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)**

Like Beethoven, Smetana suffered from deafness, the greatest tragedy for a musician. Though the onset of the hearing problem occurred somewhat later in his life than in Beethoven's, Smetana had lost most of his hearing by age 50. He was completely deaf when he composed this quartet, his first. The work is indisputably biographical, more forthrightly so even than the

Berlioz *Symphonie fantastique*. Smetana provided posterity with an explicit program for his quartet in a letter to his friend Josef Srb-Debrnov. The composer's own words serve as the best introduction to the music.

I shall not be in the least offended if this style does not find favor or is considered contrary to what was hitherto regarded as quartet style. I did not intend to write a quartet according to recipe. . . . As a young beginner I worked sufficiently hard to acquire thorough knowledge and mastery of musical theory. With me the design of every composition depends upon its subject. And so this quartet, too, shaped its form itself. I had wanted to give a tone picture of my life.

First movement -- the call of fate -- the main motif -- into the struggle of life. The love of art in my youth; romantic mood, in music as well as in love and life in general; an inexpressible yearning for something that I could neither name nor imagine clearly, and also a warning...of my future misfortune....It is that fateful ringing of the high-pitched notes in my ear which announced my coming deafness in 1874. I put this in as it was so fateful for me.

Second movement -- *à la polka* -- takes me back to the happy times of my youth, among the country people as well as among the people of higher classes (*Trio, meno mosso*, in D-flat) where I strewed the whole world with dance pieces, and was myself well-known as an enthusiastic dancer. It also describes my love of traveling; in the viola and later the second violin I marked '*à la tromba posthorn*.'

Third movement: reminds me of the happiness of my first love to the girl who later on became my faithful wife.

Fourth movement: knowledge of how to make use of the element of national music, joy at the success of this course up to the time it was interrupted by the catastrophe -- ominous for me -- of the beginning of deafness, a glance toward the sad future, then comes a brief sign of improvement, but, at the thought of the beginning of my career, nevertheless sadness. Roughly this is the aim of this composition, an almost private one, and therefore purposely written for four instruments which...talk to each other in an intimate circle of friends of what has so momentarily affected me. No more.

And no less. As remarkable as this revealing letter is the music itself, which would stand admirably as a quartet even without its very personal program. Basically, it is in a four-movement classical format with the outer two movements in sonata form. Its second movement, a glorification of the polka, functions as a scherzo. The pronounced dance rhythms lend themselves to exaggeration; the contrasting *meno mosso* is downright sultry! Smetana's slow

movement begins with an elegiac cello solo, whose emotional and expressive heights are sustained by the full quartet in a ringing chordal climax. The composer here offers an encomium to his first wife, who died of tuberculosis in 1859.

Not even Smetana's description in the letter quoted above fully prepares one for the shock of the high E that interrupts the irresistible Bohemian dance. His extensive experience in opera stood him in good stead in the dramatic design of this quartet. The emotional power of this work is gripping both as absolute music and as autobiography.