

Program Notes

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 - 1791)

String Quartet in C major, K. 465 “Dissonance” (1785)

I. Adagio - Allegro

II. Andante cantabile

III. Menuetto. Allegro.

IV. Allegro molto

Mozart's set of six quartets dedicated to Franz Joseph Haydn were written in Vienna between 1782 and 1785 (along with 12 piano concertos, two symphonies, the C minor Mass, many song settings, and the opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio*). The C major quartet is the last of these to be composed. When Haydn heard the premiere of the six quartets dedicated to him, he said to Mozart's father, Leopold “Before God, and as an honest man, I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name. He has taste, and what is more, the most profound knowledge of composition.” High praise, indeed!

The C major quartet earns its nickname from the opening *Adagio* introduction to the first movement. The cello repeats a low C, which seems a natural choice for a piece ostensibly in C major, but then the viola enters with an A-flat, the second violin with an E-flat, and then the first violin with an A-natural. None of these notes belong in a C major chord, and as the notes change by half steps in the opening bars, there are near-misses with some decidedly un-Classical dissonances (or clashes) between the voices. The introduction comes to an unsettled, gloomy close, giving no hint that one of the sunniest and most optimistic of Mozart's quartet movements is about to follow. In sonata form, the Allegro portion of the first movement is perfection in music. Not a single note is out of place, and Mozart's compositional economy is sublime in its natural sense of ease and elegance.

The second movement Andante is a sonatina movement, in that it is lacking the development section that would make it in sonata form. Perfect balance between the four voices, elegantly spun melodies, and precisely balanced phrases combine to make one of Mozart's most perfect “happy” slow movements.

The third movement clearly shows Haydn's influence, with its more peasant, rustic style. It also hints at Haydn's sly sense of musical humor with its slithering chromatic beginning to the opening theme.

The finale, a crackling *Allegro molto*, takes (as is common with many Mozart finales) a stultifyingly simple (even simplistic) theme and turns it into a joyful, energetic, and witty dance. The energy simply builds and builds until one of Mozart's most joyful quartets comes to its ecstatic conclusion.

Antonín Dvořák (1841 - 1904)

String Quartet in F major, Op. 96 “American” (1893)

I. Allegro ma non troppo

II. Lento

III. Molto vivace

IV. Finale: vivace ma non troppo

Dvořák's most loved and well known string quartet was composed during the summer of 1893 in the small northeastern Iowa town of Spillville. He was drawn to Spillville by the large population of Czech immigrants who lived in the area. Leaving the hot, crowded, noisy, and dirty confines of Manhattan also surely had something to do with the relocation. Dvořák was in America as director of the newly-formed National Conservatory of Music. His salary was the unheard-of sum of \$15,000 (nearly \$400,000 in today's dollars!). Based predominantly upon the pentatonic scale (using only the black keys on a piano, for example), it has an open, folksy feel that is particularly evocative of America's native musical styles.

Dvořák chose the viola to open the first movement of the quartet with a straightforward presentation of the main theme, purely based upon a five-note scale. It echoes the opening of Bedřich Smetana's great quartet “From My Life”, which has its own viola solo opening. An expansive second theme presented in the first violin contains possible traces of Native American influence. The movement goes through a fugato section in the development before returning back to a powerful conclusion.

The *Lento* second movement is the emotional center of the quartet. It is largely a soulful duet between the first violin and cello, with the second violin and viola providing a softly undulating accompaniment. It is much in keeping with his other great slow movements - including the *New World* symphony written in New York just months earlier - with long, yearning melodies that may belie Dvořák's homesickness for his native Bohemia.

The third movement, is a variant of the traditional *scherzo* movement. The form layout is ABABA. Notable in the A section is the first violin, who at its highest reaches imitates the song of the scarlet tanager, a species of bird common to the area in Iowa. Dvořák continues the tradition of Haydn who imitated the call of a European lark in his Op. 64 no. 5 quartet “The Lark”. The B section takes the opening A theme, smooths it out, and cuts its tempo in half. In spite of this simplicity, the movement is a pleasure to listen to due to the varied orchestrations that Dvořák employs in its course.

The Finale is in rondo form - ABACABA. It opens with another pentatonic melody borne by propulsive dance rhythms in the second violin and viola. The middle C section is a lovely chorale theme, which provides an oasis of calm before the movement gradually picks up speed and tension, leading to an immensely satisfying conclusion.

Benjamin Britten (1913 - 1976)
String Quartet No. 1 in D major, Op. 25 (1941)
I. Andante sostenuto. Allegro vivo.
II. Allegretto con slancio
III. Andante calmo
IV. Molto vivace

Benjamin Britten was in Escondido, California in the summer of 1941 when he was visited by the philanthropist Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, who commissioned from him his first full-fledged string quartet. It was subsequently given its premiere in Los Angeles in September of that same year. At the work's East Coast premiere in Washington, D.C., Britten was awarded the Library of Congress' medal for service to chamber music in recognition of the piece's excellence.

The first movement opens with the two violins and viola in their uppermost registers playing an eerie, otherworldly chorale while the cello interjects with pizzicato (plucked) figures. An atmosphere of hushed anticipation predominates. The *Allegro vivo* section (which is twice alternated with the return of the opening chorale) contrasts strongly with its slashing, syncopated (off-beat) rhythms and violent contrasts of dynamics. The movement ends with two shortened versions of both the chorale and vivo sections, dissipating into the ether at the close of the movement.

The second movement, *Allegretto con slancio* (with dash), emerges from the silence that the first movement left behind. It is a playful, energetic movement, which is built from the the four note figures that pepper the opening, jumping up and out of the texture of the accompaniment. Like much of Britten's future music, this movement contains a sly, sidelong-glancing sense of humor, almost droll, which belies his musical influence of Dmitri Shostakovich, with whose music Britten was very familiar.

The third movement, *Andante calmo*, is the emotional heart of the quartet. The movement is almost entirely a set of variations on an opening chorale, led at first by the viola (which was Britten's childhood instrument, along with the piano). The middle section combines declamatory fanfare figures in each instrument with the opening chorale, leading back into the opening section, which builds to an emotional climax before fading away to the end of the movement.

The fourth movement, *Allegro vivace*, opens with a sprightly figure in the first violin which is then taken up into a simple, exuberant fugue. The three upper instruments join to play an off-kilter melody over the propulsive, driving rhythms of the cello before fading into a melody that only Britten could write, both sighing and yearning at the same time, which quickly leads back into the opening motives for a headlong rush to the end of this most youthful and playful of Britten's three string quartets.