

Haydn, String Quartet in C Major, Op. 33, no. 3 (Hob.III.39)

The six string quartets, Op. 33, were published around Christmas of 1781. When writing to noblemen of his acquaintance that year, asking each to become a subscriber to the printing, Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) stated that the works “are written in a new and special way (for I have not composed any [quartets] for ten years.” During that time, a new Viennese master composer had begun to emerge - Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart - who had composed 13 quartets by 1773. Haydn was very interested in the brilliant youngster and no doubt had studied some of his music, digesting Mozart’s frothy, spirited sound and brilliant themes. In addition to an overall spirited style in Op. 33, Haydn titled its minuet movements either *Scherzo* or *Scherzando* (witty or jovial) - the first time the term had been applied in music of the late 18th century.

What exactly did Haydn mean by “new and special”? Analyst Reginald Barrett-Ayres offers this explanation:

Now it was Haydn’s turn to learn from Mozart. In the Op. 33 quartets, Haydn at last found a lighter touch: I do not mean that the music was less deeply felt and lacking in emotional appeal, but in Op. 33 Haydn seems to write with a finer pen. There is a certain luminous quality in the scoring, which at times seems to be translucent and crystalline.

In the C Major Quartet, nicknamed “The Bird,” these qualities come across right from the beginning. On top of a bouncy accompaniment, three light-hearted themes dominate the first movement. Two of these make liberal use of “grace notes,” quick notes preceding main notes in a melody. These lend the music a chirping effect.

The *Scherzando* that follows is actually a quick minuet. Rather than jovial, the music of the main sections is graceful, pleasant, and good-natured. Here, the instruments are in a low range. By contrast, the middle section places them rather high, more in a bird-like range.

The slow movement follows. Haydn builds it using two main blocks of music. One is warm, rich, and lyrical, with a concerted blend of the entire ensemble. The other is lighter and more playful, featuring the first violin. The pair alternates three varying times before the music quietly fades away.

The whirlwind rondo finale shows Haydn at his jovial best. The main theme may be based on a Slavonic folk song. It begins with and reiterates a “cuckoo” idea, which the composer exploits as much as possible during the movement. At the end, the music seems to simply fly off.

Dutilleux, “Ainsi la nuit” [Thus at Night]: String Quartet

Henri Dutilleux (1916-2013) came to his maturity at an unfortunate time: World War II. Following his training at the Paris Conservatory in 1938, he became the last recipient of the Prix de Rome just before the full outbreak of war. He was even forced to return to Paris without finishing his full term as prize recipient. It was not until about two years after the end of the war that Dutilleux produced his first significant compositions. From that point through the 1950s and 1960s his style and working methods evolved, making him an internationally significant figure in New Music. We might call him a “moderate modernist,” closer to Messiaen than to Boulez. Interested in all masterly progressive music, he followed no “school” or trend, slowly developing his own voice by patient, concentrated work.

Dutilleux spent 1973-1976 composing *Ainsi la nuit* with an intention “to tackle the [quartet] medium by writing strict studies ... altogether an experimental stage with no poetic impulse behind it.” He worked under a commission from the Koussevitzky Foundation for the Juilliard Quartet. Used to writing almost exclusively for orchestra during the previous two decades,

Dutilleux welcomed the challenges of the quartet medium: “It is true that a quartet exists in a more interiorized world. Because of the restricted scale and the corresponding greater economy of means, it demands perhaps a greater concentration.”

Music that the composer initially meant to have “no poetic impulse behind it” turned out to be extremely poetic, as its title implies. Dutilleux later observed, “Everything is transformed imperceptibly into a sort of nocturnal vision, thus the title *Ainsi la nuit*. The whole thing is presented, in sum, as a series of ‘states’ with a somewhat impressionistic side to them.”

The music itself consists of seven titled sections. The first, “Nocturne,” is preceded by an “Introduction.” The next four — “Miroir d’espace,” “Litanies,” “Litanies 2,” and “Constellations” — are preceded by short passages titled “Parenthesis.” Only the final two sections, “Nocturne 2” and “Temps suspendu,” are quasi-independent essays.

