The Red Bank Chamber Music Society

presents

The American String Quartet

with Anton Nel, Piano

Dohnányi • Beethoven

Peter Winograd, violin

Laurie Carney, violin

Daniel Avshalomov, viola

Wolfram Koessel, cello

Sunday Afternoon

October 11, 2015 • 4:30 PM

Trinity Church Auditorium

Red Bank, NJ

PROGRAM NOTES

PROGRAM

Piano Quintet No.1 in C Minor, Op.1

Ernst von Dohnányi

I. Allegro
II. Scherzo: Allegro
III. Adagio, quasi andante
IV. Finale: Allegro animato

INTERMISSION

String Quartet No.14 in C# Minor, Op.131

Ludwig van Beethoven

I. Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo
II. Allegro molto vivace
III. Allegro moderato
IV. Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile
V. Presto
VI. Adagio quasi un poco andante
VII. Allegro

Notes on the Program

Foreword

For the second and last time your program annotator apologizes for his need to rely on professional musicologists for the content of today's program notes. By the time you read this we will have closed on our house in Monmouth Hills and become full-time residents of Manhattan, instead of splitting our time between two homes, and I will again have the time to devote to the enjoyable task of immersing myself in the music presented on these marvelous Red Bank Chamber Music Society concerts. For the past six years I have had the privilege and pleasure of revisiting works that I have played and works that are new to me, studying the scores and listening to recorded performances, and reading about the composers and the events in their lives contemporaneous with the compositions. I look forward to resuming that rewarding process for the next concert.

Ernst von Dohnányi (1877 – 1960)

Piano Quintet No.1 in C Minor, Op.1 (1895)

(~30 minutes)

Dohnányi was probably the foremost figure in the musical life of Hungary in the opening decades of the twentieth century, towering above both Bela Bartók and Zoltán Kodaly in his lifetime. Hungarian by birth – his formal name is "Dohnányi Ernö" in the reverse-name-order of that language – he almost always used the German form of his name, with an ennobling "von" inserted. His compositional style was personal and conservative, often sounding very much like the music of Brahms. Although he used elements of Hungarian folk music, he is not considered a nationalist composer like Bartók or Kodály. He may be best known to American audiences for his 1914 *Variations on a Nursery Tune* for piano and orchestra, a delightful romp through *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*.

He was born in Pozsony, Kingdom of Hungary, Austria-Hungary (today Bratislava, capital of Slovakia). He first studied music with his father, a professor of mathematics and an amateur cellist, and then, when he was eight years old, with the organist at the local cathedral. In 1894 he moved to Budapest and enrolled in the Royal National Hungarian Academy of Music, studying piano and composition with teachers who were students and devotees of Johannes Brahms and Franz Liszt. These two composers, polar opposites with regard to whether music should be "absolute" or "meaningful", influenced Dohnányi as both composer and virtuoso performing pianist: Brahms as composer and Liszt as pianist. At the age of 18 Dohnányi published his first composition, a Piano Quintet in C minor.

Though chronologically a "student" work, his first piano quintet is a masterwork by any standard, a worthy companion to the piano quintets of Schumann, Brahms, and Dvorák. The opening movement is a sonata allegro movement full of fire and passion. The second movement Scherzo is in rapid 3/4 time, reminiscent of the Bohemian dance, the *furiant*, much used by Dvorák, and is the

most "Hungarian" in character. The ardent third movement seems to borrow its main motif from the beautiful slow movement of Schumann's Second Symphony. The finale to the quintet consists of a rondo in 5/4 time, with a coda that presents a reprise of the opening of the first movement.

While Dohnányi was hailed as the greatest Hungarian composer of his day, this work is squarely in the late romantic Central European style, rather than recognizably folkloric. Brahms was said to have exclaimed, "I couldn't have written it better myself", and he arranged to have the work performed in Vienna soon after its 1895 premiere in Budapest.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827)

String Quartet No.14 in C# Minor, Op.131 (1826)

(~40 minutes)

Beethoven finished the third installment of a commission in November 1825 but found himself so captivated by the challenges of string-quartet writing that he immediately began to sketch another one, with no commission attached. This would become the C-sharp-minor String Quartet (Op. 131) which, along with his final quartet (in B-flat major, Op. 135), he completed the following summer. There's no need to play favorites when it comes to Beethoven quartets, but – without insisting too much on what may have been meant as a casual comment – the composer did suggest to his friend Carl Holz that he loved this one most of all. With typically bluff humor, Beethoven sent this work off to his publisher (who had imprudently spelled out that he expected an "original" work) with a note attached: "Scrambled together with pilferings from one thing and another." This sent the recipient into a panic, and a week later Beethoven restored order into the relationship by writing to assure the publisher that the quartet's music really was new, after all, and not just a bunch of strung-together leftovers.

