TWENTY-SIXTH SEASON
SEVENTH CONCERT

Houston Friends of Music, Inc.
and
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PRESENT

The Muir String Quartet

Lucy Stoltzman - violin
Bayla Keyes - violin
Steven Ansell - viola
Michael Reynolds - cello

TUESDAY, MARCH 18, 1986
Hamman Hall 8:00 P.M. Rice University
PROGRAM

TUESDAY, MARCH 18, 1986

Quartet for Strings ("Unfinished"), Opus 81* ... Mendelssohn

Andante: Tema con variazione

Cherzo

Quartet No. 5** ........................................ Bartok

Allegro

Adagio molto

Scherzo: Alla bulgarese

Andante

Finale: Allegro vivace

INTERMISSION

Quartet in F Major, Opus 135*** ................. Beethoven

Allegretto

Vivace

Lento assai e cantante tranquillo

Grave, ma non troppo tratto - Allegro

* First presentation by Houston Friends of Music
** Previously heard 1960 and 1969 (Hungarian Quartet both times)
*** Previously heard 1964 (Julliard Quartet), 1967 (Amadeus Quartet), 1978 (Cleveland Quartet)

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The Muir String Quartet

Winners of the 1980 Evian International Competition and the 1981 Naumburg Foundation Chamber Music Award, the MUIR STRING QUARTET is among the world’s premier string quartets. The Muir appears annually on most of the major chamber music series in North America and tours Europe for several weeks each season.

The Muir Quartet is currently in residence at Boston University. The quartet includes Lucy Chapman Stoltzman, violinist; Bayla Keyes, violinist; Steven Ansell, violist; and Michael Reynolds, cellist.

The MUIR STRING QUARTET has been awarded the “Grand Prix de l’Academie du Disque Francais” in the Chamber Music branch for their recording of the Franck Quintet with pianist Jean-Philippe Collard on the EMI label. The Grand Prix du Disque is France’s equivalent of the Grammy, the award for highest achievement in the field of recording arts and sciences.

PROGRAM NOTES

After the death of FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847), friends, musicologists, and publishers going through his papers found a number of musical fragments. Four individual movements for a string quartet were assembled in 1850 and published as Op. 81. Two of these movements were a fugue, from 1827, and a capriccio, from 1843. The other two were an andante with variations, in E major, and a scherzo in a minor. Mendelssohn intended the latter two movements to be part of an entire quartet in a minor, but unfortunately he died before the other two movements could be completed.

BÉLA BARTÓK (1881-1945) composed his fifth string quartet in a one-month period in the summer of 1934 and dedicated it to Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge whose Coolidge Foundation had commissioned it. It is a work in which the spirit of folk music is represented not by borrowed melodies but by original music in the folk idiom. It is not difficult to figure out why this work is rather more accessible, even on a first hearing, than some of the other quartets. In the first place, there is less unrelieved dissonance, even some passages of diatonic chords. More importantly, it is a highly organized work both in its outer structure and within the movements themselves. The symmetry gives the quartet an architecture that is easier to follow than a more flowing, loosely organized work. The first movement, Allegro, and the last Allegro vivace, are closely related. They are full of driving vitality and are both in Bartók’s version of sonata form with multiple themes, comminuted developments, and clear recapitulations. The second movement, Adagio molto and the fourth, Andante, are both examples of what has been called “Bartókian night music:” this includes whispers heard over chorale-like chords,
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very high and very low note contrasts, and melodic lines completely new, and therefore joltingly strange. The third movement, Scherzo, makes use of irregular syncopated rhythms suggested by the music he heard during his excursions into Hungarian and Bulgarian hinterlands with his friend Kodály. The last movement has a musical joke played by the violin, the marking for the passage being Allegretto con indifferenza -- surely a rare interpretive injunction from composer to performer.

