

MODIGLIANI QUARTET

Philippe Bernhard *violin* **Laurent Marfaing** *viola*
Loïc Rio *violin* **François Kieffer** *cello*

The **Modigliani Quartet**, formed by four close friends in 2003, recently celebrated 10 years together, and is already one of the world's most sought after string quartets, playing in venues like Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Cité de la Musique, Wigmore Hall, Carnegie Hall, Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, Brussels' Bozar, Vienna's Musikverein and Konzerthaus, Salzburg's Mozarteum, Lucerne Festival, Schwetzingen Festival, Rheingau Festival, Kissinger Sommer, Gstaad Menuhin Festival, Hohenems' Schubertiade, Washington DC's Library of Congress, Luxemburg's Philharmonie, Zurich's Tonhalle, Munich's Herkulessaal, and La Fenice in Venice.

In the 2012-13 season the Modigliani Quartet had very successful tours in Australia, Japan, China, and the U.S., where they performed in many cities including Philadelphia, Boston, Buffalo, and San Diego. In the 2011/12 season they were nominated by the Cologne Philharmonie, Hamburg's Laeiszhalle and Baden-Baden Festpielhaus as ECHO Rising Stars.

In 2008 the Quartet began a rich collaboration with the Mirare label and has released 4 award-winning CDs, all receiving great acclaim in several countries. Their first Haydn CD was a Strad selection, their Mendelssohn CD in 2010 was a Fono Forum selection (disc of the month) and aroused admiration from critics and audiences worldwide. In 2012 their fourth CD was dedicated to youth with quartets by young Mozart, Schubert and Arriaga.

Only one year after they were formed, the Quartet attracted international attention in 2004 by winning the Frits Philips String Quartet competition in Eindhoven. The Quartet then took First Prize at the Vittorio Rimbotti competition in Florence in 2005 and won the Young Concert Artists Auditions in New York in 2006.

Following their studies at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris, the Modigliani Quartet studied with the Ysaÿe Quartet in Paris, attended masterclasses by Walter Levin and György Kurtág, and then had the opportunity to work with the Artemis Quartet at the Universität der Künste in Berlin.

Thanks to the generosity and support of private sponsors, the Modigliani Quartet plays on four outstanding Italian instruments:

Philippe Bernhard plays a 1780 violin by Giovanni Battista Guadagnini.

Loïc Rio plays a 1734 violin by Alessandro Gagliano .

Laurent Marfaing plays a 1660 viola by Luigi Mariani.

François Kieffer plays a 1706 cello by Matteo Goffriller (former "Warburg") .

Haydn, Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 50, No. 1

In April 1787, Joseph Haydn (1733-1809) received a letter from Friedreich Wilhelm II, King of Prussia. The letter read, in part,

There is no doubt that His Majesty has always appreciated *Herr Kapellmeister* Haydn's works To provide concrete assurance of the same, he sends him the enclosed ring as a mark of His Majesty's satisfaction and of the favor in which he holds him.

The ring was a token of gratitude for receiving a group of six symphonies (nos. 82-87). The king was a noted musical amateur (a cellist) and his interest in Haydn caused the composer to write and dedicate to him the set of six string quartets that became Op. 50.

The quartet opens with a repeated note in the cello, which some consider to be a tribute to the king and his favored instrument. The second theme is derived from the first, and the repeated note now becomes a feature of the movement. It is taken up by the second and then the first violin, providing an accompaniment to the second theme. The repeated note then introduces a central development full of harmonic surprises. At triple speed, it returns and leads the recapitulation to the end of the movement.

The *Adagio* is in the form of a theme and variations. The theme itself is introduced by the first violin, and then heard in the second. The second variation moves to the minor, followed by a return to the original key and theme, finished off by a coda.

The outer (main) sections of the *Menuetto* contain short thematic links with the preceding movements. Haydn offers a central Trio that is a complete contrast in mood.

Vivace marks the bubbly finale written in an overall A- B-A form. However, full of humor and surprises, the music keeps trying to find the original key and main theme — finally doing so with a great sigh of relief.

Dohnányi, String Quartet No. 3 in A Minor, Op. 33

In America, one of the least known 20th-century composers is Ernő Dohnányi (1877-1960). Obscured by Bartók and Kodály, Dohnányi's position as the chief leader of Hungarian music between the World Wars has been hidden. He held several tenures as director of the Budapest Academy and, as a conductor, actively promoted the music of his compatriots. He also built a substantial career as a touring piano soloist, performing all of Beethoven's piano music in 1920 and all 27 Mozart piano concertos in 1941. In his day, Dohnányi was considered the greatest Hungarian pianist-composer since Liszt.

