

PRAŽÁK STRING QUARTET

VACLAV REMES - VIOLIN
VLASTIMIL HOLEK - VIOLIN
JOSEF KLUSON - VIOLA
MICHAL KANKA - CELLO

TUESDAY, MARCH 13, 2007

~ PROGRAM ~

Quartet in D major, KV 575

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)

Allegretto

Andante

Menuetto (Allegretto)

Allegretto

Quartet No. 3

BOHUSLAV MARTINŮ (1890-1959)

Allegro

Andante

Vivo

~ INTERMISSION ~

Quartet in B-flat major, Op. 67

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Vivace

Andante

Agitato (Allegretto non troppo)

Poco Allegretto con variazioni

*Tonight's performance is generously underwritten by
Drs. Marcella and Tomas Klima*

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)

String Quartet in D Major, K.575 (1789)

In April, 1789, Mozart set out for Berlin and Potsdam in the company of Prince Lichnowsky of Vienna, at the Prince's request. The purpose of the trip was at least in part an audience with Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, the same cellist-king for whom Haydn had written his Opus 50 quartets two years earlier. After a ten-day stay at court, Mozart left with a goodly sum in gold coin and a commission to write six string quartets and six piano sonatas. He immediately began work during the return trip to Vienna and by the end of the month had completed the quartet we hear tonight. Two more were completed a year later but Mozart died before writing the last three and before sending any at all to the king. These quartets are filled with gorgeous writing for the cello - uniquely so in the canon of classical string quartets - and are thus known as the "cello quartets" by performers, and as the "Prussian Quartets" by musicologists.

K. 575 is, overall, in *concertante* form, that is, essentially a duet for the first violin and the cello. That is not to say the inner voices are neglected, as indeed the viola and second violin play important roles expanding and emphasizing thematic ideas and taking part in the subtle counterpoint woven into all four movements, like a miniature string orchestral accompaniment.

The first movement, *Allegretto*, starts with a sunny, pastoral theme in the first violin, quickly passed off to the viola; the cello does not play at all for the first eight bars and does not have a solo for the first 22 bars. Thereafter, and for the remainder of the four movements there are a truly remarkable number of solo passages for the cello, some of these requiring a level of virtuosity which tells us a great deal about King Frederick II's aspirations.

The *Andante* movement is an aria in form and spirit - a lovely song for all four instruments, emphasizing cello and violin. The *Menuetto* provides the cellist with a respite - the two upper and two lower voices parallel each other for most of the section, while the *Trio*, in contrast, is entirely in the cellist's hands. The final *Allegretto* starts out with a simple melody in the cello played with unfurrowed brow. It suddenly breaks out into bravura passages growing contrapuntally richer, making use of a variety of complicated compositional techniques. Mozart clearly intended that this music be carefree and fun, but not simple or easy to play.

BOHUSLAV MARTINŮ (1890-1959)

String Quartet No. 3 (1929)

The Czech composer Bohuslav Martinů began his life on December 8, 1890, from an unusual vantage point. He was born in the tower of St. Jacob's Church in Policka in eastern Bohemia. His father, a shoemaker by trade, was also the town watchman and his family lived there with him high in the tower. In Bohuslav's words, "Since I was so long isolated in the tower and as cut off from the outside world as if I had lived in a lighthouse, I could do nothing but engrave the views from the top of the tower in my memory. From each side of the balcony the outlook was different, and a wide expanse of space covered everything... This space, I think, was the greatest impression of my childhood. Before everything else it penetrated my consciousness and it was only later that I became aware of people. In my early days people seemed like little dots, shifting I knew not where nor why, figures working in an unknown fashion... building houses like boxes, moving like ants. This picture, I remember, was always changing and was dominated by space. When you consider that I lived more or less in isolation except for spatial phenomena, it perhaps explains why I viewed everything differently." Though he was to spend many years of his life in Prague, Paris, and the United States, Martinů never left Policka in his thoughts. (Throughout his life he carried a picture postcard of the Policka Tower in his wallet.)

Being a frail child, Bohuslav left the tower infrequently before the age of seven, at which time he began to attend the village school and to study violin with the local tailor. He was an extremely shy, silent child and did not fit in with the local youth, nor did he excel in his studies. Practicing the violin provided a safe diversion and gained him some pleasant recognition. He played well and the townspeople were certain that he was destined to become a great virtuoso. But Bohuslav had other interests as well, among which were reading, attending the theater, and in particular, composing. He entered the Prague Conservatory at the age of seventeen but did not apply himself to his violin studies, preferring to follow his interest in composing. The period between 1909 and 1912 was one of great musical diversity in Prague and Martinů was exposed to the works of Strauss, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Debussy, and the young Bartók. Eventually he dropped his violin studies and left the Conservatory entirely.

