

Pacifica Quartet

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Cypresses, Nos. 2, 3, and 11 (without Opus)

II. Death reigns in many a human breast

III. When thy sweet glances on me fall

XI. Nature lies peaceful in slumber and dreaming

Dvořák's music was received with great appreciation during his first trip to England in March 1884, and he returned to Prague with honorary membership in the Philharmonic Society of London and commissions from English admirers. Equally satisfying was a new relationship with the English music publisher Novello giving him a degree of financial independence as well as an improved bargaining position with his Viennese publisher. Armed with these accomplishments, he could at last escape the condescension of Viennese musical society. Belated recognition and honors in Vienna and Prague followed.

In the years immediately after his first trip to England Dvořák composed a set of Slavonic Dances, the Mass in D, the Piano Quintet in A, and a number of smaller chamber works. He also returned to his early song cycle *Cypresses*, arranging 12 songs for string quartet in 1887. Originally composed in 1865 when he was 24 years old and making his living as first violist in the orchestra of the Provisional Theater in Prague, the *Cypresses* were settings for voice and piano of 18 poems from a collection of the same name by the Czech poet Gustav Pflieger-Moravsky. The songs were inspired by Dvořák's unrequited love for one of his pupils, Josefína Čermáková. In the romantic tradition of Schubert and Schumann, the musical expression of each song reflects the mood and content of the text.

Cypresses was not published during Dvořák's lifetime in either its original vocal form or as arranged for string quartet, and it carries no Opus designation. Although *Cypresses* dates from his apprenticeship as a composer, he was quite fond of it and incorporated one or more of its songs in six other compositions.

- Program note by Robert Strong

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 – 1975)
String Quartet No. 9 in E-flat Major, Op. 117 (1964)

Moderato con moto—
Adagio—
Allegretto—
Adagio—
Allegro

By the mid-1960s Shostakovich had settled uncomfortably into his role as the leading Soviet composer and an important member of the Soviet music establishment. His official status imposed duties but also gave him some latitude to take creative risks. Symphony No. 13 (“Baby Yar”), a choral setting of Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s poetry implicitly condemning government anti-Semitism, was premiered in 1962 despite considerable interference by the cultural authorities. Shostakovich suffered no adverse consequences other than criticism and suppression of the symphony after several performances.

His private life was also more settled, happily so despite a growing list of chronic health problems. His third marriage, to Irina Antonova, a music editor and kindred spirit, was a source of great satisfaction to Shostakovich. Intelligent, industrious, and highly appreciative of his music, she brought stability and order back into his life after the unhappy years following his disastrous second marriage. She was an indispensable companion as his health gradually deteriorated during their years together and was widely credited for prolonging his life.

His principal creative challenge at this time was in chamber music. He had taken the use of his personal four-note DSCH ‘signature’ and self-quotation to a radical extreme in the Eighth Quartet (1960), and he struggled to find a path forward. Dissatisfied with a first attempt to compose his Ninth Quartet, he wrote that he “burnt it in the stove.” A second version, which he publicly described as “a children’s piece, about toys and going out to play,” was also discarded. A completely different Ninth Quartet finally appeared in May 1964, four years after the Eighth Quartet. Two months later, he completed his Tenth Quartet.

The ambitious, experimental Ninth Quartet displays many stylistic elements from the musical landscape of the earlier quartets, but it also stands apart from its predecessors by using new stylistic elements that Shostakovich would carry forward into his last five quartets: clusters and oscillating lines of repeated close note intervals; large note intervals in a widely-spaced musical texture; and sudden passages of recitative and solo pizzicato. These combine to produce a fragmentation and heightened emotional distance.

The Ninth Quartet is played without pause and has many unifying links across its movements. The restless oscillating eighth note pulse with which the first movement opens, an apparent allusion to Mussorgsky’s opera Boris Godunov, runs as an undercurrent throughout the entire movement. It returns as the main theme in the fourth movement, and appears again, much faster, in the last movement’s opening theme. A harmonic element introduced in the first movement

also reappears throughout the quartet: the note A natural, which acts, in Judith Kuhn's term, as a harmonic 'sore' to disrupt or block harmonic resolution. The movements are stitched together by their closing notes, each of which becomes the opening notes of the following movement.

