

Program notes by Brett Rutherford

(The performers chose to play Haydn's Op. 33 No. 5 instead of the first work listed, and a fine performance it was, too. The notes on Op. 77 No. 2 will remain here because – why not? - JL)

String Quartet No. 67 in F, Op. 77 No. 2, H. III:82

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Allegro moderato

Menuet: Presto

Andante

Finale

String Quartet (2009, World Premiere)

Wolfgang Muthspiel (b. 1965)

String Quartet No 15 in G, D. 887, Op. 161

Franz Peter Schubert (1797 -1828)

Allegro molto moderato

Andante un poco moto

Scherzo: Allegro vivace – Trio: Allegretto

Allegro assai

String Quartet No. 67 in F, Op. 77 No. 2, H. III:82 (1799)

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

The Haydn and Schubert masterpieces on tonight's program are each composer's last work in the quartet genre. Both quartets are haunted by Beethoven. Haydn, in failing health, published his uncharacteristically short set of only two quartets in his Opus 77 in 1799 (quartets were usually published in sets of six). The young Beethoven, who had briefly been Haydn's student on his arrival in Vienna, had just published *his* six quartets, Opus 18, and with that publication the quartet had exploded from the politeness of classical Europe into the Age of Revolutions. Haydn, who had literally invented the string quartet, backs out the door with a bow and flourish in these two gentle, bustling, essentially happy works.

Dedicated to Prince Lobkowitz (also a patron of Beethoven's), Haydn's F Major Quartet has a concertante or concerto-like manner. The violin is clearly the leader, the boss, the Hobbesian head of state. There is a sense of the music being written from the top staff down, except perhaps in the busy dance of the finale.

The two themes of the first *Allegro moderato* movement have much in common: in fact, the second is derived from the first. A tiny rest precedes the statement of the second theme. The exposition is repeated, and then Haydn ratchets up the tension a little in the development, phrases of the main theme tossed among the instruments. The real development here is melodic rather than harmonic, as we hear both themes combined, echoed, their similar contours stranded together even as their rhythmic differences make it possible to retain their identity. An emphatic "grand pause" signals the end of the development and the return of the themes (the "recapitulation").

Haydn's sense of the work's overall balance is a sound one. Since the first movement is so easy-going, its tensions relieved so smoothly, the composer senses we are not really needful of repose so soon. No, let us dance: Haydn surprises by placing his minuet here instead of in the usual third-movement spot. This Minuet is *Presto*, spry, not for dowagers (and not for Mrs. Haydn, rumored to be the most unpleasant woman ever married to a musician, but maybe for the spritely English ladies who caught Haydn's fancy on his British tour). The main theme's self-contained crescendo seems to prolong and extend the energy of the first movement rather than let it fade out: if you have been made to dance, there is an urgency about it. The contrasting Trio section is in the odd key of D Major, a tonality the brief ten-bar coda chisels away, a neat segue into the songful *Andante*.

The D Major *Andante* is the most "typical" movement of the quartet, an Italianate aria for violin and cello, with the middle voices subordinated. In mid-movement, the four players are all finally pulled into the working out of the theme. It is not without drama, too: after several pages of serious fiddling on the part of the first violin — a cornucopia of 64th notes making an elaborate filigree while viola and cello carry the melody — Haydn offers a run up to some climactic double-forte chords, but then, like the lover's quarrel it possibly depicts, calm is restored.

The finale, marked *Vivace assai*, is more orchestral, and its great sense of *brio* makes one think of the celebratory gusto of the pastoral choruses in *The Seasons*, Haydn's miraculous late choral masterpiece. This kind of perpetual motion, skipping and dancing, is "young man's music," and Haydn remained able to turn on this kind of infectious music-making right up till his last days. It is made to seem like a spontaneous flow, a fountain that cannot ever run out.

** (Note for musical sticklers: Yes, there is a later Haydn quartet, published as Op. 103, but the work is unfinished.)

String Quartet

Wolfgang Muthspiel (b. 1965)

To be present at the premiere of a new string quartet is a rare honor – or is it like taking someone else's place for a dentist appointment? We suspect the honor will be ours, from the glowing reviews that

Wolfgang Muthspiel has received for his many roles as composer, band leader, violinist, jazz guitarist and record producer. The puzzle of an Austrian composer who plays and composes in the jazz medium is partially explained by the years Muthspiel spent in Boston at the New England Conservatory and Berklee College. His long list of recordings is evidence of collaborations with unusual ensembles, such as an earlier quartet for trombone, marimbaphone, guitar and violin. The extent of collaboration with, rather than commands to, musicians, is evidenced by the composer's statement that, "For 80% of my compositions no ordinary scores exist."

**We do not know — and indeed delight in our suspense over — what will be offered in Muthspiel's brand new quartet tonight. We do know that Muthspiel and The Hugo Wolff Quartet are collaborating in April in a performance at the Esterhazy Palace in Eisenstadt. There, in the hall where Haydn played and conducted, they will be joined by a jazz quartet (piano, guitar, brass and percussion) for a Muthspiel "double quartet" composition threading the music of Haydn with his own.