There's no question that it is strikingly different from other Beethoven quartets, even in the basic matter of its number of movements. In his late works, Beethoven played fast and loose with traditional forms; here he expands the standard four-movement layout to a seven-movement structure – or, perhaps more to the point, a single vast movement of seven discrete sections with no breaks between. Or is seven too many? Perhaps one should consider there to be only six, since the third is only eleven measures long and can easily be viewed as a mere prelude to the fourth, just as the sixth can be seen as simply an introduction to the seventh – at which point we would find ourselves not so far from a sort of Classical four-movement string quartet after all. Yet even those short movements pack a punch: the listener feels as if the entire weight of a full-scale movement has been compressed into these dense supernovas, which might explode at any time. The traditional sonata-allegro form is not discarded entirely, but here Beethoven holds its drama in reserve for the final section. Where one would have expected a sonata form in the opening movement we find instead a restrained but imposing, widely modulating slow fugue (which a more traditional composer might have actually put at the end) emerging bit by bit out of silence to proclaim its melancholy. Nothing in this work is predictable.

The fugue builds in its quiet intensity as Beethoven augments the note values of its subject. This gives way to an odd transitional movement in lighthearted 6/8 meter, though Beethoven interrupts

its flow with occasional dynamic outbursts. This section leaves the listener uneasy, ungrounded; its contrasts confirm nothing about where the piece is leading. Brash chords announce the fleeting third section, a *recitative* in which all four instruments take part, with the first violin proving especially elaborate.

Finally, with the fourth section, we find ourselves in comfortable, familiar territory. The aware listener will recognize the tune as custom-made for variations, a compositional procedure in which Beethoven took great delight throughout his career. These are far removed from the simple diminutions and predictable road-plan of Classical variations. Instead, Beethoven offers us different points of view about the theme, really more akin to reinterpretations of the theme's very substance, rather than mere decoration – something along the lines of the *Diabelli Variations*, though still more condensed. Beethoven's last "complete" go at the tune suggests hymn-like transcendence, after which the variations collapse into fragmentary suggestions and half-remembered allusions.

All that remains is a final fast movement, rugged and gruff. Even this is interrupted (after a false ending) by an *Adagio* recollection of sounds that have come before, particularly the spirit of the opening fugue, thereby serving to unify the entire forty-minute work.

The piece has never lacked for admirers. One of the earliest to single it out was Franz Schubert. He idolized Beethoven, and on his own deathbed he expressed a desire that he might hear Op. 131 performed. Five days before Schubert's death, four string players assembled to fulfill his wish. One of the violinists later characterized the event: "The King of Harmony had sent the King of Song a friendly bidding to the crossing."

James M. Keller

ARTISTS

Internationally recognized as one of the world's foremost quartets, the **AMERICAN STRING QUARTET** celebrates its 40th season in 2015-2016. Critics and colleagues hold the Quartet in high esteem, and leading artists and composers seek out the Quartet for collaborations.

To celebrate its 35th anniversary, the Quartet recorded an ambitious CD, *Schubert's Echo*, released in August 2010 by NSS Music. The program invites the listener to appreciate the influence of Schubert on two masterworks of early 20th-century Vienna.

In addition to quartets by European masters, the American naturally performs quartets by such American masters as George Whitefield Chadwick, Charles Ives, Arthur Foote, Henry Cowell, and Walter Piston.

Critically acclaimed for its presentations of the complete quartets of Beethoven, Schubert, Schoenberg, Bartok and Mozart, the American also champions contemporary music. The Quartet has commissioned and premiered works by distinguished composers Claus Adam, Richard Danielpour, Kenneth Fuchs, Tobias Picker and George Tsontakis. The Quartet has recorded on the Albany, CRI, MusicMasters, Musical Heritage Society, Nonesuch and RCA labels. The Quartet's discography includes works by Adam, Corigliano, Danielpour, Dvořák, Fuchs, Prokofiev, Schoenberg and Tsontakis. Originally released by MusicMasters and again in 2008 by Nimbus Records, the Quartet's recordings of the complete Mozart string quartets on a matched set of Stradivarius instruments are widely held to set the standard for this repertoire.

The Quartet's innovative programming and creative approach to education has resulted in notable residencies throughout the country. The Quartet continues as quartet in residence at the Manhattan School of Music (1984-present) and the Aspen Music Festival (1974-present). The ASQ also teaches in Beijing, China, and travels widely abroad.

Formed in 1974 when its original members were students at The Juilliard School, the American String Quartet was launched by winning the Coleman Competition and the Naumburg Chamber Music Award in the same year.

Pianist **ANTON NEL** won first prize in the 1987 Naumburg International Piano Competition at Carnegie Hall. His multifaceted career has taken him to North and South America, Europe, Asia, and South Africa. Following an auspicious debut at the age of twelve with Beethoven's C Major Concerto after only two years of study, the Johannesburg native captured first prizes in all the major South African competitions while still in his teens, toured his native country extensively and became a well-known radio and television personality. He made his European debut in France in 1982, and in the same year graduated with highest distinction from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. He came to the United States in 1983, attending the University of Cincinnati, where he pursued his Masters and Doctor of Musical Arts degrees; during this three-year period he was a prizewinner at the 1984 Leeds International Piano Competition in England.

His recordings include four solo CDs, several chamber music recordings , and works for piano and orchestra by Franck, Fauré, and Saint-Saëns. His latest release features premiere recordings of all the works for piano and orchestra of Edward Burlingame Hill.