

# AMERICAN STRING QUARTET

PETER WINOGRAD, VIOLIN  
LAURIE CARNEY, VIOLIN  
DANIEL AVSHALOMOV, VIOLA  
WOLFRAM KOESSEL, CELLO

WITH MENAHEM PRESSLER, PIANO

Tuesday, October 13, 2009

## ~ PROGRAM ~

*String Quartet No. 50 in B-flat Major, Op. 64 No. 3*      FRANZ JOSEF HAYDN  
Vivace assai      (1732-1809)  
Adagio  
Menuetto - Trio  
Finale: Allegro con spirito

*String Quartet No. 2 in F Major, Op. 92*      SERGEY PROKOFIEV  
Allegro sostenuto      (1891-1953)  
Adagio  
Allegro – Andante Molto – Allegro

## ~ INTERMISSION ~

*Piano Quintet in A Major, Op. 81*      ANTONÍN DVORÁK  
Allegro ma non tanto      (1841-1904)  
Dumka: Andante con moto  
Scherzo (Furiant): molto vivace  
Finale: Allegro

*The American String Quartet and Mr. Pressler appear by arrangement with Melvin Kaplan.*

*On the World Wide Web: [melkap.com](http://melkap.com), [americanstringquartet.com](http://americanstringquartet.com) and  
[menahempressler.org](http://menahempressler.org)*

FRANZ JOSEF HAYDN (1732-1809)

*String Quartet No. 50 in B-flat Major, Op. 64 No. 3* (1790)

Over the years, we have had the good fortune to host the American String Quartet, who have made a point of programming some of Haydn's relatively neglected gems. Tonight we will hear one of them, Op. 64 No. 3, dedicated, as were all six in this group, to the splendid principal second violinist of Haydn's Esterhazy orchestra, Johann Tost. More famous in this opus is "The Lark," with its spectacular perpetual motion finale. But tonight's composition contains other, more subtle delights. Written in 1790, the same year Mozart produced his final quartet for the King of Prussia (K. 590) with those peculiar, odd-numbered phrases, this quartet also contains much—less obvious—asymmetry. Whether the similarity is by coincidence or product of a friendly competition between two masters, we will never know. Three of the four movements share the single key of B-flat major.

The first movement opens with a five-measure theme abruptly cut off in its middle by a two-measure "drum roll" on the 'cello introducing a peasant dance in solid, folk-tune rhythm. The more ambiguous opening theme soon returns, energetic passages ensue, a *dolce* waltz theme makes its appearance and with the development and reappearances of all these elements the movement ends. If one only listens to this movement with half an ear it appears to be merely cheerful, energetic and pretty, not nearly as memorable as a gorgeous late Mozart or any one of Beethoven's dramatic string quartets. Yet a deeper look reveals the near hidden ingenuity which makes Haydn the model for every composer of string quartets—here is unparalleled inventive handling of simple thematic material unpretentiously laid out, accompanied by sleight-of-hand in the matter of form, of unexpected, even astounding yet logical harmonic turns, and downright wit. One is filled with admiration for the unending originality and skill of the man, and with delight for having discovered his secrets.

The *Adagio* is in ABA song form, set in E-flat major, a key closely related to movement one. Unfortunately for the performers, the middle section is shifted to the key of E-flat minor—six flats!—thus pre-empting the use of open strings. This ups the ante of difficulty for the performers, and is something Mozart would never have done. One suspects it was for the "benefit" (read chagrin) of the good Herr Tost. Thematically the section is a bit of a cheat, being merely a variation of the first section, instead of offering the expected contrast. Still, one hardly notices, and certainly does not care! The first section returns, more dramatically harmonized, to end the movement.

A good-natured *Menuetto-Trio*, entirely in the key of B-flat major,



made up of uneven phrases, keeps the listener just vaguely off balance.

The *Finale* is a spirited *allegro* in *sonata-rondo* form with moments straight out of comic Italian opera (with which Haydn was most intimately familiar). It too features asymmetries, the main theme, for starters, is composed of two phrases, one four, the other five measures long. Other examples abound. Putting those considerations aside, one might just lean back and enjoy this imaginative music, which fills the air with cheer.

*Program note © Nora Avins Klein, 2009.*

SERGEY PROKOFIEV (1891-1953)

*String Quartet No. 2 in F Major, Op. 92* (1941)

June of 1941 found Sergey Prokofiev in his country house at Kratova about an hour's train ride from Moscow. The Kirov Ballet Company, having been impressed by the success of his ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, had commissioned another ballet, *Cinderella*, and Prokofiev was starting work on it one warm, sunny morning when a servant burst into the room to inform him that the Germans had invaded Russia. The fairyland world of *Cinderella* was set aside for the time being as the real world intruded. The Soviet government rounded up many of the country's artists, composers, and writers and moved them to Nalchik, a small picturesque town on the northern slope of the Caucasus Mountains. The transplanted evacuees were expected to contribute to the local community in exchange for its hospitality, and later were expected to amuse the wounded soldiers as they began to fill the local hospital.

