



Celebrity Series of Boston

Thursday, February 15, 2018 at 8pm
Longy's Pickman Hall

Doric String Quartet

Notes on the Program

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)
String Quartet in E-flat Major, Opus 64, no. 6 (Hob. III:64)

Not for nothing is Haydn known as the “father of the string quartet.” He composed 68 quartets over the course of his career, and each one is considered a masterpiece of the genre. Along with his younger contemporary, friend, and sight-reading companion W.A. Mozart, Haydn is considered to have been responsible for transforming the simple, melody-driven form of the divertimento into one of the towering genres of Western music, setting a standard that continues into the present day.

Between 1760 and 1790, Haydn was largely isolated from the outside world in his position as Kapellmeister to the Esterházy court, where he and the other musicians resided in the grand but remote palace of Eszterháza in rural Hungary. Music-making at Eszterháza offered comfortable and secure employment and a wealth of resources, but little freedom to interact with the robust cosmopolitan exchange of cities like Vienna. The self-contained court environment also came with strict mores governing relations between the classes, further concentrating the already insular professional musician’s world and spotlighting a host of colorful characters and professional intrigue.

Johann Tost, leader for a time of the second violins in Haydn’s orchestra, was one of these characters, and a person whose role in disseminating Haydn’s quartets has earned his name a commemorative place in music history. When Tost left his orchestra job in 1788 to travel and freelance abroad, Haydn, contractually tied to the Esterházys, deputized him to seek foreign publishers for six of his quartets, opuses 54 and 55. International copyright law was a field in its infancy, and Haydn had become savvy in maximizing his profits through multiple publishing contracts. In his role as delegate, Tost brought a similarly entrepreneurial spirit to his task, reselling liberally and also marketing “authentic” manuscripts of dubious origin and items from the Esterházy library that he smuggled into his luggage. Haydn was still grateful enough for Tost’s efforts that he officially dedicated his next set of string quartets, op. 64, to him. Given the virtuosity of the violin writing, Tost must have been skilled at his instrument. Even so, he eventually opted for a businessman’s life, returning to Eszterháza, marrying a housekeeper with a significant nest egg, and using the money to establish himself as a successful cloth merchant in Vienna.

Haydn’s famous wit was grounded in an appreciation for vagaries and juxtapositions, and infused both his musical style and his worldview—attributes which inextricably combine in the most memorable composers. The playfulness of his work is no mere decoration or clever aside, but a core characteristic. At his most zany and impetuous, Haydn displays a willingness to sacrifice the niceties of style for emotional directness and authenticity. Like much of his work, the string quartet Opus 64, No. 6 is never formulaic. It darts between characters and textures with disarming poise, expansive in its color palette, alert in its interplay, and adventurous in its detours *en route* to each concluding cadence.

The opening *Allegro* is remarkably succinct for a movement of such activity and variation. It is monothematic, all its melodic material derived from the opening theme—a focused and demanding technique of which Haydn was fond. The initial four-measure melody is calm and restrained; restated, it begins to expand, breaking out into chirping cadential motives, a staccato accompaniment like clockwork, flowing eighth notes, and energetic triplets. The development first layers the opening tune and legato motive in close, thick imitation, then clears for a tense volleying of the dotted figure through a harmonic labyrinth. A false recap builds up and accelerates into the proper recap—which, in turn, rarely sticks to the scheme laid out in the exposition, but instead turns corners into surprise sequences and fractures into a hocketing, pointillist texture.

The second movement, *Andante*, is in ABA form, the outer sections a gentle patchwork of rising, drifting, and settling arpeggios. In the middle comes a brief, dramatic storm, a miniature rage aria for the first violin. The *Menuetto* is typically Haydnesque, with a veneer of haughty propriety, a rich inner-voice life, and an unexpected delay of the last phrase; in the *Trio* the first violin floats away into the highest reaches of its register as the second violin completes the lilting theme. The *Finale* is a short and jolly rondo, the voices occasionally scattering for fast-moving counterpoint and frequently uniting for lusty unison passages—as well as banding together to play some final rhythmic jokes before the conclusion.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)
String Quartet No. 3 in G Major, Opus 94

Benjamin Britten's third and final string quartet is a work of crepuscular beauty, written during the composer's final years and under the ever-present cloud of his own mortality. Ascribing extraordinary meaning to a composer's last works can be a sentimental practice, but Britten is a special case. He wrote the Quartet No. 3 as a sort of postscript to his final opera, *Death in Venice*, both of which were undertaken as his heart was failing. He underwent an operation upon the completion of *Death in Venice* in 1973, wrote the quartet two years later, in the fall of 1975, and died of heart failure the following year, shortly before the quartet's official premiere by the Amadeus Quartet.

Britten was steadfast in examining his own thoughts and fears in his music, so it is no coincidence that he based *Death in Venice* on a Thomas Mann novella about the last days of a tortured writer seeking artistic and spiritual redemption in a plague-ridden city. The central character, Aschenbach, becomes obsessed with the beautiful boy Tadzio in a complex and symbolic combination of adoration, lust, and artistic ecstasy. The quartet explicitly quotes some of *Death in Venice*'s motives and key relationships, and implicitly parallels its themes of struggle and ambiguity. Britten sketched the quartet's final movement on a last trip to Venice—a conscious integration of life and art.

The quartet also stands as a complex and well-structured instrumental work in its own right, and in it one can hear a kinship with other 20th-century masters of the genre: Bartók in its arch form and in the sometimes single-minded focus of musical progression, Shostakovich in the sardonic frenzy of its fast interludes. Yet the scope of the journey, the acute yet organic shifts between uninhibited wildness and severe introversion, and the unique combination of purity and dissonance are Britten's own hallmarks.

The arch consists of three serious, weighty movements contrasted with two furious interludes, the overall focal point being the slow unfolding of the fifth movement. The first movement, *Duets: with moderate movement*, is not strictly composed of duets, but rather emphasizes the idea of duality as expressed through rhythm, texture, and character. Growing from a rhythmic tugging between second violin and viola, it moves through ethereal melodies, constellations of pizzicato notes, drones, trills, and angular imitation before revisiting and unraveling the rocking motive of the opening mixed with fragments of half-remembered echoes.

The repeating figure indicated by the title of the second movement, *Ostinato: very fast*, is a set of rising sevenths shot through with frenetic scherzo figures. A gentle, trance-like middle section reappears for a bizarre instant at the end. The third movement, *Solo: very calm*, features the first violin in a suspended, ruminative melody with extremely spare accompaniment. Its austerity and the piercing relentlessness of the violin's high register is redeemed by infusions of sweetness—bird calls, bell-like harmonizations, and a brief, euphoric eruption at the midpoint. Highlighting the large-scale arch shape, the voices cross in the movement's conclusion, with the violin moving downwards and the accompaniment drifting upwards into stratospheric harmonics. The fourth movement, *Burlesque: fast—con fuoco*, flies by with rough tenacity, tense pauses, and flares of drunken histrionics.

The quartet's fifth and final movement, which bears the heading *Recitative and Passacaglia*, is the most profound. The introduction (*Recitative*) quotes from his opera and contains outbursts of startling immediacy, framed by eerie, *sul ponticello* waves. The passacaglia is an old, cyclic form with many connotations: fate, tragedy, acceptance, progression. The simple, descending melody is introduced by the first violin over a stately bass march, a self-sustaining compass that remains even as the passacaglia increases in complexity. At the end comes a brief moment of rejuvenation, but no definitive cadence. It is a work that, like much of Britten's oeuvre, defies easy interpretation. However, the composer was enigmatically emphatic on the closing: it ends "with a question."

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

String Quartet No. 6 in F minor, Opus 80

Felix Mendelssohn was a composer of dazzling precocity, and his youthful vivacity was a cardinal trait that shapes the narrative of his life, career, and oeuvre. His death at the early age of 38 cemented the reputation begun with works like the celebrated Octet, composed at 16. The sheer abundance of his output, as well as his use of perpetual motion and blistering speed as ingredients of exhilarating virtuosity, contribute to a portrait of a prescient genius striving to fill his allotted time on earth with talent and beauty.

From the early beginnings of his career, Mendelssohn commanded the qualities that make a young wunderkind no mere showman, but truly brilliant. He possessed an elegant personal voice along with an appetite for learning, knowledge, observation, and assimilation; the absorption of surrounding greatness fed his own. Beethoven's late quartets had just appeared when Mendelssohn began composing his first set of string quartets, in 1827. Although Beethoven's complexity, disregard for traditional form, and audacious harmonic language left most critics scratching their heads, Mendelssohn was in awe, and expressed his admiration by incorporating distinctly Beethovenian elements into his own work. He was also a perceptive champion of Bach, whose music had fallen into obscurity since the Baroque period; Mendelssohn played a crucial role in Bach's reascendency with his 1829 performance of the virtually forgotten *St. Matthew Passion* with the Berlin Singakademie.

Mendelssohn's sixth quartet, finished two months before his death, was the last major work he completed. By then he had achieved fame and fortune, and been stricken by tragedy. Mendelssohn had been extraordinarily close to his sister Fanny, a talented composer in her own right—the two were inseparable in childhood and corresponded constantly as adults, and Mendelssohn relied upon her as the most insightful critic of his work. In May of 1847 he learned that she had died of a stroke, and the news wrecked him. His friends convinced him to retreat to Switzerland for a rest, where he spent his time painting watercolors and composing. The F-minor Quartet has just as much energy as his early ones, but it is also infused with grief in its many manifestations, and unmistakably a homage to Fanny. Rage, pain, longing, and the ache of memory pervade the work, making it much darker than his early quartets even as it makes use of familiar figures and techniques. Mendelssohn never recovered from his grief; he died in November after a series of strokes and was buried next to his sister.

The first movement, *Allegro vivace assai*, opens with a raw barrage of tremolo and a precipitous, plunging motive. The furor soon dispels into a calm despair, Mendelssohn's signature impetuous dotted figure subsiding into gentle waves. The rest of the movement progresses in the same tortured pattern of passion and exhaustion: next are raging triplets, sinking arpeggios over a syncopated bass, and a return of the dotted figure in pulsing repetitions. At the climax the first violin ascends to a vertiginous height while the other voices restart the tremolo of the movement's opening. All join in unison for the coda, a powerful, rhythmic *Totentanz*.

The following movement is a scherzo marked *Allegro assai*, and it immediately dashes any hope of a cameo by Mendelssohn's sparkling, *Midsummer Night's Dream* scherzo mode. Just as impassioned and turbulent as the first movement, its rhythmic devices—syncopations, pauses, and two-against-three—plow across bar lines with ruthless abandon. The shadowy trio emerges from murky depths, rocking steadily until it crescendos to the return of the scherzo. The slow movement, an *Adagio*, begins with a sinking motive in the cello and blossoms into a measured melody full of leaps and sighs. Later, a rhythmic accompaniment like a heartbeat emerges. Unlike the other movements, this one is unhurried and expansive, building to a searingly dissonant climax and subsiding with a series of gradual exhalations.

The *Finale* is unsettled and tempestuous, Mendelssohn's usual rippling accompaniment chopped into pieces and scattered between the voices. Changes of dynamic and character are drastic and sudden, and angular, abrupt motives shoot off in all directions. He has definitively thrown out elegance, balance, and poise in favor of intimate, furious emotion. At the end the first violin initiates a merciless salvo of triplets, and the rest of the voices eventually abandon their clashing accompaniments to join in a final cry of anguish before the vehement closing chords.