Takács Quartet

Saturday, March 13, 2021
2:00 PM
Bethel United Methodist Church Hall,
Lewes, DE

PROGRAM

Quartet No.15 in D Minor, K.421
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756 - 1791)

Allegro moderato
Andante
Menuetto (Allegretto) - Trio
Allegretto ma non troppo

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

Duets: With moderate movement
Ostinato: Very fast
Solo: Very calm
Burlesque: Fast – con fuoco
Recitative and Passacaglia (La Serenissima):
Slow -- Slowly moving

INTERMISSION

String Quartet No. 15 in A Minor, Op.132
Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770 – 1827)

Assai sostenuto – Allegro
Allegro ma non tanto
Molto adagio – Andante (Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen
an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart)
Alla marcia, assai vivace (attacca)
Allegro appassionato

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- Program Subject to Change -
Program Notes

MOZART
Quartet No.15 in D Minor, K.421 (1783)

When Mozart arrived in Vienna in 1781, Haydn held a reputation as the most celebrated composer of his age. Even though Mozart never formally studied with Haydn, the latter's music exerted a profound influence on the young composer. This influence was particularly evident in the field of string quartets, which Haydn had pioneered as a genre. Haydn's most recent quartets impressed the young Mozart, as they were written in a new way that made the four instruments equal participants in the musical discourse. Mozart set about to compose his own six quartets between late 1782 and early 1785, known collectively as the "Haydn" Quartets, since they were dedicated to his esteemed mentor. Mozart's dedication describes them as "the fruit of a long and laborious study", as he entrusts them "as children to a father".

Unusual for the time, these “Haydn” Quartets were written solely on the basis of inspiration, not commission; K. 421 is the second of the series. Many years later the 67 year old Constanze Mozart stated in a letter to friends that her husband was writing this D Minor quartet while she was in labor with their first child, Raimund; this would put its composition date around 17 June, 1783.

The first movement, in the customary sonata form, begins with a sotto voce brooding main theme which paints an ominous mood, very different from what we usually expect from the ebullient Mozart. The more lyrical second subject is presented in a brighter contrasting key, though its accompaniment maintains the sense of urgency and premonition of the preceding music.

The andante which follows starts out as a gentle, halting dance, initially in the traditional relative key of F Major, but reverting much of the time to the darker D Minor. The music is lyrical and the movement has a gloomy but tender quiet dignity.

The minuet continues in D Minor in a more strident tone, recapturing the turbulent emotion of the first movement. Here Mozart pushes the minuet form far beyond its origins as a stately dance, exploring contrasts of texture, mood and rhythm. The trio is a pleasant Viennese serenade complete with plucked string accompaniment reminiscent of a guitar.

The finale is a set of variations on the sad melody of a siciliano, an Italian pastoral dance. Brisk, dark, angry and still in D Minor, it showcases each of the four instruments with virtuosic solos.
A performance of the Quartet at his son’s Vienna lodgings in the presence of Haydn was reported with pride by Leopold Mozart in a letter to his daughter. In fact, Haydn himself was to be subsequently influenced by these works.

BRITTEN
String Quartet No. 3 in G major, Op. 94 (1975)

In 1972, Benjamin Britten, not yet sixty, learned that he had a faulty heart valve, and could not expect to live long, or well, without surgery. He was then composing his opera Death in Venice. He told his doctors that he would not submit to surgery until that score was finished. It was completed by March 1973, and in May Britten underwent his procedure, but suffered a slight stroke during the operation; he was generally weakened and without full use of his right arm thereafter. He convalesced during the summer and strengthened his right hand by writing letters to friends. He had to miss the premiere of Death in Venice at Aldeburgh, but was cheered by good reviews.

Britten was well enough by November 1975 to travel to Venice, where he was able to visit many of his favorite palaces, gardens and galleries with the help of his nurse and some devoted friends. He had begun composing this string quartet, his first work in that form in thirty years, before he left England, and completed the score in Venice. The English composer Colin Matthews acted as his amanuensis (scribe and artistic assistant) for much of the process.

In June 1976, it was announced that Britten had been made a life peer, with the title Baron Britten of Aldeburgh. In September, the Amadeus Quartet came to rehearse the quartet for him, but when Mstislav Rostropovich visited Britten in late November, he reported that his old friend was “very sick, his hands trembling.” On December 4, Britten died. Exactly two weeks later, the Amadeus Quartet gave the premiere. It was Britten’s last major composition.

The quartet’s five movements are arranged, arch-like, around the central third movement. In the opening Duets, Britten explores all six possible relationships between the four instruments in a quartet. Then follows a scherzo-like strident Ostinato based on repetitions of a vaulting four-note pattern that sounds superficially like a string tune-up gone wild.

The central movement, Solo, features stratospheric, sustained lyricism for the first violin. This is disturbed at its mid-point by nervously jumping gestures placed above murmuring figures in the low strings.

There follows a scherzo-like Burlesque, of which the grotesque waltz-trio seems to pay tribute to Britten’s much-admired colleague Dmitri Shostakovich, who had died just two months before the quartet was begun.

Britten organized the finale as a Recitative and Passacaglia. The Recitative includes five musical quotations from his opera Death in Venice, one for each of the players and
a final one for the ensemble. These are separated by previews of the gently pulsing theme of the Passional, one of Britten's favorite musical forms. The Passacaglia's title, La Serenissima ("the most serene"), derives from the historic title of the former Republic of Venice; the sobriquet is sometimes still applied to the modern city of Venice. The subtitle thereby refers both to the city where the quartet was completed, as well as to Britten's own recent opera. The composer said that he derived the recurring theme of the Passacaglia—two solemn three-measure phrases, mostly confined to the cello—from the tolling sounds of Venetian bells. It's difficult to shake off the fact that Britten knew he was dying as he wrote this music. This sense of passing is underlined even further, perhaps unconsciously, by the way the final bar seems almost to break off mid-phrase.

Britten had said that he wanted the quartet "to end with a question," and the five movements that lead to that closing moment are introspective, contemplative, equivocal and even, in the Burlesque, wryly humorous. This is music of one of the modern era's greatest tracers of the heart's most subtle emotions viewing the mystery of death with acceptance, with a seeking for serenity and, inevitably, with touching sadness. "What will it be like?" Britten would ask his nurse as his strength ebbed during his final months. The quartet poses that very question in heart-piercing tones.

BEETHOVEN
String Quartet No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132 (1824-1825)

In 1822, Prince Nicolas Galitzin, a devotee of Beethoven's music and an amateur cellist, wrote from St. Petersburg asking Beethoven for "one, two or three quartets, for which labor I will be glad to pay you whatever amount you think proper." Beethoven was elated by the commission, and immediately accepted it; he set the fee at 50 ducats (approximately $7,500 today) for each quartet, a price readily accepted by Galitzin. The music, however, took somewhat longer.

Beethoven had begun sketching this Op. 132 quartet by the end of 1824, but before he could progress very far with it, he was stricken with a serious intestinal inflammation, a frequent bane of his later years. "I am not feeling well," he complained to Dr. Anton Braunhofer on April 18th. "I hope that you will not refuse to come to my help, for I am in great pain." Braunhofer was alarmed by the composer's condition, and gave him strict advice: "No wine; no coffee; no spices of any kind.... I'll wager that if you take a drink of spirits, you'll be lying weak and exhausted on your back in a few hours." The physician also recommended a recuperation in the country to allow for the plentiful imbibing of "fresh air" and "natural milk." By early May of 1825 Beethoven had recovered sufficiently to repair to the Viennese suburb of Baden, remaining there — with occasional visits to the city — until mid-October. It was at Baden that this quartet was largely written.

The slow introduction to the first movement is based on a motif that recurs throughout the late quartets and in the Große Fuge as well, namely the half step.
The second movement is not a standard scherzo, but rather a minuet and trio. However, it is a minuet that is scherzo-like in the way it tosses short phrases and small motivic fragments back and forth. The middle-section trio evokes a bagpipe-like musette with its melodies over a sustained drone in the bass.

The third movement (Molto Adagio - Andante) is the longest in the quartet. Since Beethoven wrote this piece after recovering from the illness which he had feared was to be fatal, he headed the movement "Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart" (Sacred song of thanks from a recovered person to the deity, in the Lydian mode). Beethoven's illness and recovery touch directly on the music in this magnificent Adagio, though the piece is not specifically programmatic. The movement opens solemnly, in the manner of a hymn, with overlapping entries in strict imitation. The antiquarian religious feel of this opening is enhanced by its being written in one of the old church modes. (The Lydian mode is simply the F major scale with B natural instead of B flat.) This is followed by a section entitled Neue Kraft fühland (feeling new strength) with leaping octaves and sprightly trills that attest to the composer's bright new outlook on life. Then thoughts of his indebtedness to The Almighty return. Each subsequent appearance of these alternating sections is a more florid variation of the previous, until the movement ends in the celestial regions of each instrument's highest register.

Beethoven chose to follow the transcendent Heiliger Dankgesang with one of his most glaring incongruities — a brief (2-minute) march of four-square structure providing an almost shocking descent from the exalted realms of the Adagio. As if to make the listener earth-bound again, the bold march heralds the arrival of worldly poise, but having scarcely begun, it frays into a passionately urgent recitative-like passage from the first violin.

Without pause—attaca—the surging finale is upon the listener, the forceful Allegro appassionato reasserting the dark cast of the quartet with a turbulent swirl. The last movement, according to Beethoven's sketches, is based on a theme that he had originally intended for an instrumental conclusion to his Ninth Symphony, but which here becomes the subject for a vast sonata-rondo. Besides a brisk tempo and a driving 3/4 meter, the sweep of the finale owes much to the ingeniously restless figurations of the cello. In the coda, the headlong rush swiftly sheds its gravity to greet the arrival of a joyful major key.

The Heiliger Dankgesang is one of the most rapturous creations in 19th-century music. It is of interest that this work drew attention in erudite literary circles. T.S.Eliot wrote of it: “There is a sort of heavenly or at least more than human gaiety...which one imagines might come to oneself as the fruit of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering; I should like to get something of that into verse before I die.” Also Aldous Huxley, in his novel Point Counter Point, makes extended reference to and description of this quartet in the chapter concerning the death/suicide of his central character.