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Tesla Quartet

ROSS SNYDER, violin

MICHELLE LIE, violin

EDWIN KAPLAN, viola

AUSTIN FISHER, cello

2:30 pm, Sunday, October 29, 2023

Faye Spanos Concert Hall

University of the Pacific

JESSIE MONTGOMERY *STRUM* (2006, rev. 2012)
(b. 1981)

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK *from CYPRESSES, B. 152* (1865, arr. 1887, publ. 1927)
(1841–1904) 1. Moderato (*I Know that My Love to Thee*)
2. Allegro ma non troppo (*Death Reigns in Many a Human Breast*)
3. Andante con moto (*When Thy Sweet Glances Fall on Me*)
11. Allegro scherzando (*Nature Lies Peaceful in Slumber and Dreaming*)

LEOS JANÁČEK *STRING QUARTET NO. 1, The Kreutzer Sonata* (1923)
(1854–1928) Adagio—Con moto
Con moto
Con moto—Vivo—Andante
Con moto—(Adagio)—Più mosso

— INTERMISSION —

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN *QUARTET IN C MAJOR, OP. 59 NO. 3, Razumovsky* (1805–6)
(1770–1827) Introduzione—Andante con moto—Allegro vivace
Andante con moto quasi Allegretto
Menuetto: Grazioso—Trio—Menuetto da Capo—Coda—
Allegro molto

Ariel Artists., P.O. Box 230495, Boston, MA 02123 (215) 717-3129
matthew@arielartists.com — teslaquartet.com

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ARTIST PROFILE



Praised for their “superb capacity to find the inner heart of everything they play, regardless of era, style, or technical demand” (The International Review of Music), the Tesla Quartet brings refinement and prowess to both new and established repertoire. Dubbed “technically superb” by *The Strad*, the Tesla Quartet has won top prizes in numerous international competitions, most recently taking Second Prize as well as the Haydn Prize and Canadian Commission Prize at the 12th Banff International String Quartet Competition.

Now in its second decade, the quartet performs regularly across North America and Europe, with recent highlights including their debut at New York’s Lincoln Center, a return to London’s Wigmore Hall, and performances at Stanford University’s Bing Concert Hall as winners of the prestigious John Lad Prize. Notable festival appearances include the Banff Centre International String Quartet Festival; the Joseph Haydn String Quartet Festival at the Esterházy Palace in Fertőd, Hungary; the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Festival in Germany; and the Festival Sesc de Música de Câmara in São Paulo, Brazil. Having served as the Marjorie Young Bell String Quartet-in-Residence at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, Canada from 2016–2017, the Tesla Quartet also recently completed a four-year community residency in Hickory, North Carolina that included performances and workshops at local colleges, universities, and in the public school system, as well as a dedicated chamber music series.

The Tesla Quartet formed at The Juilliard School in 2008 and quickly established itself as one of the most promising young ensembles in New York, winning Second Prize at the J.C. Arriaga Chamber Music Competition only a few months after its inception. From 2009 to 2012, the quartet held a fellowship as the Graduate String Quartet-in-Residence at the University of Colorado-Boulder, where they studied with the world-renowned Takács Quartet. They have also held fellowships at the Aspen Music Festival’s Center for Advanced Quartet Studies, the Britten-Pears Young Artist Program, and the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival.

Montgomery: *Strum*

Jessie Montgomery is a celebrated composer, violinist, and educator. She is the recipient of the Leonard Bernstein Award from the ASCAP Foundation and the Sphinx Medal of Excellence. Her works are performed frequently around the world by foremost musicians and ensembles. Ms. Montgomery's guiding compositional intention, as quoted in a recent NPR interview, has always been to go for a sound that is a "culmination, like smashing together of different styles and influences," an exciting quality that is immensely relatable and emotionally accessible.

She accomplishes this by interleaving classical music with elements of vernacular music, improvisation, poetry, and social consciousness, making her an acute interpreter of 21st century American sound and experience. Montgomery adds "I've always been interested in trying to find the intersection between different types of music. I imagine that music is a meeting place at which all people can converse about their unique differences and common stories." Her growing body of work includes solo, chamber, vocal, and orchestral works.

Since 1999, Jessie has been affiliated with The Sphinx Organization, which supports young African American and Latinx string players and has served as composer-in-residence for the Sphinx Virtuosi, the Organization's flagship professional touring ensemble.

A founding member of PUBLIQuartet and a former member of the Catalyst Quartet, Jessie holds degrees from the Juilliard School and New York University and is currently a PhD Candidate in Music Composition at Princeton University. She is Professor of violin and composition at The New School. In May 2021, she began her three-year appointment as the Mead Composer-in-Residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Montgomery says *Strum* acknowledges "American folk idioms and the spirit of dance and movement." The work's title refers to the guitar-like plucking of the strings that plays the roles of floating hum, earthy groove, and rapturous thrum.

Originally conceived as a cello quintet, *Strum* is the culminating result of various versions of a string quintet she wrote in 2006. Originally composed for the Providence String Quartet and guests of Community MusicWorks Players, Montgomery then arranged *Strum* for string quartet in 2008 with selected small revisions. In 2012, the piece underwent its final revisions with a rewrite of both the introduction and the ending for the Catalyst Quartet in a performance celebrating the 15th annual Sphinx Competition.

The piece begins with what Montgomery calls "fleeting nostalgia." The voicing unfolds expansively over the ensemble, giving the music a spacious quality. Within the piece, she uses strumming pizzicato as texture motives serving the primary driving rhythmic underpinning of the piece. Layers of rhythmic or harmonic ostinati sequence collectively to form a foundation for melodies to weave in, out, over and amid layers of strumming. Listen for rhythmic intricacy and unique voicing of the parts passing around in unexpected ways and complex interaction of the four instruments requiring intense focus and precise collaboration. Arising from this, the music transforms into ecstatic celebration.

Dvořák: *Cypresses*

When thinking of composer Antonín Dvořák, we usually think instrumental: nine symphonies, several concert overtures, 16 Slavonic Dances, a late group of symphonic poems on traditional Czech folk tales, and abundant piano music. Thus, we are less apt to think of his various vocal works.

But the repertoire for string quartet includes several pieces that were originally vocal, either envisioned for presentation with a singer or as an arrangement of a prior vocal work. Respighi's "Il tramonto," Haydn's *Die sieben letzten Worte unseres Erlösers am Kreuze*, and Steve Reich's *Different Trains* all fall under this type.

The background of Dvořák's charming *Cypresses* for string quartet is a bit more complicated. As a young man of 24, living in Prague and in love with his 16-year-old piano student, Josefina Čermáková, he wrote 18 songs for voice and piano based on a collection of poems by Gustav

Pfleger-Moravský. Of a very personal nature and apparently inspired by Josephína's charm, they were not published, but remained concealed by the composer for 22 years.

However, Dvořák spent many years tinkering with the songs in diverse arrangements and repurposing some of their materials in other pieces. In 1887 he finally sent the songs to be published with the title "*Love Songs*." Around the same time, he found another use for these songs: now happily married to Josefína's younger sister Anna (Josephína had become a star dramatic actress in Prague and the Countess Kounic), he arranged a dozen of them for string quartet in 1887 during a decade when he wrote almost nothing else for string quartet. Although these string quartet versions are usually referred to as "Cypresses" (so named by editor Joseph Suk, Dvořák's student and son-in-law), the composer's title for the group of twelve was the substantially more suggestive "Echo of Songs." Finally, they were published in 1927.

The movements on today's program are love songs in which the beauty of nature and the joy of requited love are beset by destiny and bad fortune. The music is redolent of Dvořák's usual magic: his precise rhythms, dulcet melodies, and rich harmony. The original songs are clearly recognizable, with melodic lines, rhythm, and harmony unchanged. For No.11, Dvořák changed the key; for some he extended by reiteration, for others with some swapping distribution of lines to the various instruments. The candor and honesty of these quartet arrangements make them best heard, as today, in modest collections of three or four.

Janáček: *String Quartet No. 1*

For the first six decades of his life, Leos Janáček was unknown outside his native Moravia, where he served as music teacher, folk music collector and composer. He was appreciated mainly as a composer of operas rarely presented outside Brno, Moravia's main city. But that changed in 1916 when

Janáček experienced a transformation that aroused him to write the music by which we now know him.

Janáček, 62 and a married man, fell in love with 24-year-old Kamila Stösslová, a married woman. There was no literal affair, but Kamila supported an earnest platonic connection with the composer, becoming the muse for an unceasing flow of brilliant music: Four operas, the Glagolitic Mass, the Sinfonietta, the wind sextet *Mládi* (Youth), and the two string quartets.

Subtitled "The Kreutzer Sonata", Janáček's Quartet No.1 was inspired by a like-named novella by Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy was a great believer in open relations outside of formal wedlock, a position with which Janáček now clearly empathized. The novella is the account of a man traveling on a train who shares a story of how he came to murder his wife, to whom he had introduced a violinist, when he suspected the two were having an affair. The catalyst for the murder was their performing Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata and having dinner together(!).