These seven sections have been carefully organized and balanced in several ways. The two Nocturnes in the second and penultimate positions may be noticed first. The slowest music is in the second full section, “Miroir d’espace,” while the fastest occurs in the fifth, “Constellations.”

The four movements preceded by a “Parenthesis” form a central pivotal unit.

Perhaps the most obvious feature of this music is that it does not present and develop distinct themes as do the other works on this program. Dutilleux takes a different approach: “There is a tendency — it’s almost intuitive — not to present the theme in its definitive state at the beginning. There are small cells that develop bit by bit.” Also, he recognized that listeners may not thoroughly comprehend this work on a first hearing, as he wrote, “The problem of understanding may be felt by the audience, and a work they find difficult initially can later gain in attraction and interest.”

Beethoven, String Quartet in C-sharp minor, Op. 131

The string quartets and *Grosse fuge* of Opp. 127-135 were the last music penned by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827). If the early and middle works of Beethoven were often misunderstood in their day, the final ones were a complete enigma. The unusual qualities of these works were so alien to early audiences that the quartets were ridiculously considered by many to be either the absent-minded doodling of a once-great master in his dotage, or the work of a man so totally deaf and out of touch with musical sound that he could no longer distinguish consonance from dissonance — even on paper!

The truth of the matter is that we could call the last quartets “transcendental.” They transcend the standards of form, harmony, and chamber technique as they were known at that time. There is also a mystical quality about the quartets, which Aldous Huxley utilized symbolically in his novel, *Point Counter Point*. The C-sharp Minor Quartet, which Beethoven himself considered his finest, is perhaps the most mystical of all.

Then there is the matter of technical difficulty. Never a composer to compromise, Beethoven had infused his last quartets with grand visions, resulting in a multitude of difficulties in rhythm, ensemble playing, and pure endurance. The C-sharp minor quartet is the keenest test of that endurance for players and audience alike. Its seven (!) movements proceed from one to another without pause, a continuous outpouring of music spanning the better part of an hour. In the score, each movement is identified as “No.” 1, 2, 3, etc., like the numbers of an oratorio or an opera whose progress has to be worked out with dramatic logic, driving inevitably toward the concluding finale.

The opening *Adagio* movement, a fugue of tremendous depth and pathos, Wagner once described as “surely the saddest thing ever expressed in notes.” The lone unison on the note C-

sharp at the end of the fugue leads upward to introduce the second movement, sunny and graceful, and in the bright key of D major. Based on a repeating tune, this near-perpetual motion section eventually gives way to “No. 3,” a brief but highly-charged segment in an operatic, quasi-recitative style. If No. 3 is the “recitative,” then the *Andante* that follows must be the “aria.” Set gracefully in the key of A major, this movement consists of a gentle cantilena theme followed by six character variations. This is the sprawling, lyrical centerpiece of a work whose gravity actually lies at both ends.

The final three movements, together, could be considered as a large unit within the work. The E major *Presto* (No. 5) is a scherzo with two appearances of the trio and is one of the most playful scherzos Beethoven ever wrote. This is followed by a heartfelt *Adagio* (No. 6) whose regular phrasing is foiled by spontaneous lyrical outpourings. In the finale (No. 7), the listener is shaken by an opening statement that Joseph Kerman cites for its “unprecedented intensity.” This movement, with its broad sonata form and mood of unyielding defiance, forms a perfect balance against the brooding opening fugue of the quartet. It brings the work to conclusion in the spirit of what Kerman calls “force and innocence and heroic thrust.”

PROGRAM INFORMATION

Sponsor: San Antonio Chamber Music Society
Concert Date: March 29, 2015

Artist: **Elias String Quartet**

Sara Bitlloch, *violin* Martin Saving *viola*
Donald Grant *violin* Marie Bitlloch *cello*

Program credit(s): The Elias String Quartet appears by arrangement with David Rowe Artists.

www.davidroweartists.com

www.eliasstringquartet.com

PROGRAM:

String Quartet in C major, Op. 33, No.3 (Hob.III.39) "The Bird"

