

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN — String Quartet in Bb, Op. 18 No. 6 (1800-1801)

- I. *Allegro con brio*
- II. *Adagio ma non troppo*
- III. *Scherzo*
- IV. *Finale: "La Malinconia" (Adagio) — Allegretto quasi Allegro – Tempo I – Allegretto – Adagio – Allegretto – Poco Adagio -- Prestissimo*

Haydn and Mozart set a high standard for the genre of the string quartet, and young Beethoven took his time before following in their footsteps. He tried his hand at some quartets, which were played privately by his musician friends and patrons. These he withdrew, and his painstaking revisions finally yielded the six quartets of Opus 18. The sixth quartet in Bb that we hear tonight is not as fraught with drama as some of the others in the group, at least not in its opening movements.

In the opening *Allegro con brio*, Beethoven introduces an opening subject that Haydn might have handed his one-time pupil – three short notes with a leading grace note, followed by two sets of quarter notes using ascending fifths. The motive revolves snugly around the tonic note of Bb. This motive is tossed around among the four players, and the cello echoes it with *descending* fifths, and a few more notes to extend the melody. The ground is set for Haydn-esque elaboration. But young Beethoven, already the rebel, introduces a bridge passage with scales and a repeated high G, ending on a Mozartian cadence. We'll call this the "M passage." The expected sweet second theme then ensues, in the dominant key of F Major, but with some dipping into the minor for a tinge of wistful sadness.

After a tremolo chord, the main theme is repeated, but this time, the "M passage" is attached to it. In the development section, the M passage is played contrapuntally, teasing us into expecting a fussy fugue, but the opening motive happily interrupts it, like country dancers breaking up a professors' seminar. There is a strange rest, followed by two chords that sound humorously like tuning-up. This leads into the recapitulation where the main motive and "M" are joined in an even more aggressive way. We hear the second theme again with its hint of melancholy and its dramatic *decrescendi*. The final statement of the original theme leads to the final chords.

The *Adagio ma non troppo* in Eb suggests an opera aria. The second theme is in the dark realm of Bb Minor. Then a more elaborate version of the first theme appears, followed by a short coda that twists us into C Major, then drops two pizzicato chords to wrench us back to Eb. It is not necessary to analyze this music: this is a song, to be enjoyed for the beauty of its first violin melody and the inventiveness of its accompaniment. There is one eerie passage of note when the first and second violins play the same notes one octave apart, while the viola and cello play their accompaniment in octaves as well.

The *Scherzo* was understood as an exercise in musical wit, breaking away from the older tradition of elegant but predictable Minuets. Beethoven's melody jumps the bar line and the irregular beats just won't count in any kind of familiar way – kind of like a centipede with legs missing. A skipping Trio section introduces a theme whose rhythms do match our expectations, but then we are brought slyly back into the disjointed opening theme. Curiously, it doesn't sound as lopsided when heard after the Trio.

Now, forget everything that has gone before. The short *Adagio* introduction Beethoven titles "La Malinconia" takes us to a dark world – perhaps the banks of the River Styx. The voices you hear may be Orpheus, or Virgil, or Dante. It is a world of nobility, of tiny gestures that move mountains, and of abrupt transitions from anguished softness to harsh rebuke. Every note and chord is as powerful as Sophocles. Beethoven never explained this movement, or why it abruptly gives way to the joyous *Allegretto quasi Allegro* that follows.

The dancing *Allegretto* is, if anything, suspiciously wholesome and normal. At a fortissimo diminished seventh chord (one of those "aargh!" moments in music), a lonely little recitative springs up, and "La Malinconia" again. But after only two bars of gloom, the *Allegretto* leaps back, this time in A Minor. There comes a measure of silence – two measures of "La Malinconia" again! When the *Allegretto* returns, it is now pitched up at G, one of Beethoven's "wrong key" displacements, whose working out brings us to the final chords. What is this music *about*? We don't know, but no one who hears "La Malinconia" ever forgets it.

BEDRICH SMETANA (1824-1884). String Quartet No. 1 in e (“From My Life”) (1879)

- I. *Allegro vivo appassionato*
- II. *Allegro moderato a la Polka*
- III. *Largo sostenuto*
- IV. *Vivace*

Dvorak so dominates the Czech (then Bohemian) musical landscape that we tend to forget that Bedrich Smetana was the founding father of Czech Romanticism. His opera, *The Bartered Bride*, and his cycle of symphonic poems, *My Homeland (Ma Vlast)*, put the provincial Bohemia, a subject state of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, into the world spotlight. Smetana led the opera orchestra, and there, Antonin Dvorak played the viola, and listened and learned from his master.

Smetana, like Beethoven, went deaf in mid life. While Beethoven had to begin concealing his increasing deafness before the age of 30, Smetana’s condition struck when he was past fifty, the result of syphilis. The Bohemian continued composing, and most of the works for which he is now known were in fact completed after he was deaf.

