

The Red Bank
Chamber Music Society

presents

Manhattan Chamber Players

Adam Golka, Piano

Katie Hyun, Violin

Grace Park, Violin

Luke Fleming, Viola

Brook Speltz, Cello

Piazzolla • Fung • Shostakovich • Dvořák

Sunday Afternoon

September 18, 2016 • 4:30 PM

Trinity Church Auditorium

Red Bank, NJ

Advance Notes

PROGRAM

Four for Tango (1989)

Astor Piazzolla

Pizzicato (2001)

Vivian Fung

Piano Quintet in G minor, Op. 57 (1940)

Dmitri Shostakovich

- I. Prelude: Lento
- II. Fugue: Adagio
- III. Scherzo: Allegretto
- IV. Intermezzo: Lento
- V. Finale: Allegretto

INTERMISSION

Piano Quartet No. 2 in E \flat major, Op. 87 (1889)

Antonín Dvořák

- I. Allegro con fuoco
- II. Lento
- III. Allegro moderato, grazioso
- IV. Finale: Allegro ma non troppo

Notes on the Program

Unity of Purpose through Inspired Influence

Astor Piazzolla

Four for Tango (1989)

Today's program is centered on composers who took inspiration from the events and music of his or her own country to write music that fuses its source material with the framework of a standard chamber music combination. Throughout the history of Classical music composers have done this with varying degrees of literalness and authenticity. Some, such as Béla Bartók, took actual folk melodies and harmonized them within their own harmonic language. Others, however, adopted a more general approach, taking a style of music, its harmonic system, or a color palette of a native instrument as their inspiration, then found a way of translating that starting point into a coherent work in a Western idiom. The four pieces on this afternoon's program, though wildly different in their harmonic language and artistic scope, fall into the latter category.

The first two pieces involve a composer's discovery of something new and exciting, then translating this experience into music. In the case of Astor Piazzolla, the discovery was not of a new style of writing music, but of a new genre of instrumentation. In 1989 at the age of 68, Piazzolla had risen to great fame worldwide for both his compositions for and his mastery of the bandoneon, an accordion-like instrument of German origin popularized in Argentina in the early 20th century by native tango bands like the one which Piazzolla led. Most of Piazzolla's compositions were written for his band's non-Classical composition of players, and he had never written chamber music for a standard Classical chamber ensemble. But upon seeing a recital of new music given by the Kronos Quartet in New York, he decided to change that. Piazzolla approached the Kronos Quartet's first violinist, David Harrington, after the concert. Piazzolla introduced himself and said simply, "I will write a piece for your quartet." Much to Harrington's surprise, the very next week he was delivered parts for *Four for Tango (1989)*, which was soon followed up by *Five Tango*

Sensations for Bandoneon and String Quartet. Both pieces were premiered and recorded soon after, with the composer himself playing the bandoneon. Piazzolla spent most of his career composing music inspired by the Argentinean tango, some iterations being extroverted and brash, others mournful, and still others pensive and introspective. The music of *Four for Tango* is like the first of these—it is rough, wild, and dirty, as though the listener were in a seedy dance hall with ample cigarette smoke, sweaty people, scandalous clothing, and lots of alcohol. It is a breathless ride through this tango, for which Piazzolla requires great virtuosity and collaborative energy from all four players, not unlike the dancers of the music he so successfully translates.



Vivian Fung (b. 1975)
Pizzicato (2001)

Manhattan Chamber Players Composer Vivian Fung is Canadian-born but of Chinese ancestry, an influence that has found its way into many of her compositions. Even in her earliest published works, such as *Pizzicato* (2001), Fung has often been inspired by the folk music of East Asian countries. In composing this piece, she was particularly drawn to the sounds of two traditional Chinese plucked instruments: the *pipa* and *qin*. Adding to that the exotic, mystical, harmonies of the Indonesian *gamelan*, the harmonic language of *Pizzicato* is wonderfully strange—not dissonant to Western ears but certainly foreign. The piece's title refers to a technique of playing a stringed instrument by plucking the strings; bows are not used at all for the duration of this four-minute work. The Hungarian composer Béla Bartók also eschews the bows entirely for a movement of similar length from his String Quartet No. 4, clearly an influence for Fung. Like Bartók, Fung experiments with many different types of plucking with various hand placements, pushing the limits of this technique as it translates to the violin, viola, and cello. Two years after its composition, Fung incorporated the work into her own String Quartet No. 1 (making the apparent connection with Bartók's work even stronger), but specified that it could still be performed on its own, as it is this afternoon.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 – 1975)
Piano Quintet in G minor, Op. 57 (1940)