The second movement, one of two Adagios in the quartet's arched structure, alludes to music from Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, a favorite of the composer. The centerpiece third movement scherzo opens with a driving dance that is interrupted at its height by a high, melodic second theme. After the dance resumes, the second theme returns above it as a ghostly whisper with hints of atonality. In the Adagio fourth movement, passages of forceful solo pizzicato and recitative come unexpectedly after pauses in the oscillating main theme. The symphonic final movement, twice as long as any of the earlier four, opens with re-workings of themes from the first and fourth movements, and it closes with restatements and transformations of all the quartet's major themes in reverse order. In between these two sections, after a harsh tremolo, is a return of recitative and pizzicato, first in the cello and then in all instruments together. The quartet ends with an exciting prolonged crescendo. The Ninth Quartet was dedicated to the composer's wife Irina Antonova.

- Program note by Robert Strong

Ludwig van Beethoven
Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn
Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna

Quartet in F Major, Op. 59, No. 1
Allegro ~ Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando
Adagio molto e mesto ~ Thème Russe: Allegro

The first “Rasumovsky” Quartet seems more like the consummation of a style than the beginning, in chamber music, of Beethoven’s middle period. The spacious conception, the high expressivity, the sweep of formal structure, the beautiful melodies, the rich harmonies, the surging rhythms, and the brilliant string writing – all attest to surety, confidence, and maturity.

The monumental Allegro opens with a serene and noble first theme, starting low in the cello and soaring up to the first violin’s highest register. Several other distinctive melodic phrases round out the first group of themes before the first violin introduces the upward-stretching second subject. Again, further themes fill out this second group. A codetta, based on a melody obviously derived from the first theme, concludes the exposition. The development, which starts like a repeat of the exposition, is vast in size and imaginatively varied, with a brilliant fugal center section. The cello sneaks in to start the recapitulation under a descending scale in the first violin. The building and enriching process continues through the recapitulation and concluding coda.

Musicians in Beethoven’s day considered the opening rhythmic drumming on one note in the second movement strange and oddly amusing. Although the movement is lighter in mood than the Allegro, it still is somewhat restless and ill at ease. As in the previous movement, Beethoven uses many themes, some dancing and gaily abandoned others more lyrical and songlike. The structure can be interpreted either as a scherzo with two trios or as sonata form; in any case it is a thoroughly satisfying movement that grows organically and inevitably from the melodic material.

Scholars suspect that the enigmatic words, “A weeping willow or acacia tree upon my brother’s grave,” penned by Beethoven on the sketches for this movement, give an insight into the intent of this great and profoundly moving slow movement. Some say that the brooding intensity has to do with the composer’s distress over his brother Casper Carl’s marriage to Johanna Reiss, six months pregnant, and his belief that Casper’s life had effectively ended. Others hold that the sorrow was evoked by the memory of another brother, born one year before Ludwig, who died in infancy. In any event, the lament, written in sonata form, has two cantilena themes, both characterized by wide intervals between the notes. The first is stated at the outset by the first violin; the second is sung by the cello while the violin weaves a filigree accompaniment above. The rest of the movement grows from these two melodies, as Beethoven continuously reexamines, reworks, and recasts them until a series of brilliant runs in the first violin brings the movement to an end.

The Thème Russe (“Russian theme”) of the finale follows without pause. No one is sure whether Count Rasumovsky asked Beethoven to include a Russian melody in the quartet, or whether the composer did it to honor his patron. Nevertheless, it has been determined that Beethoven derived the melody from a collection of Russian folk songs published by Ivan Pratsch. While the song was originally in minor and in a slow tempo, it appears here in major and at double the speed. In this sonata form movement, the dance-like rhythm of the first theme is followed by a contrasting legato subsidiary subject played by the second violin. At the very end Beethoven slows down the last statement of the Thème Russe by a factor of four before a brilliant flourish concludes the quartet.

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