

Program Notes

Muir String Quartet

Wednesday, February 6, 2015, 7:30 PM

Reynolds Recital Hall, MSU Bozeman

MUIR STRING QUARTET

Peter Zazofsky, *Violin*

Lucia Lin, *Violin*

Steven Ansell, *Viola*

Michael Reynolds, *Cello*

Cypresses for String Quartet, B. 152 (1887)

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK [1841-1904]

"There is a vitality and freshness of the Czech folk idiom which permeates all of Dvořák's finest music."

Coming from Slavic peasant stock, Antonín Dvořák was born in the Bohemian area of what is now the Czech Republic. Antonín's father wanted his son, the eldest of nine children, to follow his trade as a butcher and innkeeper, but music was the course chosen. Dvořák openly acknowledged the strong influence of his late-Romantic contemporaries, as well as the enormous debt to earlier masters, Mozart and Schubert in particular. "It is a fact that most contemporaries influence each other, whether they want to or not. This is one of nature's eternal laws to which we are all subject." [Edvard Grieg] The most potent and long-lasting connection was with his friend and mentor Johannes Brahms (1833-1897). The close association between Brahms and his music publishers was a major asset to Dvořák's successful career. "The sympathy of an artist as important and famous as Brahms should not only be pleasant but also useful to you, and I think you should write to him and perhaps send him some of your music...After all, it would be advantageous for your things to become known beyond your narrow Czech fatherland, which in any case does not do much for you." [Hanslick, influential music critic] The renowned violinist Joseph Joachim also admired Dvořák's music. He felt that Dvořák had a special gift for melody and encouraged him to compose.

Bedrich Smetana (1824-1884) greatly influenced Dvořák's compositional style. Smetana's patriotism was infectious and awakened Dvořák's interest in the folk idiom. As a rule, Dvořák did not quote folk tunes in his compositions, but chose rather to incorporate traditional rhythmic patterns and melodic phrasing of Slavonic folk music. While he was discovering musical nationalism, Czechoslovakia was struggling for its independence from the rule of the Hapsburgs. The official language was German and the official culture was Austrian. Dvořák had a deep affection for his native land; however, he was not a revolutionary. Nothing was more important than his art.

Throughout his creative life, Dvořák exhibited a special interest in chamber music. Between 1861 and 1895 his contribution to the literature included fourteen string quartets, two piano quintets, four piano trios, two piano quartets, a viola quintet, string sextet, string trio and other miscellaneous chamber works. His interest in contemporary musical developments, coupled with his admiration for earlier composers, in particular Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, his good friend Brahms, and Wagner, helped to mold Dvorak's musical style. His practical experience as a

viola player developed an invaluable appreciation for the importance of the individual voices in chamber music. From about 1875 Dvořák devoted himself exclusively to composition. His friendship with Johannes Brahms helped considerably in nurturing a favorable reputation.

Cypresses (B.11, 1865) was originally a set of 18 love songs (text: Moravian poet Gustav Pfleger-Moravsky) that Dvořák composed in a few weeks when he was 24 and infatuated with unrequited love for a 16-year-old pupil (he eventually married her younger sister). Dvořák chose never to publish the very personal songs in their original form, but material from several of the songs were often quoted in other works. In 1887, he took 12 of the songs and revised them for string quartet, titled *Echo of Songs*. They were not published until after his death, and the title *Cypresses* was chosen at the time of publication (1921). In most of the movements the first violin takes the part originally written for voice and there is a masterful string transcription of the piano accompaniments. The melodic themes of the songs remain unchanged and the harmonic and rhythmic structure remain intact. These pieces reflect Dvořák's strong feelings for tradition coupled with changing musical styles and harmonic language.

String Quartet in B Minor, Op. 11 (1936) **SAMUEL BARBER [1910-1981]**

The music of Samuel Barber has been described as neo-Romantic, combining traditional 19th century music materials with varied contemporary characteristics. In his discipline and use of traditional forms coupled with his sense of proportion, Barber could also be considered a Classicist. Barber's primary triumph as a composer, one successful in both vocal and instrumental forms, was the subjective expression of personal emotions. His use of dissonance or atonality and complex rhythms, generally reserved for moments of demanding tension, occur within the framework of a conventional style based on traditional forms, late-19th century tonality and his distinctive lyricism. Barber had the ability to integrate modern techniques with his personal romantic aesthetic. To quote music critic Donal Henahan (1921-2012): "He [Barber] did not dabble in chance or electronics. He wrote nothing that required consulting the *I Ching*." Samuel Barber was admired by other musicians and the popular nature of his music pleased both audience and performer. Understandably, he was often judged in avant-garde circles for being too conservative. Barber is not considered an innovator or a revolutionary, but his music always exhibits a distinctive, personal label enhanced by his unique craftsmanship. He was a prolific composer who worked in all genres, and he always maintained his "*integrity of craftsmanship, expressive intensity and stylistic development*."

At the early age of 14 Barber entered the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia where he studied piano, composition, conducting, and voice (he was an accomplished baritone and for a while seriously considered a vocal career). His inclination for vocal music, evidenced by the special lyrical qualities of his compositions, is due in part to the advice, encouragement and support of his aunt, the renowned contralto Louise Homer (1871-1947). Barber made impressive achievements as a singer at Curtis, later performing in Vienna and for NBC radio broadcasts. In 1931 he recorded his own musical setting of Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach*.

