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CHAMBER MUSIC

Praque String Quartet

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Program Notes

by
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String Quartet in C Minor, Op. 18, #4 Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

This quartet has no slow movement, but it has both a scherzo and a minuet. The first movement begins with a straight forward, agitated tune that will be developed later. The second subject, by contrast, is lyrical and appears in the viola. Melodic dominance, however, is given to the first violin. The second movement- the scherzo- begins with a fugato passage but the polyphony does not continue. A second melody also begins polyphonically and likewise evolves to a harmonic context like the first. At the end of the movement, however, both melodies are polyphonically combined. The feeling here is light and graceful.

The third movement or minuet is classical in form and structure; it has regular phrase lengths and short motifs. The feeling is sombre. The Trio is a dialogue between the second violin and the viola and is more conventional. The Rondo, or final movement has a three-part form: A B A C A B A with a short coda at the end. It establishes a gay, Haydn-esque mood, has strong rhythms and conveys a tongue-in-cheek attitude. The movement and the quartet close with a prestissimo ending that is altogether agreeable.

C Minor is a key that Beethoven reserved for some of his most moving compositions. One thinks of the Piano Sonata, Op. 13, The Pathétique, the Third Piano Concerto and, of course, the Fifth Symphony. In contrast to the emotional depths of those compositions, however, this quartet emphasizes the connection with Beethoven's immediate classical past.

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String Quartet #2, "Intimate Letters" Leo Janacek (1854-1928)

The "Intimate Letters" of the title refers to the series of 600 letters he sent to Kamila Stassova from 1916 to his death in 1928. Both he and she were married to others, and it is believed that the relationship was platonic though his own strained domestic relationships filled him with a great need for her. The music of the Quartet is, in the words of one authority, his "most intimate and tender work, enchanting and dispassionate." It was composed in twenty days in 1928. He was 74; it was his last work.

Janacek's music in general and this quartet in particular are characterized by mercurial changes in mood; lots of space between the high and low registers of the instruments; strong folk-melodic influences; obsessive concern with repetition (with varying accompaniments); unpredictable changes in mood, rhythm and color and finally a rejection of conventional forms and classic, academic models. He urged his students, for example, to reject academic rules and to strike out and innovate on their own.

The first movement- Andante- is full of contrasts of all sorts and has many instances of sul ponticello (bowing near the bridge). There

are many changes in tempo, numerous soloistic interjections, many repetitions of different motifs and lots of space between the high and low registers of the four strings. This last characteristic will appear in the other three movements. Although the movement ends on a traditional cadence, the over-all context is strongly suggestive of Bartok who, of course, came later. The Adagio of the second movement contains a folk-like melody with arpeggiated accompaniments in the cello. This melody is distributed among the instruments with varying rhythms. The second section is a little faster; there are uses of the whole-tone scale, strummings on the cello and tremolo, followed by a return to the folk-melody of the beginning of the movement.

A dotted rhythm melody with open harmony begins the Moderato of the third movement. There are changes in tempo, the extremes of register, rapid changes in mood, the appearance, briefly, of a second melody, a return to the beginning of the movement followed by a gradual diminuendo and a fading away.

The final movement- Allegro- has many of the same characteristics mentioned before, especially the use of sul ponticello and the extremes of register. The dance-like rhythm which opens the movement varies from fast to slow. The music contains short, sectional segments rather than a sustained development of either formal or melodic ideas. There are intense, sharp interjection-like episodes which alternate with slow, melodic sections. The Quartet concludes by a return to the dance-like beginning of the movement.

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String Quartet # 6 in F, Op. 96, "The American" Antonin Dvorak (1841-1904)

The Quartet is the shortest of his chamber compositions- about twenty two minutes in length- and has several affinities with the New World Symphony: Its mood, its simple yet formal design, and the evident influence of American folk-music from various sources. In addition to the character of the tunes themselves, there are the uses of the pentatonic scale, the lowered seventh degree of the minor scale, and dotted and syncopated rhythms. It is important, however, to note that these are influences from folk-music, not direct quotations.

