

The Red Bank
Chamber Music Society
presents

The Escher String Quartet

Beethoven • Dvořák • Smetana

Adam Barnett-Hart, violin

Aaron Boyd, violin

Pierre Lapointe, viola

Dane Johansen, cello

Sunday Afternoon

March 22, 2015 • 4:30 PM

Trinity Church Auditorium

Red Bank, NJ

PROGRAM NOTES

PROGRAM

String Quartet No.6 in B-flat Major, Op.18, No.6

Ludwig van Beethoven

- I. Allegro con brio
- II. Adagio ma non troppo
- III. Scherzo: Allegro
- IV. La Malinconia: Adagio – Allegretto quasi allegro

String Quartet No.10 in E-flat Major, Op.51

Antonín Dvořák

- I. Allegro ma non troppo
- II. Dumka (Elegia): Andante con moto – Vivace
- III. Romanza: Andante con moto
- IV. Finale: Allegro assai

INTERMISSION

String Quartet No.1 in E Minor, "From My Life"

Bedřich Smetana

- I. Allegro vivo appassionato
- II. Allegro moderato alla Polka
- III. Largo sostenuto
- IV. Vivace

Notes on the Program

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827)

String Quartet No.6 in B-flat Major, Op.18, No.6 (1800)

(~25 minutes)

In the second half of his life Beethoven composed sixteen string quartets that individually and collectively testify to his musical genius. Each is a gem in its own right, worth a lifetime of listening, learning and performing; together they define the evolution of serious music from the “Classical” period of Haydn and Mozart to the “Romantic” era of Schumann, Chopin, and Brahms.

In 1792, in his early twenties, Beethoven left the relative backwater of small-town Bonn and moved to Vienna, the European capital of music. He had already written a sizeable body of as-yet-unpublished compositions, but at that time he seems to have felt himself more a virtuoso pianist and serious violinist than a composer, earning his living in Vienna through public performance and private piano lessons while cultivating the friendship and patronage of Austria’s nobility. But privately, from his earliest days in Vienna, he had focused his attention on composition, studying with the leading lights of the day: Joseph Haydn for instrumental counterpoint, and Antonio Salieri for vocal style. He also honed his violin performance skills with Ignaz Schuppanzigh, the leading violinist of his time, who would found the world’s first professional string quartet and who would give the premieres of many of Beethoven’s works.

Beethoven’s first formally published work, a set of three piano trios (violin, cello, and piano), appeared in 1795. Over the next five years he published sonatas for solo piano (including the revolutionary “Pathetique”), sonatas for piano and cello, string trios, chamber music for piano and winds, and his first piano concerto. But around 1798, commissioned by a wealthy noble patron of Haydn, he began work on a set of six string quartets that he clearly felt were milestones that could make or break his reputation. In those days Vienna’s audience was still entranced by the latest string quartets of Haydn, who had practically invented the form and had by then written 65 of them, while Beethoven was regarded as a terrific pianist who also composed. As it turned out, Beethoven’s six quartets would indeed make his reputation, and commissions for new works surged after their first performances.

He was soon regarded as the composer most likely to succeed Haydn and Mozart in the musical pantheon. Nonetheless, while his first six string quartets were very much in the “classical” style of Haydn, it was clear that Beethoven was to be no mere imitator of his predecessors and teachers. Innovations that were to appear throughout his mature compositions are already evident in the works of his “Early Period”: a wider dynamic range with strong and sudden emphases that heighten the drama of the music; a greater toleration of dissonance and ambiguity within a broader harmonic palette; the use of short musical motifs rather than long melodic lines, allowing greater freedom of

development; and significant departures from the classical symmetry of musical forms.

The sixth of these quartets is the most revolutionary of the set, though it opens with a pair of fairly traditional movements that might be called “Haydnesque”. The first movement is marked *Allegro con brio* (quick and spirited) and filled with tuneful energy, based on contrasting themes, one exuberantly sparkling and the other more gracefully settled, with a generous exchange of melodic dialogue among the four instruments. The second movement *Adagio, ma non troppo* (a bit lingering) is stately, opening with an appealing song-like theme on the first violin but soon shifting to a moodier minor key, with frequent dramatic silences suggesting a darker thread running through the musical fabric.

The hilarious third movement Scherzo, marked *Allegro* (quickly) shows Beethoven at his most spirited. Though the meter is a strict three beats to the bar, he dares the listener to follow the pulse as he relentlessly syncopates melody and rhythm; his performers must have laughed themselves silly, while his audiences would likely have been baffled. The brief middle Trio section puts everything more or less back on an even keel, but a reprise of the opening Scherzo tosses everything up in the air again.

