

FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC

The Vega String Quartet

Wendy Yun Chen, violin I
Jessica Shuang Wu, violin II
Yinzi Kong, viola
Guang Wang, cello

2:30 PM, March 23, 2003
Faye Spanos Concert Hall
University of Pacific
Stockton, California



Quartet in B-flat major, Op. 18, No. 6

Allegro con brio
Adagio, ma non troppo
Scherzo: Allegro
La Malinconia: Adagio—Allegretto quasi Allegro

Ludwig van Beethoven

(1770-1827)

Quartet in G minor, Op. 10

Animé et très décidé
Assez vif et bien rythmé
Andantino, doucement expressif
Très modéré—très animé

Claude Debussy

(1862-1918)

—Intermission—

Quartet No. 12 in F major, Op. 96, "American"

Allegro, ma non troppo
Lento
Molto vivace
Finale: vivace, ma non troppo

Antonín Dvořák

(1841-1904)



THE VEGA STRING QUARTET appear by special arrangement with Sandra Elm Management
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The Vega String Quartet

True to its name, ♦ the Vega String Quartet is a bright star among the new generation of chamber music ensembles. In 1991, they captured the Young Artists Prize at the 40th International Munich Competition, and since then have delighted audiences throughout the United States, Asia, and Europe. The Vega Quartet captured four of the top six prizes at the 1999 Bordeaux International String Quartet Competition, including the international music critic's prize. They have received first prizes at the Coleman Chamber ensemble, the Carmel Chamber Music competition, and the National Society of Arts and Letters String Quartet Competition.

The Vega made its Lincoln Center debut in 2001. In 2002, they joined the artist roster of Carnegie Hall's NYC Neighborhood Concert series. In the 2003-04 season, they are visiting Artists-in-Residence at Emory University in Atlanta performing the complete Beethoven quartet cycle.

The Vega Quartet have performed at numerous music festivals, including Mostly Mozart, Aspen, La Jolla, Rockport, Kingston, and Musicorda. They have also performed live on NPR's Performance Today and on live broadcasts in China, France, and the Czech Republic.

Program Notes

Beethoven—Quartet in B-b, Op. 18/6

The most ambitious project of Beethoven's early Vienna years was the set of six quartets, Opus 18, composed primarily in 1799 and 1800, and published in 1801, dedicated to Prince Lobkowitz. Beethoven seemed determined to master the Viennese high-Classic style, composing for each of its major instrumental genres. His chamber music for strings, including three string trios and two string quintets, marked a gradual liberation from his reliance on the piano as the anchor for his compositional style. The

string trios published in 1798 Beethoven considered his best work up to that date.

The string quartets, the favored media of the Viennese salons, made Vienna a world center for these compositions of which Haydn had been the supreme master. Now Beethoven, according to Kerman, threw the classical framework in doubt. Beethoven had learned the form from Haydn, but he had a tendency to arouse conflicting reactions (a compound of affection and resentment) in his Viennese teachers. At this time, Haydn decided not to take Beethoven with him to London, calling him "the great Mogul" from the provinces. Beethoven was searching for a way to create a special brand of the sonata form, always inherently dramatic; he was reaching for some dimension of tragedy and melodrama, as is clear in his piano sonatas of 1796-1797. Fortune has pointed out that he was creating an expanded long-range tonal drama, using the intensity of the material, dynamic contrasts as well as the generation of momentum.

The last two quartets of Opus 18 show his rather innovative treatment of the four-movement form. The first movements are less extensive, but swift, bland and symmetrical. This treatment caused the latter movements to seem weightier or more arresting. The most visionary of these later movements is the composite finale of Opus 18, No. 6.

The first movement, *Allegro con brio*, introduces a bouncy theme in the violins, answered by the cello, the viola supporting with pulsation. The second subject is a miniature march presented in homophonic texture until the violin elaborates it. The themes are clearly delineated in the development with intriguing variations and motivic juxtaposition.

Adagio, ma non troppo presents a gentle four-note motif repeated on different pitch levels with the addition of ornamentation. A fugal section features melodies sung by the viola and cello. The violin repeats the opening four-note motif section, which alternates with the smooth

melodic portion, and the movement dies out with three short chords.

The *Scherzo* presents another four-note motif repeated rapidly, with a contrasting texture created by a running circular motif.

La Malinconia begins the striking composite final movement with its plaintive little four-note turn over sustained, rich harmony, described by Tyson as a slow, strange sounding chromatic labyrinth. This forty-four bar mystical passage prefaces the *Allegretto quasi Allegro*, a swift, limpid little dance evocative of the waltzes in Viennese ballrooms. The *Adagio* passage returns briefly to arrest the climax before the final statement and coda.

Debussy—Quartet in g, Op. 10

Debussy finished only one quartet, commenting that he had expressed all he had to say in the form with this work. If he had finished a second (which he did begin) he might have achieved, according to Bobbett, "the idealization of string tone." His quartet, finished in 1893, was dedicated to (and is thought to have been first performed by) the Ysaÿe Quartet in Paris for the Société Nationale de Musique. The society was formed to foster "Ars gallica," partly in reaction to the Prussian War of 1871. Indeed, Debussy aimed to free French music from the spell of German Romanticism, saying, after his pilgrimage to Beirut (a site required of musicians), "Je suis musicien français."

