

## Program notes by Brett Rutherford

**Franz Joseph Haydn**

**(1732 -1809)**

String Quartet in D, Op. 64 No. 5 “Lark”

Allegro moderato

Adagio cantabile

Menuetto. Allegro

Finale. Vivace

It's fortunate that we have nicknames for a number of Haydn compositions, since they are so numerous (68 quartets and 108 symphonies, for instance), and even if the nicknames were not assigned by the composer, we are grateful for them and glad they adhered to the works. Younger listeners, impatient for high drama and big effects, can be impatient with prolific Haydn and his “typical” quartets. But “typical”, for Haydn, doesn't mean boring. This tireless inventive composer created the quartet genre almost single-handedly, transforming the quartet from a minimal “dinner music” ensemble into a form worthy of serious study. You can eat dinner while a Boccherini quartet plays in the background — not so Haydn.

Musicians likewise grow to love Haydn as they get older. They love the wit, the pathos, the endless surprises. Tonight's “Lark” quartet comes from the glorious set of six from 1790-1791, the years when Haydn became financially and politically independent after the death of his patron Esterhazy, on whose estates and in whose Vienna palace Haydn had become a kind of musical prisoner.

The first movement begins tersely with a sequence of staccato notes, punctuated with rests. Two notes upward, three notes downward. Although this sounds like the accompaniment for the violin melody on the high E-string that ensues, don't be fooled: this short motive *is* the first theme; the violin melody with its lark-like trills is the second.

The entire movement, marked more by serenity than by struggle, is based upon the interplay of the singing melody against the up-and-down first motive. If the melody is bird-flight or birdsong, the motive is ground and gravity. The first violin does get to show off with some strettis, scale passages, octave-wide grace notes and trills, a kind of bird-on-a-wire behavior that suits the “lark” suggestion. In mid-movement there is some drama: dynamic contrasts with some loud-soft-loud chords, followed by a surprising seven-bar passage in which all four players play in unison. Excitement, yes, but more a mysterious flurry in the trees caused by an errant wind.

The second movement, marked *Adagio cantabile*, is a “typical” Haydn quartet slow movement, in a manner Haydn established decades earlier when he pulled together the quartet genre. The first violin takes the center stage in an almost operatic mode, carrying most of the melodic burden, with the other instruments taking a subsidiary role. The movement is in A Major, the dominant of the home key of D (*i.e.*, five notes above), and the middle section slides into the wistful melancholy of A Minor, and then back again. Haydn is not a natural melodist, so lovely ariosos such as these are hard-won, like a dowager who has achieved a seduction through make-up, dim lighting and a superior wardrobe. Haydn plays with variations by having the viola and cello repeat some of the same music, while changing what the two violins play.

The “typical” Menuetto movement has a Trio section in D Minor.

Haydn's finale, similar to an English "hornpipe," was an instant hit in its day, and was popular well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century in an arrangement for violin and piano. It's a violin whirligig, the other instruments hammering out a staccato accompaniment. There's a shift into the philosophical gloom of D Minor for a fugal section, a leap up to the dominant A Major, and then safely back home to D Major – predictable modulations but brilliantly executed in a non-stop *perpetuum mobile* style. This is young man's music from an old hand, and an ample demonstration of why Haydn remained the "Papa" of his contemporaries.

**Franz Peter Schubert** (1797 -1828)

String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 29, No. 1, D. 840

Allegro ma non troppo

Andante

Menuetto. Allegro.

Allegro moderato

It's hard not to seek programmatic meaning in this next-to-last quartet from Schubert, the only quartet he saw published in his lifetime. Written at a time of personal despair as he confronted his terminal illness, and at a time of personal isolation when all his close friends had left Vienna, it is a brave, backward look at lost times, lost youth, and even at the lost ideal of Greece so beloved of Schubert and his contemporaries.

This thirteenth quartet of Schubert resembles Mendelssohn's Op. 13 in the same key, with its self-quotation from songs. Anyone who knows Schubert's heart-rending song, "Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel" will instantly recognize the opening bars of this quartet: it is the spinning wheel accompaniment that underlies Schubert's 1814 song, his second published work. The first stanza translates as "My peace is gone. My heart is heavy. Never will I find it again." Schubert, while at work on the quartet, called himself, "The most unhappy and wretched creature in the world." The violin melody that picks up in bar 3 is not Schubert's Gretchen song, but a totally different theme. It has the wistful sadness of A Minor about it, but Schubert, mercurial as always, sweetens it into the major briefly (the bright pain of remembered love).

The movement shows off Schubert's perfection of his own unique quartet style. After the second subject is introduced (listen for dotted-note triplets and trills), you will hear many delightful details in the working out. Instruments are paired off in twos. Bursts of counterpoint and fugato break out. The violin sings over Beethovenian solid chords on the other three strings. There's a dazzling stretch of highly chromatic give-and-take among the players. The bright world of A Major asserts itself, and after some drama, we come back to A Minor, and the return of the "Gretchen" accompaniment. After a final restatement of the wistful violin main theme, the trilled-triplet theme, played double-forte, begins what sounds like a recap, but in four bars it is all over. Just like that thwarted love affair you can't ever forget.

Schubert's *Andante* second movement is also founded on self-quotation, this time from his *Rosamunde*, a theme that would also find its way into the Piano Impromptu, Op. 142 and into the *Wanderer Fantasy* for piano. This theme seems to have drawn the composer back again and again, just as Beethoven used his own favorite theme in the Prometheus ballet, in a set of piano variations, and then in the Eroica symphony.

The cello sings alone at the beginning of the Menuetto — a self-quotation: this time the opening of Schubert's neo-classical Schiller song, "The Gods of Greece," which begins "Bounteous world, where art thou? Come again, O lovely age of Nature's blossoming!" This is a wistful, almost sad minuet, something you might dance to after losing an election, or after calling a party to which no one comes except the ugly cousins. (Or the lament of a classical scholar who realizes that no one honors his pagan gods.) It is brilliant in its somber beauty, kind of an Austrian *Valse Triste*. The ensuing major-key Trio has a lovely, arpeggiated theme, and then we are treated to a repeat of the Menuetto. This movement received the most applause at the 1824 premiere, and was the only part of the quartet singled out for contemporary praise.

The Rondo-style finale, which some critics have dubbed Hungarian in flavor, marked *Allegro moderato*, is one of those mood-breaking final movements that Romantic composers felt compelled to affix to their gloomiest outpourings, a "drink this before you go" assertion. Schubert's melody, with its grace notes and dotted rhythm, and the playful use of ritards, crescendi and decrescendi, assure us that the Haydn finale tradition was part of Schubert's schooling.

**Béla Bartók** (1881-1945)

String Quartet No. 2, Op. 17 (1915-17)

Moderato

Allegro molto capriccioso

Lento

Bartok went his own way in music. An admirer of Richard Strauss and the whole Germanic tradition of classical music, he turned his back on that world after his early works. His study of Hungarian and other Eastern European folk music, much of it done in the field, led to his adoption of modal and pentatonic scales, and to his rejection of standard key relationships. Although Bartok's music has development, modulation, struggle and resolution, he employs a totally different map of tonal relationships. His music permits chords that other composers would shun, and which some audiences still regard as something like a mouthful of alum. The sense of unease, of not knowing what is coming next, seems always there in Bartok, yet he remains essentially tonal, and highly committed to melody, harmony, rhythm, and musical communication, even if his compositional principles include some that would send Brahms shrieking from the room.

The quartet we hear tonight, Bartok's Second, has grown on audiences, and on players. The six Bartok quartets are now regarded as keystones of the 20<sup>th</sup> century quartet literature, and, let us admit it, things that sounded incomprehensible to our grandparents no longer seem so to us. We who sit through entire Mahler and Shostakovich symphonies without a qualm need not be daunted by a quartet with some astringent harmonies and Martian-sounding melodies? In fact, I know chamber music fans who listen to all six Bartok quartets frequently, and I see no signs of dementia. I am willing to be persuaded.

This is a wartime quartet, and perhaps its somber cast and its slow-fast-slow structure owes something to the tragic era in which it was composed, four years in which 9.5 million civilized Europeans were killed by other civilized Europeans. The rhapsodic first movement is loosely in sonata form. The violin introduces the main theme, which straddles bars of 9/8 and 6/8, and incorporating fourth-intervals and semitones, all derived

from Bartok's folksong studies. (Imagine young Schoenberg or Alban Berg possessed by the ghost of a Transylvanian country fiddler). We are seduced with a *dolce* passage; our ears are pulled into the familiar with octave doublings, cello arpeggios; we are pulled off center by frequent changes of tempo, meter, and dynamics, but these are things we expect in Hungarian music. It is disquieting music, with a lyrical soul, a baffled missive from the edge of an abyss.

The driving, rhythmic second movement reflects some of Bartok's ethno musicological studies far from home: among the Berber people in North Africa. Some of their rhythms, and a drone effect, are echoed in this disturbing intermezzo. The melody, which has a sense of almost barbaric simplicity about it, is ornamented, varied, but always captive to the driving rhythms. Some of the chords formed in this movement contain the dreaded tritones, the use of which used to get one expelled from the conservatory or even excommunicated from the Church. This is big-booted dancing, with insistent repetition. Critic Roger Parker counted 238 repetitions of the same "D" note in this movement, an exercise that probably no one else wishes to repeat. The music slows down nine times, and accelerates eleven times. The climax of this movement "Prestissimo" with mutes on the strings, is regarded as virtually unplayable as written. Lucky for us, and for the players, it's on the second half of the program.

The final movement is slow, resigned, philosophical. Inevitably one thinks of the exhaustion of Europe at the end of the First World War, and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It is not music of grief, but of shell-shocked amnesia, a voice asking "Tell me who I am." The Lento opening, played *con sordino* (with mutes), has an air of unmistakable desolation. Bartok himself was not able to describe the form of this movement. It is what it is, a piece of musical expressionism, inseparable from its time and place of conception. The two pizzicato "A"'s which end the work leave the listener stunned, baffled, mortal. And, let us hope, grateful.