The first movement develops the folk-song influences at length; later another folk-melody is elaborated in the viola and then both are treated contrapuntally in the development section. The mood is bucolic and tranquil. The second movement has what Otakar Sourek called "one of the loveliest jewels in any song-form of Dvorak's slow movements" - a melody very similar in style and mood to a Negro Spiritual, especially in its melancholic mood. This melody is considerably elaborated, rises to an emotional climax which is repeated and then fades away in the cello. The third movement- a scherzo- is very agitated and contains a tune similar in character to the "Shout" songs of early American jazz. Here the pentatonic scale is used. Sourek refers to this four-minute piece as "a simple bagatelle". The finale has a very spirited tune, somewhat akin to "down-home, camp-meeting" melody. There is a slower middle section and a return to the vivace character of the first section. The movement is a gay rondo. The Quartet, though brief, shows an example of Dvorak's solid, competent craftsmanship.

THE PRAGUE STRING QUARTET

Czechoslovakia has long been famous for the excellence of its string quartets, and for the past twenty years, the *Prague Quartet* has justly held its place

at the top of the roster. Founded in 1955 by its first violinist, Bretislav Novotny, the quartet soon won recognition throughout Europe. In 1965 the quartet made its first world tour, which included performances in North and South America, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, India and the USSR. American audiences, who, until then, had only known the ensemble through its recordings, were so responsive that the quartet was invited to play a 30-concert tour throughout the country the following season. Since then, they have returned every two years to perform in virtually every major music center in North America, including New York, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Pittsburgh, Montreal, Quebec, Philadelphia, Toronto, Cleveland, St. Louis, Houston and Detroit.

The repertory of the Prague Quartet is rich in the works of notable Czech composers such as Smetana, Dvorak, Janacek and Martinu, but also covers the full range of standard works for string quartet, from Haydn to Bartok to some very recent pieces by contemporary composers. Their performance of the complete cycle of the Beethoven Quartets has been widely acclaimed, and they have recorded all the Dvorak Quartets for Deutsche Grammophon, with whom they record exclusively. Of the latter recordings, Stereo Review commented:

The Prague Quartet plunges in with a totally unexpected abandon, as if these four men, thinking as one, were themselves improvising the music Dvorak set down eighty years ago. There is certainly nothing earthbound about their interpretation--at times the animation reaches a level approaching giddiness--but there is also, nonetheless, an anchoring sense of depth and expansiveness..... In its own right, this is simply one of the most stimulating chamber music recordings yet offered from any source.

In 1978 these recordings were awarded the High Fidelity International Record Critics' Award (Grand Prize) during the Salzburg Summer Festivals.

Welcome, Young People--

Parents are encouraged to bring their school-age children to our FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC concerts. We do ask that children under ten years of age not sit in the first five rows of the theater, and that all children sit with their parents. Thank you for your understanding and cooperation.

BRETISLAV NOVOTNY, first violin, was born in 1924. He was laureate of the International Violin Competition in Geneva in 1947. From 1954 to 1960, he held the post of soloist and leader of the Prague Symphony Orchestra. Co-founder of the Prague String Quarter in 1955, he has played first violin for the ensemble ever since.

KAREL PRIBYL, second violin, was born in 1931. He served as leader and soloist for the Prague National Theatre Orchestra, as well as soloist for the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra. He has been with the Prague Quartet since 1957.

LUBOMIR MALY, viola, was born in 1938 and won the Golden Medal of the Helsinki International Viola Competition in 1962. He assumed the post of leader and soloist of the Prague Chamber Orchestra (which performs without conductor) and has also performed with the Prague Symphony Orchestra. He is a professor at the Prague Conservatory.

SASA VECTOMOV, cello, was born in 1930 and studied at the Prague and Moscow Conservatories and in Siena with Andre Navarra. In 1955 he won the Prague Spring Festival Prize and, in 1959, the Casals Prize in Mexico City. He has recorded extensively and performed throughout the world, including at Kennedy Center. He plays the famous "Mazacurati" cello, made by Alexander Gaglianus in Naples in 1712. He joined the Prague Quartet in 1983.

L A T E C O M E R S

In consideration of the performers and our audience, we have adopted the following policy which will be strictly enforced at all future concerts: There will be NO seating while a performance is in progress.

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W I T H

U R S U L A O P P E N S . . . P I A N O

Sunday, November 11, 1984 . . . 3 p.m.

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