The final movement is a rondo that opens in *Adagio* (lingering) tempo: Beethoven subtitled it “La Malinconia” (melancholy) and wrote “This piece must be played with the greatest delicacy”. It opens with an extended slow introduction that alternates between moods of serenity, sadness, mystery, and unsettled expectation. Then, with no real preparation, it moves suddenly to a tempo *Allegretto quasi allegro* (a gently quick pace), and the two contrasting moods will recur throughout the movement. If there was any doubt until now whether this quartet was the work of Haydn or of Beethoven, this movement will dispel it: Beethoven’s harmonic shifts are sometimes radical, the tempo and dynamics change frequently, his melodic building blocks are short, the silences are powerful, and the passion never lets up.

When the thirty-year-old Beethoven sent pre-publication copies of his first six string quartets to a professional violinist friend for comment, he wrote “Only now have I learnt to write quartets”. For the next thirty years and ten more string quartets he could honestly have said the same with each new masterpiece.



Antonín Dvořák (1841 – 1904)

String Quartet No.10 in E-flat Major, Op.51 (1879)

(~30 minutes)

By 1876, Antonín Dvořák at age 35 had already composed five symphonies, eight string quartets, two string quintets, and a piano quintet. Famous in his native Bohemia, in 1877 he came to the approving attention and sponsorship of Johannes Brahms, only eight years his senior but already internationally acclaimed as the greatest living composer in the tradition of Bach and Beethoven.

The admiration was mutual, and Dvořák would go on to honor and often emulate Brahms throughout a long career that lasted into the twentieth century.

From his earliest compositions, Dvořák made explicit use of Czech folk idioms, incorporating elements of his native Bohemian and Moravian styles, rhythms, and textures into his own personal musical language. His international reputation was made when he wrote a set of *Slavonic Dances* in 1878 and dedicated them to Brahms; unlike Brahms's *Hungarian Dances*, many of which borrowed heavily from actual popular melodies, Dvořák's melodies and motifs are merely suggestive of popular Czech music, and none of them existed before he created them: they were inventions not reminiscences.

Two of these styles came to predominate in his works over the following decades: the *dumka* and the *furiant*:

The “*dumka*” was a musical form of his own invention, based on an ancient Slavic style of spoken epic poetry, with sudden alternations between melancholy and exuberance, between declamatory and lyrical.

The “*furiant*” is a headlong Bohemian dance alternating rapidly between two-step and three-step time with accents that shift excitedly across the melody.

The popularity of his folk-inflected compositions led to a commission by a professional string quartet to create a “Slavonic work” for them, and the result was the work we hear today.

The first movement *Allegro non troppo* (not too quickly) opens with a gently rocking motif that gracefully shifts into a more dance-like second motif underpinning a tuneful melody.

The second movement is titled “*Dumka*” with the subtitle “*Elegia*”, suggesting the mourning of a loved one's life mingled with the recollections of happier times. Its minor key and sudden shifts in mood and tempo make it the most Slavic of the four movements. It opens *Andante con moto* (a walking pace with forward motion), with the violins and viola singing a mournful lament over a strummed cello; a lively *furiant* dance bursts out of the gloom, but eventually we are brought back to the sad reverie of the opening, with just a dash of wistfully happy reminiscence to end the movement.

In the third-movement *Romanza* a mood of harmonious serenity reigns, with only the slightest wisp of melody singing above a gently moving pulse.

The finale is a rollicking Bohemian dance, marked *Allegro assai* (rather quickly). Built up from two similar melodies, it is filled with good humor and never takes itself too seriously, ending in grand style.



Bedřich Smetana (1824 – 1884)

String Quartet No.1 in E Minor (“From My Life”) (1876)

(~30 minutes)

Smetana was the first in a line of great Czech nationalist composers that continued to Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904), Leoš Janáček (1854-1928), and Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959). He was born in the kingdom of Bohemia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and ruled from Vienna by the Habsburgs for three hundred years. Under Habsburg rule Bohemian culture and language were looked down upon by the ruling society and, for long periods, suppressed; in Smetana’s youth German was still the official state language, and Czech wasn’t taught in primary school. Periodically, Czech nationalist sentiments surfaced in movements that ranged from peaceful to violent struggles for recognition as a people with a voice in its own government.

From his early days as a composer, Smetana was pulled by the powerful emotional gravity of reemerging Czech nationalism that demanded a distinct voice to express its own independent identity in its own language. He was similarly drawn to the idea of instrumental music as narrative, evoking sound-images of stories and emotions and personal reminiscences. One of his heroes was Franz Liszt, an early exponent of the “tone poem” that aimed to convey the words of Shakespeare and Dante and Goethe in wordless music. Of course many earlier composers had done this one way or another: Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*, Rameau’s *Birds*, and Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony* are no less programmatic than Liszt’s *Hamlet* or, later, Richard Strauss’s *Don Juan*. But by the mid-nineteenth century battle lines had been drawn between composers of “pure” music and “programmatic” music, and Smetana was clearly on the side of the latter.