While Beethoven concealed his deafness as long as he could, Smetana made his condition the subject matter of his intensely autobiographical String Quartet in e minor, titled “From My Life.”

This is program music, in the sense that each movement concerns itself with a phase of the composer’s life, both as man and artist. The opening *Allegro vivo appassionato* depicts the artist as a young man. The viola takes the lead with the ardent main theme. It must have been a profound experience at the premiere to see and hear Smetana’s younger protégé, Antonin Dvorak, playing the surging melody with which the quartet starts, amid trembling notes from the violins and a low E on the cello. Although the melody has great passion, it also has a germ of despair built in, since it is punctuated with falling intervals.

Like the “Dreams and Passions” movement in Berlioz’ *Symphonie Fantastique*, this movement depicts the unfocused yearnings of youth, its awkwardness in saying what it wants, and its flirtation with thoughts of catastrophe. For the young, every romantic failure is the end of the world. The theme, with its Byronic gloom built into its falling notes, is passed to the violins and repeated several times before the gentle second subject, marked *dolcissima*, sets in. The *Meno allegro* development that ensues has melodic and harmonic urgency, with virtuoso writing for the first violin. Had Smetana ever gotten around to writing a violin concerto, it is obvious that he knew exactly how to create a masterful, striding violin solo.

The music moves subtly into E Major for the restatement of the secondary theme, making it all the more dramatic when the drama of E minor returns for the coda. Surprisingly, the first movement dies away with a few pizzicato notes.

In the bumptious F Major *Allegro moderato a la Polka*, Smetana celebrates and shows off his contribution to European music – bringing the folk dances of Bohemia into the symphony and into chamber music. The teasing first polka melody, with its many rests between phrases, is as unpredictable as a scherzo. Perhaps in imitation of a band in a country inn, the viola is asked to play, briefly, “like a trumpet, on the G string.” The second Polka theme modulates to the darkness of F Minor, with the violins playing in chords. After an elaborate bridge passage, some new material that seems to be starting yet another polka tune actually brings us back to the music we heard first. We are teased with some more of the wistful second polka theme before Smetana brings his happy dance to a conclusion.

The *Largo sostenuto* is Smetana’s musical recollection of first meeting the young girl he would later marry. Set in Ab Major, this is almost a free-form fantasy, music of the opera house, with emotion as its driving force. It reaches its climax about five minutes in when, after a yearning chromatic violin solo, all four instruments assert a succession of powerful chords, *sforzando*. Anyone who has ever been in love knows exactly what this feels like.

The *Vivace* promises a happy finale, leaping into the brightness of E Major, and had Fate not overshadowed Smetana with deafness, this would have been in the mold of the endless, dancing finales that the composer’s disciple Dvorak would create seemingly without effort all his life.

The fourth movement begins in E Major, then moves to A minor, back to E Major, then to the original (tragic) key of E Minor at the end. The joyous dance theme is followed almost instantly by a second subject. After some arresting, open-stop chords, the first theme repeats itself. Meandering into A Minor, the music progresses, then leads back deceptively to the opening dance. This might well be one of those “rondo”-type dances that spins back upon itself, except...

After two bars of silence the lower strings hover with a tremolo, and the violin plays a piercing high E. (This high E is the ringing sound that Smetana first heard as his deafness progressed.) We are thrown back into the somber world of E Minor with this brief passage, worthy of Beethoven, and now the yearning theme from the first movement returns, its falling intervals now a cry of anguish. The viola moves tremblingly downward, and an echo of the love music from the third movement introduces a ray of hope. There is a fluttering, muted echo of the polka, which fades as quickly as it rises. But the vital dance with which the movement began does not return, and the quartet fades away with three pizzicato notes.

HUGO WOLF. (1860-1903) Italian Serenade for String Quartet (1887)

Hugo Wolf, known as an incomparable composer of German lieder, composed only this quartet, and it is only the first movement of a work he never completed. Like Schumann and Smetana, Wolf spent his last years in madness. The quartet, inspired by the composer's reading of Eichendorff's German novel about the romances of a ne'er-do-well violinist, takes its cue from that work, where the author describes a chamber orchestra performing a serenade. The miracle is that Wolf's decapitated quartet has become the most-played encore for professional quartets, and the piece has also found life in the orchestral repertoire in Wolf's 1892 arrangement for strings.

This is music of a timeless sort -- with the life-force of a Mozart serenade rather than the gravitas of a German Romantic. It packs into about seven minutes of playing time a full exploration of its theme, which may have been based on some Italian folk song that might have been played on an oboe. The piece resembles a rondo, returning repeatedly to its main theme. Since Wolf was a master composer of lieder, it is not heard to hear two imaginary voices in the music: the desperate lover who has hired the players and sings his plaintive love verses, and the tempting-but-ever-saying-no reply of the dark lady.