Martinů avoided serving in the military during World War I by returning to Policka and working as a music teacher, spending his spare time composing. After the war he joined the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra as a

second violinist and gained an insider's view of some of the great orchestral literature. He made several attempts to obtain formal instruction in the elements of composition, but each time he was put off by the rigidity of the methods and would decide to go his own way.

In 1923, Martinů received a small scholarship, which enabled him to settle in Paris where he chose to remain for the next seventeen years. His admiration for Albert Roussel led to some composition lessons and additional contacts in Parisian musical circles. Within five years he had composed almost 40 works, from operas and ballets to chamber pieces. Many of these works received a hearing both in France and in Czechoslovakia.

Martinů was a very elusive artist, preferring to go his own way with little care as to whether his work was well-received or not. Throughout his life he preferred solitude, keeping his working methods to himself, and composing very rapidly, while rarely rewriting anything. As a result, his work is somewhat uneven. During his early career, he was a particular admirer of the work of Debussy and along with the prominence of Czech folklore in his music, Debussy's keen sense of timbre is evident in Martinů's music.

The Third String Quartet was written fairly early in his career, while he was still living in Paris. It was composed in December of 1929 and was dedicated to the Roth Quartet. The work shows some of the influence of Debussy in its use of tone color and texture, but is obviously Czech in nature. The first movement begins with plucked chords in the cello, off beats played *col legno* (with the wood of the bow) by the viola, and a quiet tremelo in the second violin. Over this texture the first violin introduces the motif which will have primary influence throughout the movement. Later, the first violin takes up a gentler secondary theme and the two themes play against each other throughout the movement.

The second movement makes use of the viola to handle most of the melodic material, though the cello helps in the closing bars. The third and final movement is somewhat suggestive of the work of Bartók. The viola opens the movement once again and propels it forward until it is pulled back by a calmer motif, accompanied by the plucked notes of the cello and harmonics in the first violin. The first theme returns again, followed by a dash to the finish.

Blacklisted by the Nazis, Martinů departed from Paris in 1940 with his French wife, leaving all of his scores and belongings behind. After spending nine months wandering in an effort to gain exit papers to North America, he and his wife secured berths on a ship and arrived in New York in March 1941. Adjustment to the new life proved difficult as Martinů spoke no English and

had no scores with him to demonstrate his ability, but a commission from Koussevitsky allowed him to compose his first symphony. His career in this country proved rewarding, with both an audience for his compositions and teaching posts that included Tanglewood, Princeton University, and the Curtis Institute. His musical output was prodigious. However, he tired of what he saw as the slick American way of life and returned to Europe in 1956, continuing to compose until his death in 1959.

Program note © Margaret Bragg, January, 2007

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)
Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 67

By his own account, Johannes Brahms composed and discarded more than twenty string quartets before finally creating something that could survive his rigorous judgment. The quartet on tonight's program is the third and last of his published quartets, written in 1876, five years after the publication of the first two.

The most genial of the three, it was composed as Brahms was in a particularly jolly frame of mind. He had recently given up his burdensome post as music director of one of Vienna's leading orchestras, he had come to terms with his first symphony after fourteen years of gestation--both the symphony and the quartet were completed during the same summer--and he was at the threshold of the most masterful and productive period of his life.

In a teasing letter to his publisher, he sent him the work with a request for the astounding sum of 5,000 taler, gradually reducing the sum in the course of the letter: "From this you will deduct 1000 taler out of innate meanness; for keeping you waiting 500; for only two key signatures in B flat 250 tlr.; for cigars, tobacco, odekolonje [read aloud to decipher and don't forget the soft j] 750 tlr.; because of mistakes in tallying and calculating another 1000 will be lost, and 200 tlr. you had loaned to me, that leaves a remainder of 800 tlr." He hinted at laundry bills for shirts and pocket handkerchiefs yet to come, and asked for the rest to be paid "punctually in quarterly installments of at least 10 tlr. in Hanoverian bank notes," a currency they both knew was worthless, commenting that he only accepted it at a discount.

In this high-spirited mood he dedicated the quartet to his good friend, Prof. Dr. Theodor Wilhelm Engelmann, amateur cellist and one of the discoverers of bacterial photosynthesis. "I will probably publish a string quartet shortly and may need a physician in attendance (like the first) [a

reference to the dedication of Op. 51 to the surgeon, Dr. Theodor Billroth]... no question of a forceps delivery, but merely a matter of standing by. There is no violoncello solo in it, but a viola solo so tender that you may well change your instrument for its sake!"

Soon after, the work was premiered by the quartet of Brahms's long-time friend, Joseph Joachim, who was also entrusted with the bowings and even the fingerings of the first edition.

It is not easy to know how to describe this piece. In outward form a perfectly ordinary quartet, constituted of four traditional movements, there is nevertheless almost nothing ordinary about this work. For one thing, it features the viola, normally the most difficult of the four for the ear to pick out; until the Bartók quartets, it is the most glamorous work for that instrument in the repertory. And then there is the first movement. It starts innocently enough in B flat, 6/8 time, sounding for all the world like Mozart's "Hunt" quartet. Eight measures later, we are jolted into remembering that this is Brahms, not Mozart: six eighth notes can be ordered in two ways, either in two groups of three, or in three groups of two. After the opening phrase, Brahms pushes the music abruptly from the first grouping to the second, then switches back and forth in a dazzling display of metric ambiguity so that the listener hearing this work for the first time can be forgiven for wondering what is going on. Throughout the movement Brahms toys with the many ways these two groupings can be juxtaposed; there are even times when the musicians play in differing but coinciding time signatures--a common practice in 20th century music, but rare for the 19th century. It is worth remembering the opening phrase of this movement, as well as the sinuous second subject (in F minor) played by all four strings in unison eighth notes but in contrary motion, for we shall encounter them again.

The *Adagio* is one of Brahms's gorgeous instrumental songs-without-words, cast quite normally in ABA form. What is unusual here is the A section when it returns: instead of repeating the instrumentation of solo violin versus accompaniment, the entire quartet plays as one instrument, with solo and accompaniment so intertwined that one can scarcely disentangle them. It is a remarkable *tour de force*.

But the most striking movement is the *Allegretto*, with its solo viola throughout. It is curious that in his letter to Engelmann, Brahms referred to it as "tender." By the time of publication, he had changed the designation to read *Agitato* (*Allegretto non troppo*), and indeed the violist must convey agitated melancholy. The ABA intermezzo is a genre perfected and probably invented by Brahms.

With the fourth movement we have returned to unadulterated sunshine.

This is a theme and variations, a choice for a last movement which harks back to the classical era of Haydn and Mozart, and in keeping with the mood of the beginning of the first movement. In this case, we have a set of seven variations and long coda on a folk-like theme in 2/4 time. At least, it begins by sounding like a folk tune, but the Brahms in it peeks out irrepressibly by virtue of the chromaticisms and distant harmonies of the second half of the theme, and the abrupt end of the theme with virtually the same two bars as the beginning--a sort of musical palindrome. The variations proceed in the usual way, with increasing complexity and choice of more distant keys. By the sixth variation we are in G flat major, with syncopated legato upper strings against a pizzicato cello and then viola, all played *piano*, and *molto dolce*: a veil has obscured the sun. A sudden change in tempo and key signature restores the sun, and we are in the last variation. But now, instead of a simple 2/4 time, we are in 6/8, also a duple time but one which easily allows for the triple division of the beat. The theme is presented in outline form only, but somehow the inner voices sound vaguely familiar--soon these inner voices become the outer voices, still sounding awfully familiar--and it will dawn on the listener that the first movement has insinuated itself into the last with perfect ease, and that the themes of the first movement are in fact worked out in such a way that both movements are compatible with each other and represent alternate versions of each other.

The work ends in a joyous celebration of both movements simultaneously, and one feels sure that the famous surgeon, Theodor Billroth, was correct when he wrote ruefully to the famous scientist, Theodor Engelmann, that Brahms's dedications of his quartets to them would keep their names alive far longer than would any of their own work.

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The Pražák Quartet—one of today's leading international chamber music ensembles—was established in 1972 while its members were students at the Prague Conservatory. Since then, the quartet has gained attention for its place in the unique Czech quartet tradition and for its musical virtuosity.

The 1974 Czech Music Year saw the Pražák Quartet receive the first prize at the Prague Conservatory Chamber Music Competition. Within twelve months their international career had been launched with a performance at the 1975 Prague Spring Music Festival. In 1978 the quartet took the first prize at the Evian String Quartet Competition as well as a special prize

awarded by Radio France for the best recording during the competition.

For nearly 30 years, the Pražák Quartet has been at home on music stages worldwide. They are regular guests in the major European musical capitals—Prague, Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels, Milan, Madrid, London, Berlin, Munich, etc.—and have been invited to participate at numerous international festivals, where they have collaborated with such artists as Menahem Pressler, Jon Nakamatsu, Cynthia Phelps, Roberto Diaz, Josef Suk, and Sharon Kam.

In North America, the Pražák Quartet has performed in New York (Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, 92nd St. Y), Los Angeles, San Francisco, Dallas, Houston, Washington, Philadelphia, Miami, St. Louis, New Orleans, Berkeley, Cleveland, Tucson, Denver, Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal.

Their 2006-07 tours will bring them to 23 North American cities, including New York (Carnegie Hall), Boston, Houston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Detroit, Kansas City, New Orleans, Salt Lake City, Tucson, Vancouver, and Montreal.

The Pražák Quartet records exclusively for Praga/Harmonia Mundi which, to date, has released 20 award-winning CDs. In addition to numerous radio recordings in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic, the Pražák Quartet has also made recordings for Supraphon, Panton, Orfeo, Ottavo, Bonton, and Nuova Era.

Visit the Pražák Quartet at www.prazakquartet.com.