

ARIEL QUARTET – 2014-15 BIO

Characterized by its youth, brilliant playing, and soulful interpretations, the Ariel Quartet has quickly earned a glowing international reputation. The Quartet was formed in Israel sixteen years ago when its members were young students, and they have been playing together ever since. Recently awarded the prestigious Cleveland Quartet Award, the Quartet serves as the faculty quartet-in-residence at the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music, where they direct the chamber music program and perform their own annual series of concerts – a remarkable achievement for an ensemble so young.

Highlights of the 2014-15 season include a groundbreaking Beethoven cycle performed at New York's SubCulture that includes a midnight performance of the *Grosse Fuge*; a performance featuring music by three generations of Israeli composers at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.; performances resulting from the Cleveland Quartet Award in Kansas City, Austin, and Buffalo; and a tour of South America. The Ariel will also collaborate with the pianist Orion Weiss in a program commemorating the 100th anniversary of World War One featuring three works written in 1914.

The Ariel Quartet performs widely in Israel, Europe, and North America, including two record-setting Beethoven cycles last season, performed before all the members of a quartet turn thirty. The Ariel continues to astonish with its performances of complete works by memory and has remained committed to performing extensively in Israel. In addition, the Ariel has collaborated with the pianists Menahem Pressler and Orion Weiss; violist Roger Tapping; cellists Alisa Weilerstein and Paul Katz; and the American and Jerusalem String Quartets. Additionally, the Ariel was quartet-in-residence for the Steans Music Institute at the Ravinia Festival, the Yellow Barn Music Festival, and for the Perlman Music Program.

Formerly the resident ensemble in the New England Conservatory's Professional String Quartet Training Program, the Ariel has won a number of international prizes including the Grand Prize at the 2006 Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition. After they won the Székely Prize for their performance of Bartók, as well as the overall Third Prize at the Banff International String Quartet Competition in 2007, the American Record Guide described the Ariel Quartet as "a consummate ensemble gifted with utter musicality and remarkable interpretive power" and called their performance of Beethoven's Op. 132 "the pinnacle of the competition."

The Ariel Quartet has been mentored extensively by Itzhak Perlman, Paul Katz, Donald Weilerstein, Miriam Fried, Kim Kashkashian, and Martha Strongin Katz, among others. The Quartet has received extensive scholarship support for the members' studies in the United States from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation, Dov and Rachel Gottesman, and the Legacy Heritage Fund. Most recently, they were awarded a substantial grant from The A. N. and Pearl G. Barnett Family Foundation.

June 2014

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Quartet in E-flat Major, K. 428 (Einstein No. 421b)

Allegro non troppo ~ Andante con moto

Menuetto: Allegro ~ Allegro Vivace

Composed within weeks of his previous quartet, K. 421, Mozart probably completed K. 428 by the end of July 1783. Although concise and compact, it very successfully projects a reflective, pensive personality.

Instead of a straightforward first theme, the four instruments play an unharmonized melody in octaves replete with many notes alien to the home key of E-flat. A warmer, harmonized passage with an insistent little rhythmic figure in the second violin establishes the E-flat tonality. Mozart then loudly repeats the opening phrase, this time harmonized with lush, romantic-sounding chords. After expanding this idea, Mozart thins out the texture and has the first violin and then the viola state the second theme. A spate of scampering scales ends the exposition. The brief development, mostly concerned with the start of the second theme, leads to the recapitulation, which includes a few measures of development of the principal subject. The movement ends without a coda.

The melodies of the Andante con moto are not particularly distinctive or memorable. Far more musical interest is attracted by the advanced, chromatic harmonies that Mozart employs throughout the movement. Particularly striking to modern audiences is the passage in the development section that bears an uncanny resemblance to the famous motif from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, which was written seventy-six years later! The music has a dreamlike, yearning quality, as well as a slight sense of urgency that comes from the frequent use of suspensions – one instrument holding on to a note while the others change to a new harmony.

The vigorous opening of the Menuetto provides the quartet's first forceful rhythmic impulse. While not especially dancelike, the Menuetto does have a good, strong swing to it. The smoother, rather melancholy strains of the trio, though, bring back the work's somber character before the music is reinvigorated by the Menuetto's return.

The impish opening of the finale, however, completely changes the quartet's mood to one of cheerful good humor. The attractive tunes, the unexpected silences, the alternation of forte and piano passages, the witty treatment, and the overall sturdiness show Haydn's influence very clearly. In form the movement is a rondo. The principal subject is stated three times with slight variations, the first violin countermelody in the final statement providing a most felicitous touch. Between the repetitions there are two appearances of slightly more lyrical contrasting episodes that differ more in key than in character.

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Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

String Quartet No. 5

Allegro - Adagio molto - Scherzo: Alla bulgarese
Andante - Allegro vivace

Having devoted much of his life to the collection and study of the folk music of his native Hungary and other lands, Bartók believed that composers could use this material in any one of three ways. They could incorporate folk melodies in their music, compose original melodies in folk style, or absorb the essence of the folk idiom and integrate it into their own compositions.

For the three years before writing the Fifth Quartet, Bartók was actively involved with the first approach, spending a good deal of time collecting, transcribing, and arranging folk songs and dances. The Fifth Quartet, though, belongs solidly in the third category. No peasant melodies, original or imitation, are to be heard. Instead Bartók uses the vitality and expressiveness of folk music as the inspiration for a highly sophisticated, completely original composition.