Wolf tried several times to add additional movements to the quartet, but these efforts came to nothing. As late as 1897 the composer was sketching a Tarantella finale, and had also sketched a slow middle movement. This was the year Wolf was committed to the asylum from which he never emerged, and his quartet was not played in a concert until 1904, the year after the composer's death.

Wolf's songs have an ardent following, although his songs are not as accessible as those of Schubert or Brahms. In the quartet, Wolf rises tantalizingly from the restriction of singer's voice and accompaniment and gives us a glimmer of what might have been, had this fine composer lived to compose chamber and orchestral works.

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975). String Quartet No. 7 in f#, Op 108 (March 1960)

- I. Allegretto
- II. Lento
- III. Allegro

Written in the same year that Shostakovich was forced to join the Communist Party, this quartet is spared the tragic dimensions the composer put into his Eighth Quartet, a virtual suicide note in music. Although it cannot be separated from the times and circumstances in which it was composed, this is an intensely personal work, an elegy for the composer's first wife Nina, who died in 1954.

The work was premiered May 15, 1960 by the Beethoven Quartet in St. Petersburg (then still Leningrad), and had its Moscow premiere at the Moscow Conservatory on September 17 of the same year.

It is the shortest of all of Shostakovich's quartets, and there is the risk of writing notes that take longer to read than the quartet takes to listen to! But as is often the case with great music, composers can compress much into a small interval of time.

The composer had a life-plan for composing string quartets, intending to compose one in each major and minor key, doing for the quartet literature what Bach did for the keyboard in his *Well-Tempered Clavier*. That said, the Seventh Quartet should have been in Eb Major, following the scheme the composer

was using. Instead, the quartet is set in the moody and passionate key of F# Minor, which puts it in company of Haydn's "Farewell" symphony and Mahler's withering Tenth Symphony.

Shostakovich often includes coded content in his work, and when you hear the first theme in the opening *Allegretto*, a kind of sardonic, skipping melody, you will immediately hear three repeated eighth notes, followed by a rest, quite literally a "knock at the door." In German folklore, Death knocks three times at the door or window of a dying person, to the horror of family members watching at the bedside. Considering how many nights during the Stalin years, the composer expected a different kind of "knock at the door" that would take him to the Gulag, this gesture is richly suggestive. We are meant to recall terrible times. (In the Tenth Symphony, Shostakovich alternated the door-knock with the notes D-Eb-C-B, which are D-Es-C-H in German notation for the composer's initials, meaning, "Knock-knock-knock! Shostakovich!") So no matter how engaging the violin's utterances might be, the knock at the door is embedded in the theme.

There is a break into hurried sixteenth notes, and a key change to Eb (the "home" key Shostakovich planned to use originally!) with the cello carrying the line, some very chromatic passages passing it back to the violin, and then a bridge passage played in block chords.

This bridge brings us back to F# Minor, with the main theme played *pizzicato*. This adds further to the grotesque atmosphere. It has the air of a hushed conversation, and the *pizzicato* requires leaving out the grace notes, so that the effect is a coded conversation, out of earshot of Those Who Watch and Listen. The movement ends with extensions of the "knock at the door" motif.

The *Lento* is an eerie, almost minimalist movement, with no key signature, played with the strings muted (*con sordino*). The second violin plays an unsettling succession of arpeggios, which look like a wave depicted on an oscilloscope. Viola and cello play *glissandi* at one point, adding to the weirdness of the atmosphere. What is going on here? The clue, I think comes from the biography of Nina Shostakovich. She was an experimental physicist who spent months each year on Mt. Alagez in Armenia, engaged in cosmic ray research. Like many Soviet researchers, she was exposed to massive doses of radiation from radioactive materials, and from poorly shielded X-ray equipment. She died from a radiation-induced cancer. This music sounds to me almost like a science-fiction sound track depicting radiation. I would venture to give this *Lento* movement the nick-name "Death by X-Ray."

The final *Allegro* has, for most of its length, no key indication. It is highly atonal, and since it is riddled with intermingled sharps and flats, it must be a daunting task to play. Even though the musical materials are spun out from motifs in the first movement, it would seem to be a Dance of Death, with the skeletons from the X-Ray now hammering away at a fiendish dance. The theme is passed among the viola and the two violins as a canon, the strictest type of fugue imitation (a melody played against itself, not against a second theme). Even though what we hear would give Bach convulsions, it is a Baroque concoction as conceived by a wrong-note revolutionary. This is angry music depicting a universe that kills capriciously. Then, abruptly, the "home key" of F# Minor asserts itself, with muted strings. As the quartet slows down and softens to its conclusion, there is no fist-shaking against Death (what is the use?), just a quiet slipping away, life sitting at life's deathbed, and a hint of the ominous three-note "knock at the door."

— Program Notes by Brett Rutherford