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American String Quartet

PETER WINOGRAD, violin
LAURIE CARNEY, violin
WOLFRAM KOESSEL, cello
DANIEL AVSHALOMOV, viola

2:30 PM, Sunday, September 24, 2017
Faye Spanos Concert Hall
University of the Pacific

ANTON WEBERN FIVE MOVEMENTS *Arr. for String Quartet (1928/9)*

(1883–1945) Heftig bewegt; Tempo I
Sehr langsam
Sehr lebhaft
Sehr langsam
In zarter Bewegung

JOHANNES BRAHMS QUARTET IN B-FLAT MAJOR, OP. 67 (1876)

(1833–1897) Vivace
Andante
Agitato (Allegretto non troppo)–Trio–Coda
Poco Allegretto con Variazioni

— *INTERMISSION* —

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN QUARTET IN C-SHARP MINOR, OP. 131 (1826)

(1770–1827) I. Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo
II. Allegro molto vivace
III. Allegro moderato–Adagio
IV. Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile–
Piu mosso–Andante moderato e lusinghiero–
Adagio–Allegretto–Adagio, ma non troppo e
semplice–Allegretto
V. Presto
VI. Adagio quasi un poco andante
VII. Allegro

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ARTIST PROFILE



Internationally recognized as one of the world's foremost quartets, the American String Quartet celebrates its 42nd season in 2017–2018. Critics and colleagues hold the Quartet in high esteem and many of today's leading artists and composers seek out the Quartet for collaborations.

The Quartet is also known for its performances of the complete quartets of Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, Schoenberg, Bartók, Mendelssohn, and Mozart, as well as all the string quintets of Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Brahms. The Quartet's recordings of the complete Mozart string quartets on a matched set of Stradivarius instruments are widely held to set the standard for this repertoire.

To celebrate its 35th anniversary, the Quartet recorded an ambitious CD, *Schubert's Echo*, released by NSS Music. The program invites the listener to appreciate the influence of Schubert on two masterworks of early 20th-century Vienna.

In addition to quartets by European masters, the American naturally performs quartets by American composers. The American also champions contemporary music. The Quartet has commissioned and premiered works by distinguished American composers Claus Adam, Richard Danielpour, Kenneth Fuchs, Tobias Picker, George Tsontakis, and Robert Sirota. The Quartet has recorded on the Albany, CRI, MusicMasters, Musical Heritage Society, Nonesuch, and RCA labels. The Quartet's discography includes works by Adam, Corigliano, Danielpour, Dvořák, Fuchs, Prokofiev, Schoenberg, and Tsontakis.

The Quartet's innovative programming and creative approach to education has resulted in notable residencies throughout the country. The Quartet continues as quartet in residence at the Manhattan School of Music (1984–present) and the Aspen Music Festival (1974–present). The ASQ taught in Beijing, China, from 2005 to 2014, and travels widely abroad.

Webern: *Five Movements*

When first hearing tone rows, one must think it easy to create such a random construct. Composers must just pick notes like number callers choose balls and—bingo!—the piece writes itself. The truth is that atonality and serialism are all about control. Being a very precise person, Anton Webern wrote only notes that were exactly what he wanted.

Webern has two distinctions: a dubious one of being one of the last casualties of WWII when he was shot by an American soldier as he stepped outside for a cigar and was mistaken for a participant in his brother-in-law's black market ring, and a more respectful one of being, with Arnold Schoenberg and pupils Alban Berg and Nikos Skalkottas, a founding pillar of the Second Viennese School, a purpose of which was to use a totally chromatic expressionism to move as far away as possible from the bloated Romanticism of Strauss, Rachmaninov, and others.

Classical music had been governed for nearly 300 years by traditional rules of harmony that atonality, and later serialism, completely rejected. Choosing focus on sound rather than melody, the Austrians championed the intellectual over the emotional.

If harmonic interruption was the first round fired at the old establishment, compositional conciseness was the second shot. For the many who were used to late Romantic pieces lasting an hour or more, Webern's 10-minute works of genius were absolutely revolutionary.