Janáček composed the Quartet over a span of 15 days in 1923, using parts of a similarly titled piano trio he had written in 1909. In one of very few instances of program music for chamber ensemble, the music follows Tolstoy's story over the periodic rhythmic sound of the train movement occurring in each movement.

Although the title does refer to Tolstoy's novella, the music is not a straight-forward chronicle. We repeatedly hear the opening theme in all four movements. This has been hinted to be a kind of obsession depicting the suspicious fixation of the husband, but there is no other indication to support this concept. The edgy scratching of the strings is also an ongoing motive throughout the work. In the third movement, an enigmatic, twisted part of Beethoven's *Kreutzer Sonata* appears, but it is hard to recognize. Instead, you could pay more attention to the original constructs, harmonies, and string writing, which were perhaps stirred by illicit passion. Truly, the piece is mystifying and leaves a great deal open to your own private associations.

Beethoven: *String Quartet No. 9*

This work, a product of Beethoven's "middle" period, is the third of three in his "Razumovsky" cycle of string quartets. Count (later Prince) Andrey Razumovsky,¹ the Tsar's ambassador to the Habsburg Court in Vienna, commissioned Beethoven to write the three quartets² for the Schuppanzigh Quartet (likely the first professional string quartet) with whom the Count frequently played as second violinist. The Schuppanzigh was a group the Count funded, and whose members were considered to be some of Vienna's finest string players. In his commission, his only specific request was that Russian folk tunes be featured in the music. Beethoven fulfilled this request in two of the three quartets, but with melodies that are, as he put it, "real or imitated" Russian themes.

There is evidence to suggest that this piece was written in a hurry: In late October 1806, Beethoven travelled from Silesia to Vienna with his manuscripts packed in a trunk. On the way pouring rain infiltrated the trunk so that the manuscripts were wet when he reached Vienna. Due to these stains on his manuscripts, we know that at this juncture he had just finished the C major quartet's first movement, leaving little time for completion. The smaller scale of this work, the apparent absence of a Russian theme, and also Beethoven's use in the minuet of material sketched years earlier are all factors that may relate to a certain haste in the process of composition.

Op.59 was completed six years after Op. 18, his first quartets, and moved the genre of the string quartet out of the small "chamber" setting and into a different realm of musical priorities. Everything makes sense but is more abstract; development sections are much longer; changes are much sprier and lead to sudden key changes; and some concepts don't finish, interrupted by silence.

The first movement begins with an enigmatic, unhurried prologue of ambiguous and changing tones slowly focusing. After a pause of a full measure, there is a completion on a "heroic" chord. Only then does the first violin declare the

first *allegro vivace*. But wait! Even that is a false start and is replaced after a few bars by the true first subject. This maneuver is featured in many forms and in many contexts in the entire exposition, the development, and the recapitulation.

The slow second movement is a strange and grief-stricken lament, established by the first violin on top of the cello's pizzicato and passed down for completion to the second violin and then viola. The sadness of everything fashioned from this initial song is unrelenting until eventually a second short, lyrical subject brightens up the outlook. However, this restless melody disappears and reappears until finally it is gone forever leaving a feeling of unrelenting despondency.³

In place of a predictable sarcastic Beethoven scherzo at this point, a charming dance leads into an animated trio. This minuet repeats until it gets to a coda, which alternates between pianissimo and crescendo effects, and then leads without pause into the *Allegro molto* fugal subject of the last movement. The composer, author, and teacher D. N. Ferguson has described this Finale as "a huge fugue, on a theme ten bars long that crackles like a dangerous live wire." This extremely unconventional "crackling" drives a wild surge of energy to a heroic ending peaking at *fff*.

Several have hinted that Beethoven created the three Razumovsky quartets as an integrated unit where the extensive first movement of Op. 59, No. 1 is not fully balanced until stabilized by its stunning complement in the finale of Op. 59, No. 3. Possibly the three quartets operate like a colossal three movement work with an extensive and complicated first movement, an anxious, contrastive second movement, and a brilliant, triumphant dénouement.

Written in haste or not, it is a brilliant piece! Hopefully, Count Razumovsky appreciated it.

notes © Dr. Michael Spencer

¹ He was the brother-in-law of Prince Joseph Lobkowitz

² Razumovsky also commissioned the 5th and 6th Symphonies.

³ I suppose this could be a Russian theme!

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*Answer to 9/17 Trivia:
Count Andrey Razumovsky*

*Chamber Trivia for 11/19:
Who selected the first four members of the Julliard String Quartet?*

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