

South Bay Chamber Music Society
September 20 & 22, 2019

Fiato String Quartet
Carrie Kennedy, violin
Joel Pargman, violin
Aaron Oltman, viola
Ryan Sweeney, cello

Program Notes by Boglárka Kiss, D.M.A.



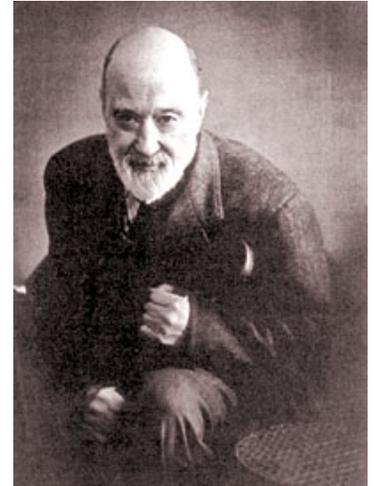
The string quartet

As a chamber music group, the string quartet consists of four instruments: two violins, a viola, and a cello. From its humble beginnings in outdoor serenades, the string quartet rose to become one of the most prominent chamber ensembles in classical music. Austrian composer Joseph Haydn is credited with elevating the genre of the string quartet in the mid-18th century, having written over sixty of them. Indeed, writing for a string quartet demands utter skill from composers: There are only four parts to write for, all of which have closely related sonic characters, and the medium requires logic and transparency of design within which to bring the musical drama to life. Since Haydn's time, practically all major composers have written string quartets, and the genre now boasts a vast repertoire.

String Quartet No. 1 “From the Salvation Army” (1989-1902)

Charles Ives (1874-1954)

Charles Ives is considered to be an utterly original American composer. His father was a professional musician with a diverse career, exposing the young Ives to popular songs of the time, marches, and band and church music, and black spirituals. Early in his life, Ives developed an affinity for musical chaos, namely writing and playing different melodies simultaneously, often in different keys. This cacophony later became a characteristic element of his compositional style. Although Ives worked as a professional church organist for over a decade, he made his living in the insurance business, and retired in his mid-fifties.



His *String Quartet No. 1*, written during his sophomore year at Yale University, was originally a work for organ and string quartet, and the titles of its four movements borrow from the Protestant church tradition: Chorale, Prelude, Offertory, and Postlude.

The first movement is a fugue, while the latter three are reminiscent of an American revival service. Overall, the work exhibits Ives’ style, with tuneful melodies, quotes of popular songs, and a kind of sonic chaos achieved by layering different musical ideas on top of one another. In spite of these many elements, the work is wholly accessible and playful, ending with an “Amen” plagal cadence.

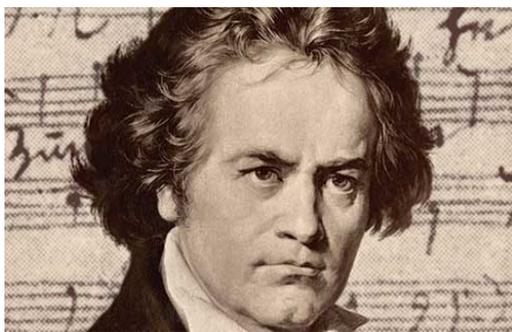
Follow this link to hear this work performed:

<https://www.chambermusicsociety.org/watch-and-listen/video/2017-video-archive-4/ives-quartet-no-1-for-strings-from-the-salvation-army/>

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

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Beethoven’s music is known for extremes and contrasts, and this quartet is no exception. The opening movement features a kind of urgency Beethoven often exhibits, with two contrasting themes. After a relatively serious development section an abrupt pause may remind the listener of the composer’s lighter side.



The slow movement follows with two beautiful and simple melodies that may divert attention away from the masterful balance Beethoven achieves in his use of the four instruments of the quartet.

The fast third movement contrasts strongly with the second’s calm, with its playful and busy character, featuring the violin in a difficult solo in the middle section.

A slow introduction opens the final movement, subtitled “La Malinconia.” This movement features the most complex music of the entire work, at times foreshadowing Beethoven’s mature style. Although the music turns joyful and fast, the opening melancholy recurs later, but the work closes in a witty and joyful mood.

All six quartets from the Op. 18 set were dedicated to Prince Joseph Franz von Lobkowitz, an enthusiastic patron of music and Beethoven. Aside from the quartets, the composer dedicated several of his symphonies, including the Fifth, to the aristocrat.

The following link provides a live rendition of the work: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzyyIzEiK4>

Quartet No. 3 in F Major, Op. 73 (1946)

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)



Just after World War II and having written nine symphonies already, Shostakovich once again turned to chamber music. His third string quartet is regarded by many as his best work, showcasing a variety of textures and sound worlds that evoke a strong emotional response. Although the work may be enjoyed as absolute music, its impact may be amplified when one considers the unofficial titles the composer gave to the movements, each of which is a reflection on World War II:

The first movement, “Calm unawareness of the future cataclysm,” is in sonata form that may sound happy at the outset, but quickly turns to foreshadowing the looming conflict, ending with a complacent musical smirk.

The second movement, “Rumblings of unrest and anticipation,” juxtaposes an angular and menacing waltz in triple meter with a march in duple meter.

“The forces of war unleashed” become readily obvious in the third movement with loud dynamics, a fast tempo and relentless rhythms. The composer infuses the music with caricature and parody, a technique he often employed when depicting the senselessness of war.

The fourth movement is entitled “Homage to the dead,” and is a haunting dedication to those lost in war, set as a kind of funeral dirge.

The finale asks “The eternal question: Why? and for what?” The music vacillates between marches and dances, recalling the grief of the fourth movement as well, until the work dies away without providing an answer posed by the movement’s title.

To hear a live performance of this work by the Borodin Quartet, please click:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pONaDQZwoEg>

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