Debussy was not interested in mastering the classic forms and his quartet was written during the period when he conceived the *Prelude a l'Après midi d'un Faune* (1892), the unique composition that opened wide the door to the music of the twentieth century marked by a greater harmonic and formalistic freedom. Debussy wrote slowly and his fame rests on a comparatively small output, but he ventured into unexplored territory. His small output of chamber music consists of three sonatas for various instruments with piano or harp, and this quartet.

♦ Vega, a star of the first magnitude, is the brightest in the constellation Lyra

For Debussy, music was primarily a sensuous experience. "French music is clearness, elegance, simple and natural declamation. French music aims first of all to give pleasure," he declared. Debussy had heard a group of musicians from Bali at the International Exposition in Paris and was excited by their (to European ears) ill-tuned pentatonic scales. He wrote, "I no longer believe in the omnipotence of the eternal *do, re, mi*. There must be other scales... Music may be revived by a continual interchange of major and minor thirds" (such as he used in his prelude, *Voiles*). He explored composing with a whole tone scale and abandoned the Baroque harmonic progression. His harmony was to be generated by his melodic ideas, and he found reason "to use incomplete chords and vague floating intervals. By drowning a key, one can always arrive where one likes without difficulty and go out of and enter any door that one prefers. Thus, our world of music becomes enlarged and also more subtle..." Within this freedom, however, Debussy worked with exemplary sobriety and economy.

Debussy disclaimed interest in the classical sonata form with its development section and instead followed the French master of cyclical form, César Franck, in which musical ideas are carried forward from one movement to the next. He based his entire quartet on the theme presented in the very first measures, an impassioned theme, quickly spent. Debussy intended to exercise his "fantasie" through free variation and contrasting material is used throughout. The opening phrase appears in the second movement, the *Scherzo*, first playfully and then more smoothly. Perhaps this pizzicato movement caused Chausson to comment that Debussy's form was lacking in decorum. Debussy countered that Chausson did not let himself go enough. Franck found the quartet too nervous, "all pins and needles."

The opening theme, more drastically altered, appears in the slow movement and in the finale as the lyrical subsidiary theme. There is no culmination with the theme used in an impressive final presentation as Franck might have done. Debussy's approach has been described as nearer to Monet's in

recording the variation of light on the façade of Rouen Cathedral. His ideas are dressed in warm tone colors and rich harmonies, and the instrumental writing is intricate and elegant.

Dvořák – Quartet in F, Op. 96

Dvořák was invited, as an international figure, to be the Director of the New Conservatory of Music in New York. Reluctant to leave his native land, the salary offered him was a small fortune, and with the increasing demands of his large family, he accepted the post for two years. In September of 1892, he took up his post and during his three hours of teaching per day that his timetable allowed, he tried to free his students from European domination which he felt was stifling originality, urging them to search out folk songs, plantation music and Indian music, finding therein the simplicity of fresh melody.

Dvořák had pursued this direction in Czechoslovakia. He had had to learn the great classic forms of German music, aided by his friend, patron, and mentor, Johannes Brahms. His chamber works of 1870 show clarity of compositional technique but the music is somewhat impersonal. Discovering the music of his native Bohemia, he developed his own individual musical language. From their unspoiled rhythms and melodies, he developed a combination of folkloristic idioms and a rather more personal style combined with his sense of formal structure. Works like the *Slavonic Dances* of 1878, with rhythmic verve, local color, and stylistic polish brought him international fame. He brought this same indigenous character to his chamber music.

Dvořák's first American work was his ninth symphony, *From the New World* (1893). Various influences of American folk idioms have been traced by devotees of the work, true to the advice he gave his pupils; in general, however, it is a European work, signified, as the composer pointed out, by the title emphasizing that the work was "from" the new world, a Bohemian looking back to his native land. The American quartet was written after a restorative

vacation in Spillville, Iowa, a Czech community. The Kneisel Quartet gave the first performance on New Year's Day, 1894 in Boston. Dvořák reproduced those features he had developed in other genres in his homeland, impressions of Bohemia, except that here we have impressions of North America, Indians and Blacks notably, achieving a certain "American" language, combined with his own style and European musical tradition.

The opening theme presented by the viola, with a rapid folk-like rhythmic, is a rising melody that offers the material for the other themes of the work. The violins provide a carpet of sound, and the cello is used for percussive rhythmic effects. The melody, like others in the work, is pentatonic, using a five-note scale that contains a minor third but no semitones, the scale of the majority of folk songs. A folk like melody makes the round of the instruments with the cello especially notable. Intermittent strident passages are heard and after a pensive presentation of the slow melody, the movement concludes with a raucous statement.

The *Lento* continues the pentatonic melody given to the viola, above an underpinning six beat ostinato. The melody ends in the low ranges of the cello and viola, the underlying rhythm changed to two beats stroked followed by a pause and two beats plucked.

The *Scherzo: Molto vivace* uses a repeated strong fanfare, alternating with a softer passage and strident passage followed by the melodic.

The tempestuous finale is built on rhythmic passages, the first reiterated in the lower strings, and suggests a Copland-like folk ballet. Smooth polyphonic passages with song-like melodies are interspersed with the rhythmic interludes, and the movement ends in a tutti-type dance, lively, fresh, and vigorous. Thematic links between the movements transcend the wealth of ideas, characters and structures of the composition.

—Notes by Dr. Catherine Roche

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