However, the collective moan about modern music not having a tune doesn't apply to Webern. If you are a first-time listener, the challenge is that his melody is rather broken up and consequently perplexing to grasp. The line moves rapidly among instruments and is shifted throughout registers. This is a technique called *Klangfarbenmelodie* or literally tone color melody.

An additional characteristic of twentieth century music was its expanded use of new tone colors and extended techniques. A talented cellist, Webern also had a full knowledge of the techniques available to string players, and in the first movement alone he uses standard pizzicato, Bartók pizzicato, *col legno*, and *sul ponticello*. (If you have left your Italian dictionary at home, the translation is plucking the strings, slapping the string against the fingerboard, playing with the wood of the bow, and bowing near to the bridge.)

Webern wrote *Five Movements*, Op. 5, in the spring of 1909. In summer of 1928, he revisited the pieces, arranging them for string orchestra, but made minimal actual changes in the score. After working on his *Quartet*, Op. 22 and unsatisfied with the orchestral arrangement of Op. 5, he made a new arrangement with more extensive changes in early 1929. This arrangement, introduced in Philadelphia on March 26, 1930, is what we hear today.

The first of the Movements has a pair of themes followed by their development and a reprise and is the most spread-out of the five, with a faintly enthusiastic edginess. This yields to a soft, slow second movement fashioned as sensual and enigmatic using muted strings. Does it feel as if you are eavesdropping through a curtain, unsure of what is coming next? What comes next is a gruff, intermittently frisky third movement sharing some of the liveliness of the first. This finishes with a boisterous unison passage that finishes the blink-your-eye-and-you'll-miss-it third movement. The quartet is then thrown into the spooky contemplation of the expressive, sparse fourth. Listen in the ethereal fifth for a desolate cello line that plays between the high and low limits of register exchanging unnerving for otherworldly. It is soft, fleeting, and slowly diminishes to silence.

Brahms: *Quartet in B-flat Major*

When pressed to complete an essential task, have you ever found that you occupy yourself with less serious trifles that put off the important task that remains ahead. In the summer of 1875, Brahms found himself in that exact situation working on quite a lot of beautiful music as a way to put off completion of the First Symphony. Among Brahms' "trifles" was the third quartet, later to become his favorite of the three he wrote.

Brahms is well known as having a pitiless sense of self-deprecation, which is why even though beginning string quartet composition in his teens and despite frequent urging and requests, he was in his 40s before producing any string quartet he was willing to publish. When finally ready, after an over-twenty-year gestation, he published two at once in 1873 as Op. 51, Nos. 1 & 2. He managed to create his third, Op. 67, in only a single year in 1876. The piece is dedicated to his close friend, physician and amateur violinist, Theodore Billroth.¹

It is common knowledge among the performers of Brahms' chamber music that the sonority of the sound palette of his imagination is better served by quintets and sextets than only four voices who find their resources more taxed and stretched. While a challenge for the strings, their task enhances our enjoyment of his penetratingly personal language and its inimitable originality of texture and melody.

The first of the four movements is a *Vivace* in 6/8 time that should remind you of Mozart's 'Hunt' quartet, K.458, with its 'horn-call' opening. There is also a feeling of sunshine in the country or the elation of a summer outing. Hopefully you

¹ After whom the Billroth II operation, in which the upper part of the stomach is connected to the first part of the jejunum for refractory peptic ulcers, is named (but now we have drugs for that)

will enjoy yourself as much as Brahms seems to be: he is tossing accents and sforzandos into unexpected parts of the measures and frequently alternately shifting between 6/8 and 2/4 time. The players have simultaneously different time signatures and seem to agree to disagree as the theme develops. Things do get sorted out at the recap where everyone seems to be “talking” at once.

The lyrical *Andante* is an outpouring of emotion: balanced phrases, helpful motion in the bass line, and a wide range of melody. But listen for profound, valiant motifs skulking beneath the surface waiting to emerge in a dramatic sequence of boldness. There is a leaping about on a dactylic rhythm (long/short-short), and the opening secure section reappears for the finish. It is one of the loveliest and most exceptional slow movements Brahms ever wrote.

Despite its Italian description as *Agitato*, you won't have to worry about the need for a Billroth II operation or grab your Tums®: you will feel it rhythmically not gastrointestinally. Dancelike, troubled, and restless yet graceful, it seems to bob and sway with downbeats missing, phrases finishing after one bar, and accompaniment directly competing with melody. Listen for the special treatment afforded the viola throughout, playing boldly while the other strings, in muted complement, lend ethereal backing. The first violin affords a balance to keep the music in control, and after a brief, more carefree, structured trio section, the movement ends in a peaceful, but uneasy coda.

The final *Allegretto* restores the piece to the joviality (though not matching the energy) of the first movement. You may hear a reinvasion of the homage to Beethoven's 'Harp' quartet well into the set of variations. This inventive movement lightens the preceding three movements in a charmingly laconic

style, and, despite the harpy intrusion, the variation structure persists. Momentum is lost late in the coda and it almost comes to a close before there is a sweeping, exuberant concluding flourish.

Brahms' chamber works are an undertaking for both performer and listener. He recreated the genre for advanced compositional techniques but he always included a veil of melody, harmony, and formal design of great appeal.

Beethoven: *Quartet in C# Minor*

Beethoven's last five² quartets display the revolutionary innovation that had grown so natural for him that he achieved it without any of the strain present in earlier works. The central thrust of Beethoven's entire life-work had been to take the sonata style he inherited from Haydn and Mozart and to diversify and enrich it with elements of fugue and variation. Quartet No. 14, Op. 131 was the penultimate of Beethoven's completed quartets chronologically (though not in numbering), and these final oeuvres were his ultimate creations. He considered Op. 131 his finest and favorite work, and we think of it with the last two quartets as his crowning achievement, unmatched in spiritual depth, beauty, and power: the most spiritual, tranquil, and unearthly of his quartets. It was not played publicly until after his death.

Opus 131 is seven interconnected movements played without pause, creating a completely organic, well-integrated whole. The seven sections are basically the four conventional movements with a fugal introduction and two connecting interludes.

Listen for the performers to create the underlying unity by maintaining proper relationships of tempo and mood giving the work a smooth flow. One aspect of the network of relationships that holds the seven movements together is a

large-scale rhythmic continuity. You will hear a glimpsed series of musical possibilities anticipated and quoted throughout which are reviewed and rediscovered in the finale. No quartet in history had ever begun with anything remotely like the slow fugue that opens this quartet. Yet at the same time, the movement brings a sense of complete familiarity.

The opening fugue briefly presents in its grave tonal explorations and sublime melancholy the principal keys of all the succeeding movements. The juxtaposition of C# against D creates a dissonance that contributes to the bleak atmosphere of the opening and to the expressive tension throughout. The extreme conflict of the keys is echoed by the motion from *molto espressivo* to *allegro molto vivace* in the scherzo-like second movement. Listen for the opening serenity to be dispelled by an outburst of life.

Subsequent movements resolve the blending of contrasting principles and traditions: the third movement is a prototype of a free cadence leading to the fourth (the center of the work in every respect), a set of six innovative variations.

The fifth movement intensifies the combination technique of the first two movements in which variations of the rondo theme approach, step-by-step, the fugue theme of the first movement. The both gentle and sorrowful sixth movement combines the function of introducing the finale with tangible references to the first movement.

The final *Allegro* concludes with open reversion to the fugue theme of the first movement and, with fusion of the motif combination, scherzo, and final cadences as well as hints at all the preceding movements, frames and sums up the entire work.

— notes © Dr. Michael Spencer

² ...well, 5½ if we assign autonomous status to the Great Fugue, Op. 133, originally intended as the finale to Op. 130

62ND SEASON 2017-2018

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