What shall we expect from Muthspiel's musical palette? Here's what is said of him on his record label's website: "His highly personal musical language embraces openness ... various influences from Messaien, Glenn Gould, Bach's lute works, renaissance choral and Austrian folk music to Miles Davis, Prince, and Bill Evans."

Ready or not, here it is ... tucked between the last two masterpieces of two dead great Austrian composers, this music from today's young, jazzy Austria, via Boston and New York.

String Quartet No 15 in G, D. 887, Op. 161 (1826)

Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828)

How could this great masterwork, Schubert's last completed quartet, go unheard and unpublished until 1851? The first movement alone places it among the ranks of the truly great quartets. Written as it was in awe of Beethoven, whom Schubert was too shy to approach, it commands our full attention and awe from the first bar. The *Allegro molto moderato* begins with a swelling effect, from piano to forte in two bars, a huge *ff* chord already pulling us into the darkness of the minor. It repeats, with a d minor chord, clearly establishing that light-dark/major-minor tensions will be the order of the day. The main theme, with a dotted rhythm and a wide interval leap at the outset, provides a recognizable "cell" that will recur throughout the quartet and provide a sense of unity.

The real miracle here, however, is not just the technical construction of harmonies and motifs. When, in the 15th bar, the violin sings over a tremolo accompaniment from the other strings, we are plunged into a "sound world," a tonal painting. The effect is electrifying. When the second theme is stated, almost march-like, the solo violin takes off, playing tremolo, reversing the effect that preceded, one "trembling" voice against the legato movement below.

**This gives way to a very excited, virtuosic passage. The cello repeats the second theme, with pizzicato accompaniment. After another agitated passage, the viola gets a turn at the theme against pizzicato violins and cello. All of the foregoing may repeat (at the option of the players), and then a very Beethovenian bridge passage leads into the development.

Musicologists enthuse much about the working out of Schubert's development, which is very complex. There are many shifts in tonality, and the themes are varied, especially with triplets, leading to a very quiet recapitulation. For the coda, Schubert revisits the opening material with its dotted rhythms and minor-chord tensions. For the listener, it is the end of an almost symphonic journey — not just the composer doing his job in building a sonata-form work — but a passage through a complete sound-world, fraught with passions and perils, and a thrilling return to where one started.

The *Andante un poco moto* that ensues is so remarkable, so “Romantic” a work, that I find it impossible to consider it merely in musical terms. The mournful, stately, processional theme that opens it, a cello lament, interlaced with atmospheric intervals with piercing “cries,” implies a narrative. It is not about key relationships and the development of “motifs”; it is something else. So listener, let me hallucinate in the most unmusicological way, that this tragic canvas is a recreation of some great episode in Greek myth. It begins *in medias res*, with a sense that some catastrophe has already occurred. We stand before the walls of Thebes under a gray sky, the sun blotted behind sinister clouds. Queen Niobe, punished by Apollo and Diana for her pride and boasting, leads the funeral procession that brings forth her sons — seven, all slain by the arrows of the gods. Her seven daughters lead the mourners. Niobe is still not bowed. Even with her sons gone, she boasts, she has more children than Latona, the Titan mother of Apollo and Diana.

I hear in the six interruptions of this sad, sad music, the return of the wrathful gods, who sit on a cloud-top and fire more arrows into the funeral procession. The piecing high notes that interrupt the flow of the music are the arrow strikes, the rending of Niobe's heart as her daughters are killed before her eyes. This is the cruelest moment in Greek myth, told by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. Niobe, bereft of her daughters, holding the last one in her arms, freezes in place. She weeps, and weeps, and weeps. She becomes stone, a rock from which her tears flow as a fountain, for all eternity.

**You may hear something altogether different in this movement of stately mourning and stark pain. As a modern listener, you may refuse altogether to make any extra musical connections. Yet Schubert loved the Greek classics and wrote many songs on mythological themes, and one of the hit operas of 1826 was Pacini's *Niobe* (!). Her name was in the air, she was the symbol for inconsolable grief. Beethoven was thrilled when one of his friends guessed that one of the Op. 18 quartet slow movements was “about” Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. I shall wait for Schubert's ghost to give me a “bravo” or call me a fool. At least we Romantic fools live deeply.

Now, on to the spritely *Scherzo*. This music, in D Major, bears resemblance to scherzi by Mendelssohn, a light fairy grace, a touch of moonlight. In the Trio, the players get to pair off in a succession of duets. A slow decrescendo lets the Trio die away like a dream, followed by a repeat of the Scherzo.

The finale, *Allegro assai*, torn between G Major and G Minor, has an almost Rossini-like quality, an opera overture for quartet. It is full of dynamic contrasts, sudden jumps from loud to soft, and the 6/8 tempo pits its six beats against the two-note dotted rhythm from the first movement. This harmonic and rhythm tension keeps everything flying, with rondo-like repeats of the opening material. But there's nothing mechanical about what happens here: it is a roller-coaster ride and a serious workout for the

players. If one thinks of the tarantella and its possessed dancing, one is not far off the mark. Schubert, like Haydn before him, chooses to exit dancing.

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