These two works with which we open the program contrast sharply with the **Piano Quintet in G Minor, Op. 57 (1940)** by Dmitri Shostakovich. Though brilliantly composed, conceptually mature, and emotionally powerful, it is actually an early chamber music work by Shostakovich—only the fourth work in the composer’s chamber music catalog. It is followed by no less than fourteen additional string quartets (he had already composed two), a piano trio, a violin sonata, and a viola sonata. When one compares the Piano Quintet to the first two string quartets (written just prior to it), it is immediately apparent that the 34-year old composer had taken a great stride forward, and the triumphant success with which it was met upon its premiere was completely warranted.

In 1940, most of Europe had already plunged into what would become World War II. The Soviet Union, though ostensibly protected by a non-aggression pact signed by both Stalin and Hitler, was already beginning to face the certainty of conflict, though no one could imagine the scope and brutality of what was to come. Yet the country was eerily quiet, like the proverbial calm before the storm. The Red Terror of the early years following the Russian Revolution of 1917 had passed. The collectivization of the peasants from 1929-1930 had been completed, albeit at the cost of widespread famine and starvation and the death of millions. The purge trials of 1935-1936 and the mass arrests that subsequently engulfed the entire country were complete. Shostakovich himself had almost succumbed to personal political terror in January of 1936 when Stalin and his minions walked out of a performance of his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtensk District*, an event that was followed up with an article in a local paper stating, "things could end very badly for this young man." This all speaks to the classic view we have of Shostakovich as the tortured artist, living in constant fear of the censors sending the police to beat down his door and take him away.

To affix that image to the Piano Quintet, however, would not be entirely accurate. That said, the piece is most certainly a product of the time at which it was written. Filled with intense passion (the opening Prelude), utter despair (the Fugue that follows), sardonic wit (the Scherzo), and solemn mourning (the Intermezzo), the work closes with a smile (or at least a smirk or grimace) in the Finale. Unlike the other pieces on this program, it is not specifically influenced by folk music, nor does it take a specific tune or native style as its inspiration. Its austere themes, however, are distinctly Russian in character, undoubtedly inspired by Russian orthodox chant (not unlike in the music of Tchaikovsky and Arensky a few years before), and, especially in the third and fifth movements, are thinly veiled sarcastic jabs at Russian propaganda songs and anthems. This undoubtedly contributed to the immense popularity of the work following its premiere. Rostislav Dubinsky, original first violinist of the Borodin Quartet, recalls:

“For a time, the Quintet overshadowed even such events as the football matches between the main teams. The Quintet was discussed in trams, people tried to sing in the streets the second defiant theme of the finale. War soon started completely changed the life of the country as well as the consciousness of the people. If previously there was the faint hope of a better life, and the hope that the ‘sacrifices’ of the Revolution were not in vain, this hope was never to return. The Quintet remained in the consciousness of the people as the last ray of light before the future sank into a dark gloom.”



Antonín Dvořák (1841 – 1904)
Piano Quartet No. 2 in Eb major, Op. 87 (1889)

Antonín Dvořák, author of the famous “New World” Symphony and “American Quartet,” is well known to modern Classical audiences as the father of musical nationalism in his native Bohemia (modern day Czech Republic). What is less commonly known is the path he took to becoming one of the most famous composers in the world. Born into a rural, lower-

middle class family, Dvořák was raised with the intention of him eventually succeeding his father as the town butcher. After completing his apprenticeship in a (slightly) larger town nearby, the young Dvořák did something rather unexpected: instead of returning home to serve under his father, he packed his bags and headed to Prague with the hope of pursuing his childhood hobby, the viola, professionally. He soon secured a position in the Prague Opera Orchestra, serving under the baton of the great Czech master Bedřich Smetana and learning the great operatic repertoire of Mozart, Rossini, and Wagner. In his spare time, Dvořák would pore over chamber music scores he would borrow from colleagues in the orchestra, learning the music of great masters such as Haydn, Schubert, and Mendelssohn. When he finally tried his hand at composition, almost completely self-taught, the results were, rather expectedly, uneven and largely derivative.