The Quartet in F Major, Op. 135, of LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827) was finished in October of 1826, five months before his death. It is interesting to recall this fitful period. The apartment where he had moved (for the last time) in the Alsergrund district of Vienna was in a state of disintegration in spite of a few solicitous friends and a live-in caretaker, Karl Holz. (Because of his abrasive, sometimes paranoid, personality, his personal affairs were not much better.) Manuscripts, papers, and personal effects were strewn about in complete disarray. After all the rounds of being treated - with physick, tapped of fluid and energy, and dosed with wine and herbs, his physical appearance was frightful to behold. Yet, to paraphrase G. E. Marek, it was only the man who was near death; the artist in him was not.

The sixteenth and last quartet, the Op. 135 in F, and the substitute last movement for “The Great Fugue” (the last two pieces he composed), were born out of this chaos and anguish. Beethoven never witnessed a performance of his last quartet (he never heard it either, of course). It is a work set apart from the previous four, being lighter, shorter, and less thematically homogeneous. The almost flippant opening few notes usher in the main theme, a smiling, if not actually gay, rising figure followed by an answering phrase. This repartee foretells the banter of the last movement. The development proceeds along lines now familiar to the listener of late Beethoven quartets -- stretched tonalities, fragmented motifs, and complex structures abruptly giving way to a simple theme. The latter juxtaposition is especially effective in the last few notes of this movement which seem to taunt us ordinary mortals by saying, “Now wasn’t that easy?”

The Vivace resembles many dynamic movements in the Beethoven quartet literature placed like this one between two movements with a minimum of pyrotechnics. In its irregular syncopation and crossed accents there is a total absence of an intuitive feel for where the first beat of the measure lies, reminiscent of the Scherzo of the B flat Quartet, Op. 18, no. 6. The Lento, scholars feel, may have been added as an afterthought to what was intended to be a three movement quartet. Its mood is the most serious of the quartet, but as the movement markings indicate, it is more singing and tranquil than impassioned. Beethoven wrote in the margins of the manuscript over the main melody, the words “Susser Ruhegesang. Friedengesang” (Sweet, restful, peaceful song). There are four gentle variations, never marked above piano, which create exactly the mood of Beethoven’s words.
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The last movement has the inscription (by the composer): "Der schwergefassste Entschluss. Muss es sein? Es muss sein!" (The hard-won decision. Must it be? It must be!) What must be? No one knows. Perhaps it was a deliberate joke meant to confound generations, like Fermat’s last theorem. Philosophical speculations of course are numerous. It seems almost a spoilsport gesture to quote a more probable -- and mundane -- explanation. A certain Dembscher, having missed the first performance of the B flat Quartet, Op. 130, was told by Beethoven he would first have to pay to get the manuscripts for a repeat performance at Dembscher’s home. Jokingly Dembscher asked, with levity, "Musses sein?" Beethoven replied, equally amused, by writing a canon with the question, the answer, and the additional words, "Heraus mit dem Beutel!" (Out with your purse!) The mood of the question and its answer repeated several times as well as the bright and cheerful middle voice of the cello and the pizzicato ending seemingly give no hint at a summation of Beethoven’s life or the tragedy of human existence. Yet, we do not know whether Beethoven saw these profound questions as major or minor key subjects. After all, his last words were: “The comedy is finished.”

Program Notes by JACK B. MAZOW

HOUSTON FRIENDS OF MUSIC 1985-1986 SEASON

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Thursday, October 17, 1985 ............................................. Tokyo String Quartet
Wednesday, December 4, 1985 ......................................... Empire Brass Quintet
Tuesday, January 7, 1986 ............................................. Emerson String Quartet
Wednesday, January 29, 1986 ........................................... Musical Offering
Wednesday, February 19, 1986 ......................................... Kalichstein, Laredo, Robinson Piano Trio
Tuesday, March 18, 1986 .................................................. Muir String Quartet
Thursday, April 3, 1986 ............................................. Fitzwilliam String Quartet
Wednesday, May 7, 1986 .................................................. New World String Quartet with David Shifrin, Clarinet

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