

CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF FORT WORTH PRESENTS
Marmen Quartet: "Multiple Levels of Virtuosity"
Saturday 15 March, 2025 - Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2025

Quartet in E-flat, Opus 33, No. 2 (Hob. III:38), "The Joke"
Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Haydn's Opus 33 quartets have become known as the "Russian" Quartets because they are purported to have been first performed in the apartments of visiting Russian royalty in Vienna. No fewer than three of them have taken on individual nicknames of their own: "How d'you do," "Bird" (not to be confused with the later "Lark" Quartet), and "The Joke," which opens this afternoon's program. If nothing else, the nicknames indicate that these quartets have become familiar favorites.

Haydn composed his Opus 33 set in 1781. By that time he was nearly 50. Although he was still employed by Prince Nicholas Esterházy, Haydn was already the best known living composer. Fully cognizant not only of his own growing fame but also of the strong commercial potential afforded by the increasing popularity of the string quartet genre, he made Opus 33 available in manuscript to a number of wealthy patrons. This private issue was intended to precede formal publication by Artaria in Vienna (although Artaria rushed publication, causing Haydn some embarrassment). In a letter offering the quartets to Prince Krafft Ernst Oettingen-Wallerstein, Haydn mentioned that these works were "written in a new and special way, for I haven't composed any for ten years."

Much has been made of Haydn's assessment of his new works and the meaning of the "new and special way." Haydn's biographer Rosemary Hughes opines:

Possibly, as some have suggested, Haydn is using the phrase as a selling point. But at the same time it represents a consciousness on his part that in the architecture of the movements, in the treatment of the thematic material within the movement, in the handling of the instruments, both individually and as an integrated texture, everything that in Op. 20 [the previous set from ten years before] wears an air of triumphant but strenuous endeavour has here become completely effortless.

The eminent British writer Donald Francis Tovey considered Opus 33 to be, as a group, “the lightest in all Haydn’s mature comedies.” As it happens, the finale of the “The Joke” quartet, in particular, is very witty indeed, thoroughly justifying Tovey’s general remark and the quartet’s subtitle. It is preceded by three marvelous movements that are models of clarity and expression.

The opening *Allegro moderato* is spacious and relaxed. Its distinctive rhythmic patterns, stated in the opening measures, provide grist for Haydn’s mill in the second theme and in the development section. Virtuoso triplets in the first violin part add sparkle to the leisurely pace. Next comes a *Scherzo*, unusual for two reasons. At this point — the early 1780s — it was still customary to place this movement third rather than second. Also, Haydn uses the term *Scherzo* rather than *Menuetto*, a practice that did not become customary in symphonic writing until Beethoven’s Second Symphony. The word *scherzo* means ‘joke’ in Italian. Although this is not the movement that gave the quartet its name, the lighthearted atmosphere is evident in Haydn’s writing. The central trio section of this *Scherzo* is Mozartean in its clarity of scoring.

Both the slow movement and the finale are in simple rondo form: A-B-A-B-A-Coda; however, they are quite different in approach. Haydn’s *Largo e sostenuto* breaks from the pattern of intricate, operatic embroidery in the first violin by assigning the principal theme first to viola and subsequently to second violin. The filigree occurs primarily as accompaniment.

The finale, a lively rondo, is a world unto itself. Haydn draws us in effortlessly with a rollicking, dance-like tune in 6/8 meter. It is classic rondo material: catchy, clear melody, stable accompaniment, and logical harmony. Foursquare and straightforward, if it were only eight measures long (its initial statement), it would sound brief but conclusive. And therein lies its potential for humor. Haydn starts with finality and ends with uncertainty, interpolating a Beethovenian *adagio* passage that sounds completely out of place. Then he fragments his rondo subject, interspersing haphazard rests between phrases. We are caught in the act of anticipation because of Haydn's intentional confusion between cadence and opening. The joke is his musical process of aural teasing, second-guessing our expectations. A word to the wise: this is *not* a work where you want to initiate applause! Best to wait until the string players have lowered their bows. And it *is* OK to chuckle.

String Quartet No. 3 (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 \$3,000, 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 sound jarring and dissonant, including the Third Quartet. 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], *glissandi*, multiple stops, *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.

Premier quatuor [First Quartet] in G minor, Opus 10
Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

When the Ysaÿe Quartet played the première of this quartet in Brussels in 1893, the initial reaction was poor. Debussy had established his then modest reputation as a composer of art songs and choral music. He tended to eschew traditional abstract forms and was inexperienced in contrapuntal writing. The quartet baffled listeners. Critics accused the young French composer of being vague and incoherent.

Debussy's biographer Edward Lockspeiser argues that Debussy was most successful when his music had an extra-musical association:

The songs show him to be the poet's musician; the best of the piano pieces, the painter's musician. With his abhorrence for professionalism, he did more than any other composer to bring music out of its own isolated world into a wider world where art, literature, and

music interacted on each other freely. Is it, then, surprising that, with one exception, his examples of absolute music are failures? But that one exception is a masterpiece: it is the String Quartet.

The quartet is unique in Debussy's *oeuvre*. Widely regarded as his finest piece of chamber music, it is his sole completed effort in the realm of the string quartet and the only composition to which he assigned a key and an opus number as part of its title. The quartet is unmistakably cyclic in its thematic organization. Between 1892 and 1894, Debussy was very close to Ernest Chausson. Chausson's famous teacher, César Franck, had achieved great renown with his cyclic Symphony in D minor (1888). That pioneering work, and Franck's innovative technique, exerted enormous influence on both younger composers.

In a series of letters to Chausson from 1893, Debussy wrote of difficulties with the incomplete quartet. On 2 July, he complained: "As for the last movement of the Quartet, I can't get it into the shape I want, and that's the third time of trying. It's a hard slog!" Even after its completion, he expressed dissatisfaction with its formal structure. Struggling with sonata form, he seized upon the technique of stating a germinal motive in the opening measures of the first movement, which then figured prominently throughout the entire work. Debussy reworks the motive with great rhythmic and textural ingenuity in the scherzo (*Assez vif et bien rythmé*). Vivid pizzicato writing evokes both mandolin and guitar.

Emotionally, the climax of the quartet occurs in its slow movement, which is the one section where Debussy chooses not to apply the cyclic composing technique. The finale, *Très modéré*, makes specific reference to the first two movements, quoting the germinal motive in

inversion and in syncopation, as melody and as accompaniment. Debussy's contrapuntal technique in this last movement is as disciplined and traditional as in any piece he wrote. Passages with double stops for all four players result in a lush, rich sonority with the color range of a small orchestra. As in all of his finer works, Debussy paints for us in this quartet a brilliant, evocative canvas in sound.

Debussy dedicated the quartet to the Belgian virtuoso Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931), first violinist of the quartet that premiered the work.