However, learning from his failures and refusing to publish most of his early efforts, Dvořák soon came under the wing of the great Johannes Brahms (the most famous composer in the world at that time), who immediately recognized his talent, got him a contract with Brahms's own publisher, and served as a mentor to the younger composer during the late 1870s and early 1880s. They would remain close friends until Brahms's death in 1897. It was through these early successes that Dvořák found his distinct voice as a composer, devising ways of incorporating the music of his homeland he so loved (Brahms continually—and unsuccessfully—urged Dvořák to move to Vienna, where he assured him he would find even greater success) into music required to appeal to a decidedly Western European audience. It was the Age of Empires, and Bohemia was under the rule of the Austrian Hapsburg Dynasty, so there was very little room for compromise there. Despite these restrictions, Dvořák developed so unique and fresh a style that he quickly became an international success, touring all over Europe and especially England (where his popularity was nothing short of pop sensation celebrity status) during the 1880s. It was after a particularly long time away from home that Dvořák returned to Bohemia and sat down to write his Piano Quartet No. 2 in Eb major.

It is perhaps Dvořák's most exotic work, and is peppered with influences from styles and fellow composers hailing from all over Europe; but it is, of course, distinctly Bohemian in character. In the first and last movements, one can easily observe that Dvořák had just finished composing numerous large-scale symphonic/choral works, for the sheer scope and volume produced by only four players is noticeably orchestral in concept. Even the very opening of the piece has the character of a trumpet fanfare, and Dvořák's well-developed skill in orchestration pervades throughout the brilliant first movement. The inner two movements are more intimate, the second containing a poignant cello solo undoubtedly influenced by the slow movement of Brahms's earlier Piano Trio No. 1 in B major. Here, the recent events in Dvořák's life are brilliantly translated onto the page with deliciously pan-European writing. He explores some very unusual, sumptuous harmonies and voicings in this movement, particularly in the bridges to the two impassioned episodes that contrast with the generally serene texture.

The third movement, marked *grazioso* (or “gracefully”), most noticeably draws from folk elements, especially in its lightning-quick middle section. It is essentially comprised of two dances from two different regions: a gentle *ländler* (a popular Austrian dance at the time) and the Czech *furiant*, a fast dance alternating 3/4 and 2/4 meters found in many of Dvořák's other chamber and orchestral works. More exotic passages and textures continue to punctuate the texture. At one point, the piano writing seems to approximate a popular folk instrument, the dulcimer, yet this passage also sounds uncannily similar to Jamaican steel drums (though it is highly doubtful that Dvořák was familiar with this music!). Dvořák brings all these elements together to create yet another beautifully integrated movement that shows his worldliness and well-developed craftsmanship. The bombastic *Finale* imposes high technical demands on all four players and closes in grand fashion, again very orchestral in texture, rounding out a work of stunning maturity and unity of purpose.

Program Notes by Luke Fleming

ARTISTS

The **Manhattan Chamber Players** is a chamber music collective of New York-based musicians who share the common aim of performing the greatest works in the chamber repertoire at the highest level. Formed in 2015 by Artistic Director Luke Fleming, MCP is comprised of an impressive roster of musicians who all come from the tradition of great music making at the Marlboro Music Festival, Steans Institute at Ravinia, Music@Menlo, Yellow Barn Chamber Music Festival and Perlman Music Program, and are former students of the Curtis Institute, Juilliard School, Colburn School, New England Conservatory, and Yale School of Music.

At the core of MCP's inspiration is its members' joy in playing this richly varied repertoire with longtime friends and colleagues, with whom they have been performing since they were students. Building upon that foundation, new works commissioned from its composer members keep the ensemble firmly grounded in the music of both the past and present. Its roster allows for the possibility of programming the entire string and piano chamber music repertoire, from piano duos to string octets. While all its members have independent careers as soloists and chamber musicians, they strive for every opportunity to come together and again share in this special collaboration.

Members of MCP are current and former members of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, ACJW, and the Amphion, Attacca, Dover, Escher, and Ying Quartets, and the Lysander and Sheridan Piano Trios. They are top prizewinners in the Banff, Concert Artists Guild, Fischhoff, Melbourne, Naumburg, Osaka, Primrose, Queen Elisabeth, Rubenstein, Tchaikovsky, Tertis, and Young Concert Artists Competitions, and are some of the most sought after solo and chamber performers of their generation. During its inaugural season, in addition to a (le) poisson rouge debut in New York and numerous concerts across the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, the Manhattan Chamber Players has been featured multiple times on NPR's Performance Today, and is the

Ensemble-in-Residence at both the Northern Lights Music Festival in Mexico and the Crescent City Chamber Music Festival in New Orleans.

Manhattan Chamber Players is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization.