

## Lafayette String Quartet

January 17, 2010

### Barber, String Quartet, Op. 11

In the years following his graduation from the Curtis Institute, Samuel Barber (1910-1981) spent time traveling and composing in Europe under various stipends and grants. Between 1935 and 1937, he won the Prix de Rome and two Pulitzer Travel Scholarships. Barber's stay in Rome had a far-reaching effect on his career, for it was there in 1935 that he met Arturo Toscanini. Three years later, when Toscanini became conductor of the newly formed NBC Symphony Orchestra, he premiered two new works by Barber: the *First Essay* and the *Adagio for Strings*.

Originally, the *Adagio* was the slow movement of Barber's String Quartet, written in Rome in 1936. For Toscanini, Barber adapted the *Adagio* for full string orchestra. Its long, mellifluous lines, lyric intensity, and heartfelt sincerity had an immediate impact on audiences and critics alike. Olin Downes wrote of the premiere, "There is an arch of melody and form. The composition is most simple at the climaxes, when it develops that the simplest chord, or figure, is the one most significant."

In the string quartet, two *Molto allegro* movements surround the *Adagio*. The first presents three contrasting themes: the first is frenetic and stop-and-start; the second is lyrical and texturally hymn-like; the third is playful and brief. Barber works out a development involving all three themes, displaying great craftsmanship alongside deep emotional expression. In classic sonata fashion, the three themes are reprised, but in an unexpected way. Barber continues to develop each, expressing new possibilities, even as he concludes the movement.

The brief finale follows the *Adagio* after a short pause. Beginning with a recollection of the first movement's opening theme, it then proceeds to new material, some of which has that same nervous character, while other music is more pensive, introverted, and lyrical in the mood of the *Adagio*. In the two-and-a-half minute finale, Barber manages to sum up all that has come before.

### Carter, String Quartet No. 2

Having passed his 100th birthday in 2008, Elliott Carter has truly lived up to the words of Aaron Copland, that he is "one of America's most distinguished creative artists in any field." Carter was initially encouraged to become a composer by Charles Ives who had sold insurance to his parents, later going on to study at Harvard with Walter Piston and in Paris with Nadia

Boulanger. With his explorations into tempo relationships and texture, Carter's consistently innovative and dynamic output of works is unmistakably American.

Twice winner of the Pulitzer Prize, the first composer to receive the United States National Medal of Arts, one of the few composers ever awarded Germany's Ernst Von Siemens Music Prize, and in 1988 made *Commandeur dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the Government of France, Carter recently received the Prince Pierre Foundation Music Award, bestowed by the Principality of Monaco, and he was one of a handful of living composers elected to the Classical Music Hall of Fame.

Carter's first Pulitzer Prize in Music was for his String Quartet No. 2. The work also received the 1960 New York Music Critics Circle Award and a UNESCO prize for that year. It was composed in 1958-59 and premiered in 1960 by the Juilliard String Quartet. About this music, Carter wrote the following note (edited here to reduce technical data):

. . . In it, the four instruments are individualized, each being given its own character embodied in a special set of melodic and harmonic intervals and rhythms that result in four different patterns of slow and fast tempos with associated types of expression. Thus, four different strands of musical material of contrasting character are developed simultaneously throughout the work. It is out of the interactions, combinations, cooperations, and oppositions of these that the details of musical discourse as well as the large sections are built. Up to the end of the second movement, the various facets of each instrument's character are presented quite distinctly. After that . . . there is a growing tendency to cooperate and exchange ideas, while in the cadenzas, opposition between the solo and accompanying instruments grows. The Conclusion returns to the state of individualization of the first part of the work.

The first violin reveals its itself in its cadenza and elsewhere as fantastic, ornate, and mercurial [with] its rapid figurations and variously expressive phrases. . . . It dominates the first movement, partly imposing its ideas on the others. The second violin, dominating the second movement and *Conclusion*, plays a part which consistently projects regular rhythms. . . . It has a laconic, orderly character which is sometimes humorous. The viola . . . adds its repertory of expressive motives to the group, coming to the fore in the third movement, expanding ideas first heard in its cadenza. The somewhat impetuous cello part . . . frequently breaks out of the rhythmic scheme, a feature which reaches its greatest freedom in the cadenza and finally draws the other three into an agitated accelerando at the ending of the fourth movement. The form of the work does not follow traditional patterns but is developed directly from the relationships and interactions of the four instruments, which result in varying activities, tempos, moods, and feelings.

## Tchaikovsky, String Quartet No. 3 in E-flat Minor, Op. 30

“I think I have rather written myself out. I’m beginning to repeat myself and cannot conceive anything new. Have I really sung my swan song and have nowhere further to go?” It was the private premiere of Tchaikovsky’s Third Quartet that caused the composer to be riddled by these self-doubts, which he expressed to his brother, Modeste. This was in March 1876, and Tchaikovsky could not foresee that at the quartet’s first public performances a few weeks later, audiences would actually weep during the *Andante funebre* movement. He had composed the quartet in less than a month as a tribute to his conservatory colleague, Ferdinand Laub, who had died the year before. Laub had played first violin in the premieres of Tchaikovsky’s first two quartets, and now the composer’s third and final essay in the medium was a *tombeau* for the performer.

In the elegiac opening *Andante*, the violin leads an intense *plaint* that unfolds into a funeral march. The main body of the movement is a wistful *valse triste* containing a variety of thematic and rhythmic ideas. One involves a triplet in a clever way that offsets the natural accentuation, giving the impression of 2/4 time. At the end of the movement, Tchaikovsky reprises the funeral march.

The Scherzo is a brief interlude between the weightier first and third movements. In duple meter, it is more of a Russian dance than a traditional Scherzo. The middle section becomes melancholy in contrast to the vigorous outer sections.

The *Andante funebre* is undoubtedly the quartet’s center of gravity. Its outer sections, dominated by sonorous and sometimes sharply dissonant chords, form a dirge-like funeral wreath surrounding the central section. There, peaceful relief comes in the *cantabile* theme in the violin. But even this idea turns more tragic before settling back to its original relaxed demeanor.

Tchaikovsky’s artistic worries may well have centered on the finale, the weakest part of the quartet. Its unrelenting energy does not seem enough to carry the uninteresting, repetitive themes. Fortunately, the ending saves the situation. Just before the ending, Tchaikovsky inserts an *Andante* that recalls the elegiac first movement introduction. As it closes, the pattern of the cello’s notes spells out the name of the composer’s dear friend: F-Er-Di-nAnd.

**Program Notes by Dr. Michael Fink**  
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