

CORIGLIANO STRING QUARTET - MARCH 10TH

PROGRAM NOTES

Haydn - String Quartet in D minor, Op. 76, No. 2 (Fifths)

Joseph Haydn completed his Op. 76 string quartets in 1797, the first major compositions to emerge from his pen after his two triumphal visits to England. As Haydn himself was well aware, he was now practically universally acknowledged as Europe's greatest living composer. (His dear friend Mozart was already six years dead, and Beethoven was just beginning to establish himself.) As he had successfully done with his twelve symphonies specifically composed for London, Haydn again exerted himself to surpass all previous efforts. He now had forty years of experience writing string quartets and was with justice considered the father and master of the genre. The six quartets of Op. 76 are, in fact, considered Haydn's crowning achievement among all his remarkable legacy of 83 quartets, and the D minor quartet, which we hear today, is one of the two most loved and revered of the set.

D minor is a venerable string quartet key, with the distinction of four great works by Haydn and each of Mozart's only two string quartets in the minor mode. As the premiere exponent of the optimistic and rational Viennese classical style, Haydn in his maturity generally tended to avoid minor keys. However, when he did choose to cast a work in minor, the results were almost invariably of special interest. In the case of Op. 76, we find Haydn conscientiously observing the long tradition of issuing quartets in groups of six including at least one in minor. Especially during his youthful *Sturm und Drang* period, Haydn often used minor keys in a proto-Romantic manor to express intense and even violent subjective emotion. But Haydn also had another typical

approach to the minor mode, writing in a severe, learned, contrapuntal and deliberately “antique” sounding style. It is this second manner that we encounter in the first movement of Op. 76, No. 2.

The opening Allegro lends this piece its popular subtitle the *Quinten* or “Fifths” Quartet, because its musical substance is based almost completely on the initial motif of two descending fifths. As a unifying device, these fifths will also be subtly present in the other three movements as well. But listen now for the basic motif as “Haydn utilizes every contrapuntal device at his disposal: canon, stretto, inversion, *canonizans* (retrograde motion), augmentation, diminution; it is almost a textbook demonstration of late 18th Century learnedness in music” (H. C. Robbins Landon). Please be assured that there is nothing stuffy or dry about all of this. On the contrary, we are offered very exciting music that bristles with energy and also contains flashes of Haydn’s characteristic wit.

The Andante movement, in 6/8 meter, is delicately graceful and begins and ends in major, offering welcome contrast and release of tension. Here the first violin is clearly the soloist, with the other players primarily relegated to providing discreet accompaniment. Listen for the middle of the movement when the melody is varied into a florid string of 32nd-notes, spread over 15 measures.

The Minuet returns us to D minor and a severe contrapuntal style as Haydn launches into a strict canon in two parts (strings paired in octaves). This weird and heavy footed dance has earned the sobriquet “Witches Minuet.” The pulsing, staccato chords of the major key trio provide dramatic contrast before the “witches” return.

The *vivace assai* (extremely lively) Finale partakes of some of Haydn's popular Hungarian style. Its syncopated theme begins the movement in minor, but before long this whole dramatic quartet is brought to a joyous conclusion in ringing D major.

Lorenzo Mitchell

[Here go David's notes on the Atar Arad Quartet]

Smetana - String Quartet No. 1 in E minor, "From My Life"

In addition to their strongly and deliberately Czech national character, all the most famous compositions of Bedrich Smetana carry explicit extra-musical associations. Always he was intent on telling stories and describing things. This goes without saying for his operas such as *The Bartered Bride*, *Dalibor*, and *The Kiss*. *Ma Vlast* ("My Fatherland") is a monumental series of six orchestral tone poems, vividly depicting characteristic scenes drawn from the landscape and history of his native Bohemia. With these works we have Smetana the public figure, deliberately creating and promoting a national school of Czech music. When, on the other hand, he felt the need for more intimate and personal expression, Smetana turned to chamber music. Here too he was impelled to convey a scenario, but now a subjective and autobiographical one. His beautiful Piano Trio in G minor (1855) documents the intense grief he experienced following the death of his beloved little daughter. The String Quartet No. 1, which we here today, he subtitled "From My Life" and, in a letter to a friend, offered a detailed interpretation. Smetana completed this work in 1876, two years after the catastrophic onset of deafness (at age 50) and the resulting end of his public career.

As to the style of my quartet, I gladly leave its appreciation to others, and am not in the least vexed if it does not please, since it stands quite apart from the hitherto

accepted quartet style. I had not intention of writing a quartet according to recipe and the customary formulas, with which I am acquainted through the study of them when, in my youth, I learnt musical theory. With me, the form of each composition is the outcome of the subject. And thus it is that this quartet has made its own form. I wanted to paint in sounds the course of my life.

The opening movement starts abruptly with a single harsh, imperious chord, followed by a softly oscillating 8th-note accompaniment, against which the viola sings a most expressive and dramatic theme: short l-o-n-g long, pause; short l-o-n-g long, pause... Smetana has here provided one of the most memorable and exciting viola solos in the entire chamber repertory. The subject of the first movement is *propensity for art in the early days, preponderance of romantic sentiment, indescribable longing for something which I could not express or even definitely imagine, and also a foreboding, as it were, of my coming misery* (the viola theme, which will return fatefully in the last movement).

Second Movement: Quasi Polka, leads me into reminiscences of the merry life of my youth when I, as a composer of dancing pieces, lavished my music upon the young people, when I myself was widely known as a passionate lover of dancing, and so on. The graceful contrasting middle section, heard twice, *gives musical form to my memories of the aristocratic circles in which I spent many years of my life.*

Third Movement: Very slow and sustained; calls up my memories of the happiness of my first love for a girl who later became my faithful wife. Following a cadenza for solo cello, the sweetly expressive main theme is softly presented by the violin. This same melody will later be sounded fortissimo by all the strings together playing double and triple stops.

Fourth Movement: Realization of the element of national music; joy over this success which is interrupted by the fatal catastrophe; beginning of deafness; outlook into a sad future; passing hope for recovery yet; recollecting the early stages of my career, painful sentiments. Much of this is suggested by means of material recollected from the first movement. Smetana also explains that the long held high tone in the Finale ... is the fateful sound of the highest tones in my ear which announced approaching deafness to me in the year 1874. I have permitted myself this little bit of jesting because it was so fatal to me.

This, then was the object of this composition, which is purely personal, as it were, and therefore purposely scored for only four instruments, which, like intimate friends, discuss among themselves the things, which move me so deeply. Despite these private aims, within five years Smetana's "From My Life" was well on its way to becoming a cornerstone of the string quartet literature.

Lorenzo Mitchell