The quartet consists of five movements arranged in an arch or bridge form; that is, the first and fifth sections are fast and share thematic material, the second and fourth are slow and similar in mood, and the third forms the central keystone of the entire work. The opening theme is a series of repeated hammered notes that reminds Bartók biographer, Lajos Lesznai, of the laments sung by the Szekely people from the southern part of what is now Romania. After being so firmly rooted on one note, the angry, dissonant second theme is distinguished by gigantic upward leaps in all the instruments. The tempo gradually slows for the second violin's presentation of the third theme, a lyrical line that gently rises and falls in contour. The three themes are developed before Bartók brings them back for the recapitulation. But in keeping with the overall mirror image of the quartet, they are heard in reverse order. Also, they are inverted, so that the third theme falls and rises, and the second theme dives downward.

The Adagio molto is a wonderful example of Bartók's so-called night music, his unique evocation of the distant sounds of nature on a still, dark evening. Out of the birdcall trills and half-heard murmurings, little wisps of melody call to mind dimly remembered folk songs. As the air clears, a pained, anguished melody emerges, but it too soon disappears into the shadows.

Bartók's familiarity with Bulgarian folk songs probably inspired the Scherzo's rhythmic asymmetry, which he achieves by dividing the nine notes of each measure into groups of four, two and three. The fluid melody, however, flows easily over the irregular accents of the accompaniment. A slightly faster trio functions as the fulcrum of the movement and of the entire quartet. The viola states its slightly out-of-balance, folklike melody over the first violin's muted rustling. The movement ends with a much modified repeat of the Scherzo.

The fourth movement recreates the night-music mood of the second movement, perhaps now with an added edge of coldness and aloofness. An agitated and passionate middle section is heard before the opening mood returns.

In the Finale, Bartók brings back the peasantlike vitality of the first movement. Certain thematic connections appear, but they are more obvious to the eye than to the ear. Near the end of the movement, Bartók interrupts the breakneck forward motion with a puzzling brief section that he marked *Allegretto, con indifferenza*, a banal little tune that grows increasingly out of tune as it progresses. The original vigor then resumes to end the movement.

Bartók composed the quartet in the uncharacteristically short time of one month, from 6 August to 6 September, 1934, on commission from the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation. The dedication is to Mrs. Coolidge, who was such a remarkable and perceptive patron of chamber music. Its first performance was given in Washington, D.C., by the Kolisch Quartet on 8 April, 1935.

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Ludwig van Beethoven

(1770-1827)

String Quartet in E Flat Major, Op. 127

- I. Maestoso; Allegro
- II. Adagio, ma non troppo e molto cantabile
- III. Scherzando vivace
- IV. Finale

In response to Prince Galitzin's commission, Beethoven began composing his Op. 127 quartet in May 1824, completing it in February of the following year. The premiere was given by the Schuppanzigh Quartet in Vienna on March 6, 1825, but because the group had only two weeks to rehearse, it was very poorly played and just as poorly received. Beethoven then invited a quartet led by Joseph Bohm to prepare the music under his guidance. Since he was already completely deaf, he coached them by watching their bow and finger movements. The highly successful performance on March 26 delighted Beethoven and led to a total of nine more performances over the next several weeks.

The short, slow introduction that opens the quartet is broad, strong, heavily accented, and thickly written. It is followed by the faster first group of themes, starting with a lyrical melody that Beethoven marked *teneramente*, or tenderly. Over sharp repeated notes in the second violin and viola, the first violin introduces another, more forceful theme to conclude the first group. The second group returns to the cantabile character of the opening, minimizing the contrast that customarily occurs between the groups of themes in sonata form. The development starts with a return of the introduction, one level louder, and then, back in the faster tempo, the music builds to a powerful emotional climax. Before the development is finished, though, the introduction returns for a third time, louder even than before. Beethoven goes back to the faster tempo once more, which leads to the sneaky start of the recapitulation and proceeds to a coda and soft ending. The result is a stunning movement that follows the law, if not the spirit, of standard sonata form.

The Adagio is a set of five free variations based on two themes of sublime, serene simplicity. Left behind are previous variation movements in which Beethoven maintains the underlying melody, harmony, and rhythm and merely embellishes and elaborates the original theme. In Op. 127, he expresses the loftiest, most profound sentiments through his emotionally complex transformations and transfigurations of the two themes. As Robert Schumann said of this movement, "One seems to have lingered not fifteen short minutes but an eternity."

The Scherzo vivace, with its energy, its élan vital, brings the listener down to earth from the exalted spiritual plane to the Adagio. After four pizzicato chords of introduction, the cello states the rhythmically incisive main theme, which is then expanded and developed to enormous proportions. In a whirling, virtuosic middle section, the first violin takes whispered melodic flights over repeated notes in the other instruments. This is followed by a literal repeat of the opening section.

In a curious lapse, Beethoven marks the last movement Finale, but without any tempo indication; the musical content, though, seems to call for a bright, fast tempo. After a brief unison phrase of introduction, the first violin sings out the lighthearted first theme. A second theme, starting with sharp, repeated notes and continuing with heavy accents, follows. After developing and returning the thematic material, Beethoven appends a coda in a strikingly different key, meter, and tempo, creating a completely new tonal aura and rhythmic pattern (although based on the movement's opening theme), which ends the quartet on a strongly positive note.

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