He was the first virtuoso pianist to perform chamber music regularly. Among his compositional output, which includes opera, orchestral music, songs, and piano works, Dohnányi wrote only nine chamber works. However, following in the footsteps of Brahms (who arranged the Vienna premiere of his Piano Quintet, Op. 1); he carefully and masterfully honed each chamber work. It is even claimed that after Brahms, he had few equals in the chamber music field.

Dohnányi composed his third and last string quartet in 1926, during a three-year sojourn in the U.S. During that time, he was conductor of the New York State Symphony Orchestra, on leave from the Budapest Philharmonic.

The style of the quartet is moderately modern for its time. Fast-shifting harmonies of the Richard Strauss variety are peppered with clearly dissonant phrases. Thus the first movement offers us some highly contrasting themes, which the composer develops vigorously during the development. Here, the rhythmic drive matches the tonal adventurousness, and harmonies become more dissonant with only a few reversions to "standard" harmonies, probably intended humorously. The same strong contrast holds true in the final reprise, where oom-pah accompaniments occasionally relieve the tense "expressionistic" atmosphere.

The theme presented at the opening of the second movement is like an odd conglomeration of Mendelssohn and late Wagner. During the early variations, Dohnányi maintains this style mixture, leaning now one way, now another. The musical result is first class, however, and the composer continues masterfully, adding touches of Brahms-style resonance during the second half of the movement. The bare essence of the theme is brought back in the final moments.

The bouncy, spirited final movement seems to anticipate some of Shostakovich's music: Over a floor of steady, repeated sounds, other instruments etch out melodies in a variety of moods, ranging from the burlesque to the fiercely aggressive. By contrast the central section, led by the cello, is truly *giocoso* in a manner that *we* might even associate with film cartoons. Reprising the first section in galloping rhythms, the "horse" finally tires, coming to a brilliant, witty ending.

Beethoven, Quartet in F Major, Op. 135

The last year of Beethoven's life was difficult on every level. His health was poor, his finances were in shambles and his suspicious and distrustful nature had driven away all but a few friends. This made him cling desperately to his nephew (and adopted son) Karl. In August 1826, Karl attempted suicide, claiming later: "My uncle harassed me so." Amid the chaos, Beethoven composed what was to be his last Quartet, Opus 135 in F Major. His third quartet in the key of F (Op. 18, No. 1 and Op. 59, No. 1 share the key), was written during the two months that Karl was recovering in the hospital. Completed in October 1826, Opus 135 was written only months after Beethoven's surprising Quartet in C-sharp minor, Opus 131. That the two share the same span of time and sprang from the same composer's imagination is mind boggling. After stretching the form of the quartet to its very limits in Opus 131 (which is in seven movements, played without pause), the Opus 135 Quartet is in a new style, or rather, is a return to a more classical aesthetic. The brevity and "normality" of the piece makes it stand apart from the other quartets of

Beethoven's late period. Scholars suggest that perhaps he intended Opus 135 to be the first of a new set of quartets.

The Quartet in F, Opus 135, is in a traditional four-movement form, but this is not to say that the piece is uninspired. It is as if Beethoven had distilled quartet writing to its very essence. The first movement (Allegretto) is capricious, while being gently conversational, providing the listener with an entertaining “tug of war”. The scherzo movement (Vivace) follows with humor and brilliance, at times wild (in one section the lower three voices repeat a rhythmic figure some 50 times while the first violin interrupts with bursts of what sounds like country fiddling). For the third movement (Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo), Beethoven returns to his beloved variation form, offering a song or hymn, with four variations. The composer's working title while sketching the movement was “Süsser Ruhegesang oder Friedengesang” (“Sweet Song of Rest or Peacefulness”). For the finale movement, Beethoven provides us with a riddle as a preface. Above the music, he writes “Der Schwer gefasste Entschluss” (The Difficult Resolution or Decision), and gives us two short examples of music. The first is marked “Grave” and contains the question “Muss es sein?” (Must it be?). The second is marked “Allegro” and states not once, but twice: “Es muss sein! Es muss sein!” (It must be! It must be!). What follows is a musical discussion, going back and forth between the two, with the answer “It Must Be!” triumphantly claiming the end. The piece comes to a close with wit and lightheartedness. Scholars have hotly debated Beethoven's meaning of the opening question and answer, with opinions ranging from discussions of Beethoven using music to debate a range of ideas including (but not limited to): “free will versus destiny”, the laundry bill, the necessity of paying the rent, and the inevitability of death.

Published posthumously and released in August 1827, Opus 135 is dedicated to Beethoven's friend Johann Wolfmayer, a musical amateur and wealthy merchant. Beethoven did not live to see the work's publication or first performance.