The elements of Barber's style, in particular his long, lyric lines and the uses of instrumental color and technique, emerged early and didn't drastically change in later years. With Barber's penchant for romantic fullness and lyricism combined with classical procedures, he is not recognized as an innovator, though his works have a distinctive personal stamp.

The Quartet is set in two movements. Barber is rather conservative in his use of tonality, but flavored by the more modern angular melodies and dissonant harmonic functions. The Quartet opens with a bold unison of the main theme, rhythmic and intense, first stated in octaves (interval of eight notes) and then contrasting chords. A legato melody follows and then these three ideas are developed and recapitulated. The exquisitely beautiful *Adagio* is constructed around one long, sinuous theme that moves slowly and deliberately. The beginning is calm and tranquil and then Barber carries the theme to an intense, exciting climax. This movement is often performed separately and is well-known as an independent work for string orchestra, the *Adagio for Strings*. Barber arranged this movement for larger forces at the request of the famous conductor Arturo Toscanini, who premiered it in 1938. This version was popularized in the movie *The Elephant Man*. The Quartet was premiered by the Pro Arte String Quartet in Rome, December 1936.

An open-hearted yet a tough romantic, Samuel Barber was one of the few 20th century American composers to fight for the dominance of lyricism. In his last decades, he seemed to be losing the battle, but by the end of the 20th century Barber had posthumously become one of America's most widely performed composers.

String Quintet in G Minor, K. 516 (1787) WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART [1756-1791]

In 1787, Mozart experienced a great success with Le nozze di Figaro in Prague and while working on a new commission, Don Giovanni, he composed the two significant string quintets, K. 515 and K. 516, completing them in only four weeks. The quality and the speed with which they were created were an extraordinary achievement.

"When they hear my G minor Quintet, they will weep." [Letter, Mozart to his father]

1787 was not a good year for Mozart financially. He was a failure in the eyes of the Viennese. One of music history's greatest geniuses was misunderstood and slighted by this segment of society. Mozart wrote to his father: "I have now made a habit of being prepared in all the affairs of life for the worst. As death, when we come to consider it closely, is the true goal of our existence, I have formed, during the last few years, such close relations with this best and truest friend of mankind, that his image is not only no longer terrifying me, but is indeed very soothing and consoling." The income from his appointment as court chamber musician for Emperor Joseph II was little more than a token. His desperation was obvious when it was necessary to stop work on *Don Giovanni* in order to produce something that could be sold immediately. This resulted in the two string quintets, K. 515 and K. 516. The response to these works was disappointing because they were considered unfashionably difficult and too unusual. Also, one might consider that the marketability at the time for any string quintet was probably uncertain. Composers have not generally favored the string quintet. Compared to the string quartet literature, there are few — those of Brahms, Boccherini, and Mozart, who reign supreme in this area, immediately come to mind. Mozart's six quintets cover the years 1773-1791, Salzburg to Prague: the first composed in 1773 (K. 174) and the last in 1791 (K. 614). There is also one quintet for horn and strings (K. 407, 1782) and one for clarinet and strings (K. 581, 1789). The four string quintets, 1787-1791, reflect a high point in his chamber music compositions. Mozart seemed to be comfortable with a five-part, rather than a four-part texture (no doubt favored for the increased possibilities for harmonic richness). The total number of varied instrumental

combinations increases greatly. It is truly fascinating that Haydn, the master of the string quartet, never wrote a string quintet. When asked why, his response was: "*He could not find the fifth voice.*" Haydn was devoted to the string quartet and considered it to be the highest level of chamber music.

K. 516 is the most famous of Mozart's Quintets, with its dramatic power and combination of tragedy and tenderness. The opening movement, *Allegro*, is intensely passionate, yet sorrowful in character. It begins with the upper three instruments untethered by the bass, full of restless and quiet agitation; the main theme is punctuated by breathless rests. The poignant coda offers a sense of resignation and an absence of struggle. The *Menuetto*, no courtly dance and more severe than a typical minuet, is contrasted by a happier and more consoling *Trio*. The movement ends quietly. The delicate, and muted throughout third movement, *Adagio, ma non troppo*, has a melancholy disposition and is rhythmically and harmonically complex. An infinitely touching movement, it plays on the opposing beauty of sadness. Mozart begins the finale with a slow *cavatina* (little song) and serves as an introduction to the final lighthearted and lilting *Allegro*.

It is interesting that on two occasions Mozart conceived pairs of works in the favored keys of C major and G minor. In 1787, the C Major String Quintet (K. 515) followed shortly by the G Minor Quintet (K. 516), and in 1788, Symphony No. 40 in G Minor (K. 550) followed by Symphony No.41 in C Major (K.551, *Jupiter*).

Mozart's father died about two weeks after this Quintet was completed. This work is indeed a mirror of Mozart's personal tragedy.

"The Germans have always been at all times the greatest harmonists, and the Italians the greatest melodists. But from the moment that the North produced a Mozart, we of the South were beaten on our own ground, because this man rises above all nations, uniting in himself the charm of Italian melody and all the profundity of German harmony...[He is] the only musician who had as much knowledge as genius, and as much genius as knowledge." [Gioachino Rossini]

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