

PROGRAM NOTES

String Quartet in D minor, Op. 76, No. 2

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Haydn completed his final set of six quartets in 1796-97 following his second visit to London. These quartets, dedicated to his patron Count Joseph Erdödy, were written when Haydn was at the peak of his compositional powers and fame as an old master.

The second quartet of the set became known as the "Quinten" or "Fifths" quartet because of the frequent use of the perfect fifth interval found not only in its melodies (usually as a "falling" fifth), but also in its harmony. The main themes of the first, second and fourth movements favor the fifth prominently and show Haydn's fondness for employing small units to generate large structures. The opening movement in sonata-allegro form is one of Haydn's most powerful and grand-scaled, as well as highly contrapuntal. While there are no true fugues, his mastery of fugal techniques is evident in the constant interplay between the four instruments--a conversation of equals.

The second movement, in three-part form, is not a true slow movement, but rather an *allegretto* based on a theme in D major, a serenade-like melody that is initially heard in the first violin over a pizzicato accompaniment. Perhaps the most unusual movement is the third, where the players are paired in stark octaves in canon against each other. This rather grim music in D minor has become known as the "Witches' Minuet." The finale is nominally in D minor except for the return of the playful first theme, which shifts into D major during the recapitulation from where it rushes to an exuberant conclusion.

String Quartet No. 3

Peteris Vasks (b. 1946)

The Latvian composer Peteris Vasks, son of a Baptist pastor, is known for music of intense spirituality. Between the years 1966-74, his primary musical occupation was as double bassist in various Latvian and Lithuanian orchestras. At the same time he continued to study composition. His output includes three symphonies, numerous concertos, choral works, and chamber works including five string quartets.

Vasks grew up under the oppressive post-war Soviet influence, so it is no wonder that he stated that "when I think about modern life, it is impossible not to realize that we are balancing on the edge of the end of time." He further said "my intention is to provide food for the soul and this is what I preach in my works." With its combination of folk-like elements, chorale-like meditation, and anxious outbursts of motoric or brutal gestures, the third quartet, written in 1995, reveals the composer's struggle to reconcile these stylistic juxtapositions, and at the same time demonstrating the evocative and raw emotion of his music. The world premiere of the quartet took place on March 16, 1996, in Mainz, Germany.

The composer's publisher suggests that the third quartet is a reflection on the possibility of peace on earth, "a tenet of faith as well as an expression of hope." The opening movement is based on a Latvian folk melody "Christmas--Peace on Earth," while the Bartókian second movement incorporates other aspects of Latvian folk music and dances. The chromaticism of the third movement is strongly reminiscent of Shostakovich, and the final movement, as stated by the publisher, is "calm and slightly melancholy [symbolizing] peace on earth by means of sonorous sustained choirs."

String Quartet No. 1 in E minor (“From My Life”)

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)

Up to the 1860s Smetana was known mainly as a pianist and teacher who had been well schooled in the Austro/German tradition and had already composed a relatively large body of music. During the summer and early autumn of 1874, his health deteriorated rapidly due to syphilis, so much so that he became completely deaf by the end of the year. Nevertheless, he continued to compose and in 1879 completed his great cycle of six symphonic poems, *My Country*, one of which is his most famous work, *The Moldau*. The rest of his life was fraught with financial and health-related difficulties, although there were a few triumphs such as the one-hundredth performance of his well-known opera, *The Bartered Bride*, in 1882. From this time onwards, he found it increasingly difficult to compose, and with the progression of dementia and finally insanity, he died in a Prague asylum on May 12, 1884.

Smetana's fame rests principally on becoming the father of the Czech national opera where he was the first to use the legends, history, and characters associated with Bohemian life. The use of folk elements also permeated his instrumental music, and in 1876 he composed his first string quartet, subtitled "From My Life." In a letter from 1878, the composer described to a friend the autobiographical "program" for each movement. The first movement represents "the love of art in my youth, my romantic mood, and the unspoken longing for something which I could not name or imagine clearly." He said the first theme represents "Fate's summons to take part in life's combat," and that the opening motive of the falling perfect fifth is "a warning as it were of my future misery." The second theme of the movement suggests "affection for romance in music and love." The second movement, in the style of a polka, brings "reminders of the happy times of my youth, when as a composer I strewed the young world with dance pieces, and was known everywhere as an enthusiastic dancer." The third movement recalls "the happiness of my first love for the girl who later became my faithful wife."

Smetana's written description of the finale begins by recalling a happier time with "the discovery that I could treat national elements in music, and my joy at following this path until it was checked by the catastrophe of the onset of my deafness, the outlook for a sad future, the tiny rays of hope and recovery, but remembering all the promise of my early career, a feeling of painful regret." One cannot miss the coda's famous piercing high E in the violin representing ringing in his ears and fatefully proclaiming his oncoming deafness.

--© Todd Crow