As a political radical in his twenties Smetana had skirmished against the monarchists during the Europe-wide revolutions of 1848. The position of the Czechs gradually improved over the next dozen years, and Smetana’s reputation in Prague’s musical circles rapidly advanced. He became conductor of the Czech-language National Theater in 1860, for which he wrote the brilliant opera *The Bartered Bride*.

By 1874 he had become completely deaf, but he composed some of his most profound works from then until his death ten years later, including the symphonic poem cycle *Má Vlast* (“*My Homeland*”) with its memorable *Moldau*. Two years later he composed his first of two string quartets, a profoundly personal reflection that he titled “From My Life”. Here is what he wrote to friends, according to a 1946 Prague edition of the quartet:

Movement 1 (fast, lively, and impassioned). “The call of fate (the principal motif) into the struggle of this life. The attraction to the arts in my youth; inclination to romanticism, in music as well as in love and life in general; an inexpressible yearning for something that I could neither express nor clearly understand, and also a warning concerning my future misfortune: that is where the long-sounding tone in the [fourth-movement] finale originated; and it is that fateful ringing of the shrill tones in my ear which foretold my coming deafness in 1874. I allowed myself this little irony, as it was so fateful for me.”

Movement 2 (moderately quick, like a Polka): “*Quasi Polka* evokes in my memories the happy years of my youth, spent as much among country folk as in the salons of high society. While my whole youth was filled by composing dance music, I was known everywhere as a passionate dancer. It also describes my love of travel, with viola and second violin solos indicated to sound ‘like a posthorn’.”

Movement 3 (very slow and restrained): “This reminds me of the happiness of my first love to the girl who later became my faithful wife. The struggle with adverse fate and the final attainment of my goal.”

Movement 4 (fast and lively): “The discovery of nationalism in our fine arts, the joy of having finally found the right path in our national art, the happy success along this way; then a horrible whistling of a piercing tone starts ringing in my ear as warning of my cruel fate, my present deafness that has forever taken away the happiness from me of hearing and deriving pleasure from the beauties of our art. Submitting to an irremediable fate, presaged in the first movement as a warning, with a very small hope for a better future.”

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ARTISTS

The Escher String Quartet has received acclaim for its profound musical insight and rare tonal beauty. Championed by the Emerson String Quartet, the group was a BBC New Generation Artist from 2010-2012, giving debuts at both Wigmore Hall and BBC Proms at Cadogan Hall. In its home town of New York, the ensemble serves as Artists of The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and in 12/13 presented a critically acclaimed 3-concert series featuring the quartets of Benjamin Britten. In 2013, the quartet became one of the very few chamber ensembles to be awarded the prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant.

Within months of its inception in 2005, the Escher Quartet was invited by both Pinchas Zukerman and Itzhak Perlman to be Quartet in Residence at each artist’s summer festival: the Young Artists Programme at Canada’s National Arts Centre; and the Perlman Chamber Music Programme on Shelter Island, NY. The quartet has since collaborated with artists including David Finckel, Leon Fleischer, Wu Han, Lynn Harrell, Cho Liang Lin, David Shifrin and guitarist Jason Vieaux. Last season, the Escher Quartet undertook an extensive UK tour with pianist Benjamin Grosvenor.

The Escher Quartet is increasingly making a distinctive impression throughout Europe as it builds important debuts into its schedule and receives consistently high acclaim for its work. These developments have included the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, the Auditorium du Louvre in Paris and the Conservatoire de Musique in Geneva among others. In 2013, the group's first appearance at Israel's Tel Aviv Museum of Art resulted in an immediate re-invitation, and its performance at Wigmore Hall was followed by an invitation to establish a regular relationship with the venue. The current season sees further significant debuts at London's Kings Place, Berlin's Konzerthaus and Slovenian Philharmonic Hall in Ljubljana, as well as the Risør Festival in Norway, O/Modernt Festival in Sweden and Great Music in Irish Houses.

Alongside its growing European profile, the Escher Quartet continues to flourish in its home country, performing at Alice Tully Hall in New York, Kennedy Center in Washington DC and Ravinia and Caramoor festivals. Last season saw a critically acclaimed debut at Chamber Music San Francisco and an appearance at Music@Menlo in California. Elsewhere, the group gave its first Australian performances at Perth International Arts Festival in 2012, and this season makes its debut at the Hong Kong International Chamber Music Festival. Adding to the current season is the quartet's involvement in the education of young musicians, with coaching activities at Campos do Jordão Music Festival in Brazil and the Royal Academy of Music in London.

The quartet has recorded the complete Zemlinsky String Quartets on the Naxos label, releasing two highly-acclaimed volumes in 2013 and 2014 respectively. Forthcoming releases include the complete Mendelssohn Quartet cycle on the BIS label.

The Escher Quartet takes its name from Dutch graphic artist M.C. Escher, inspired by Escher's method of interplay between individual components working together to form a whole.