Franz Josef Haydn
1732-1809

Allegro moderato
Scherzo: Allegretto
Adagio ma non troppo
Finale: Rondo – Presto

“Ainsi La Nuit” (“Thus the Night”): String Quartet

Henri Dutilleux
1916-2013

Introduction and Nocturne—Parenthèse I
Miroir d’espace—Parenthèse II
Litanies—Parenthèse III
Litanies 2—Parenthèse IV
Constellations
Nocturne 2
Temps suspendu

intermission

String Quartet in C-sharp minor, Op. 131

Ludwig van Beethoven
1770-1827

Adagio, ma non troppo e molto espressivo
Allegro, molto vivace
Allegro moderato
Andante, ma non troppo e molto cantabile
Presto
Adagio, quasi un poco andante
Allegro

THE ELIAS STRING QUARTET

Sara Bitlloch, Donald Grant *violins*
Martin Saving *viola*, **Marie Bitlloch** *cello*

The Elias String Quartet take their name from Mendelssohn's oratorio, *Elijah*, of which Elias is in its German form, and have quickly established themselves as one of the most intense and vibrant quartets of their generation. They perform around the world, collaborating with many different artists. The Quartet was formed in 1998 at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester where they worked closely with the late Dr. Christopher Rowland. They also spent a year studying at the Hochschule in Cologne with the Alban Berg quartet. Other mentors in the Quartet's studies include Hugh Maguire, György Kurtág, Gábor Takács-Nagy, Henri Dutilleux and Rainer Schmidt.

The Quartet made its North American debut in March, 2012 to great critical acclaim. In addition to a sold-out concert at Carnegie Hall, they were praised in the *Washington Post* for their "shimmering beauty," and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* proclaimed, "Few quartets at any stage of their evolution have this much personality." During their March, 2015 tour, they will perform 15 concerts in 14 cities across the U.S. and Canada, including a return to Carnegie Hall, and in Buffalo, Toronto, Salt Lake City, San Antonio; San Francisco; and Portland, OR, among other cities.

The quartet has been chosen to participate in BBC Radio 3's prestigious New Generation Artists' scheme, and they are the recipients of a 2010 Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award. With the support of the Borletti-Buitoni Trust, the Elias Quartet are now immersed in their Beethoven Project: learning and performing all Beethoven string quartets. The cycles started in 2012/13 and continue throughout this season in Great Britain. They are documenting their journey on a dedicated website:

www.thebeethovenproject.com

They have performed alongside artists such as Michael Collins, Jonathan Biss, Simon Crawford-Phillips, Ralph Kirshbaum, Alice Neary, Ann Murray, Joan Rogers, Mark Padmore, Roger Vignoles, Michel Dalberto, Peter Cropper, Bernard Gregor-Smith, Ettore Causa, Timothy Boulton, Robin Ireland, Adrian Brendel, Anthony Marwood and with the Endellion, Jerusalem and Vertavo Quartets.

The Quartet received second prize and the Sidney Griller prize at the 9th London International String Quartet Competition in 2003 (as the Johnston String Quartet) and were finalists in the Paolo Borciani Competition in 2005. For four years they were resident String Quartet at Sheffield's "Music in the Round" as part of Ensemble 360, taking over from the Lindsay Quartet. The Ensemble has released discs by Mozart, Beethoven and Spohr with Sanctuary Classics and Nimbus.

The Quartet most recently recorded the piano quintets of Schumann and Dvorak with pianist Jonathan Biss, available on the Onyx label. The Quartet's recording of Haydn and Schumann quartets was released in spring 2012 on the Wigmore Live label. Their previous effort on that label, a disc of Mendelssohn, Mozart and Schubert, was given the BBC Music Magazine Newcomer Award in April 2010. Their debut recording of Mendelssohn quartets for Sanctuary Classics also received wide acclaim, and their performance of the Op. 80 quartet was chosen as best recording on BBC Radio 3's 'Building a Library' in September 2009. They have also released a disc of French harp music with harpist Sandrine Chatron for the French label Ambrosie and Goehr's Piano Quintet with Daniel Becker for Meridian Records. In addition, they made a recording of Britten quartets, released by Sonimage.

www.eliasstringquartet.com

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