During his stay in this region, Prokofiev became very much interested in the local folk music. "It seemed to me," he later wrote, "that the combination of new and untouched Oriental folk songs and that most classical of classic forms, the string quartet, ought to produce interesting and unusual results." The composer realized that music in that part of Caucasus was at a level much less sophisticated than that of Moscow and he doubted a string quartet would be understood, but he spoke to the chairman of the local Arts Committee. The response he received was as follows: "You write just as you feel. If we don't understand your quartet now, we'll learn to appreciate it later on."

Thus was born the idea for Prokofiev's *String Quartet No. 2 in F Major*, which contains an interesting combination of folklore and modern harmony. The first movement is based on a Kabardian folk song. The rhythmic introduction is characterized by a recurring accent placed on the fourth beat of each measure. A descending scale in the first violin leads to the second

section in which the lower three instruments begin a two-note repetitive figure while the first violin plays a dance theme. That in turn is followed by a heavy but cheerful melody in the first violin and the exposition slows down to the point of an actual pause in the music. The development starts calmly but becomes increasingly confused and discordant. In the recapitulation the themes return and the first theme is given one final dissonant twist before the movement ends.

The second movement is based on a Kabardian love song, (“*Synilyaklik Zhir*”), with an Eastern orientation not only in its tonality but also in its quality of sound. In the middle section of this movement there is a close imitation of the sound that is characteristic of a native Caucasian instrument called a kemange, or “bowed spiked fiddle.” The kemange, which is originally from Persia, usually has three strings. It has a long neck and is held vertically, with the spike resting on the player’s knee while it is bowed. The middle section of the movement is in major, a light-hearted dance with much use of *ricochet* bowing, *pizzicati*, and *glissandi*. All four instruments take turns playing florid ornamental passages. The love song returns, with an embellished accompaniment and interesting Oriental sound effects.

The idea for the third movement is drawn from a vigorous mountain dance (“*Getigezhev Ogurbi*”). The beginning resembles a march, which leads then to a lyrical melody played by the first violin over a *ponticello* accompaniment. There follows a free passage in the first violin, a return to the march, and then a surprise cadenza played by the cello. The next section is filled with agitated filigree in the middle voices with sustained pitches above in the first violin and later below in the cello. The movement concludes with a tour back through the melodies, in reverse order.

Prokofiev composed only two string quartets and very little additional chamber music. His second string quartet, begun on November 2, 1941, was completed in five weeks. The first performance was given in Moscow by the Beethoven Quartet on September 5, 1942. It had to begin later in the evening than scheduled, due to a German air raid.

*Program note © Margaret Bragg, July 2009.*

ANTONÍN DVORÁK (1841-1904)

*Piano Quintet in A Major, Op. 81* (1887)

Dvorák’s Piano Quintet was actually a second attempt at writing a piano quintet. His first, also in A Major, preceded it by fifteen years but



it was not to his liking so he destroyed his copy shortly after hearing it performed. Years later he borrowed a copy he had given to a friend and tried to revise it, but gave up the project. His second attempt resulted in perhaps the best of its genre in the chamber music literature, rivaled only by the piano quintets of Schumann and Brahms. Dvorák has combined the five instruments in such a way that all are perfectly balanced, a skill which has eluded many composers when the piano is involved.

The Quintet was begun in August 1887, two days after Dvorák had told his publisher Simrock that he was not currently working on anything at all. Dvorák's trip to America was not yet on the horizon and the Quintet is entirely Czech in nature. With its combination of a sunny joyful disposition, which on occasion is interspersed with spells of tender melancholy, the Quintet gives a perfect picture of Dvorák's personality. As my colleague Nora Klein remarked after a recent hearing: "As to the Quintet, it has everything—but not too much of everything. Gorgeous, soaring melodies, intensely ethnic dance rhythms, and his wonderful rich modal harmonies..."

Beginning with the exquisite cello solo, which alternates between major and minor passages, the first movement depicts the balanced mood contrasts so typical of Dvorák at his best. There follows a vigorous transitional passage and then the second theme is stated by the viola, the first of many passages in the work where the viola has a prominent role. This is not surprising since Dvorák was himself a violist. The movement is in sonata form with the coda continuing the major/minor alternation to ultimately end in major.

The second movement is a typical Dvorák interpretation of a *dumka*, a song-like form which is characteristically soulful, but into which cheerfulness often intrudes. The lively middle section is a variation on the piano's opening theme. Dvorák subtitled the *Scherzo* "Furiant," which is somewhat puzzling, since the movement contains none of the cross-rhythms, which typically define this characteristic Czech dance. In the trio section one hears a rhapsodic version of the first theme, leading then into a *chorale*, before the opening is restated.

The *Finale* begins with an exuberant dance-like quality and uses several different themes. Before completing the final bars, Dvorák takes time to look back wistfully at the opening melody.

Dvorák devoted the remainder of the Fall of 1887 toward making revisions in his Quintet and then took the work to Simrock in Berlin, along with his Symphony in F, the Symphonic Variations, the String Quartet in G and "The 149th Psalm." (For these five works he received 6000 marks.) As Simrock later wrote to Brahms: "It is extraordinary what a lot of music



that man has in his head and, in spite of his silence (in Prague, his wife tells me, he is called the 'Bohemian Moltke' [an astute Prussian general who lived from 1800 to 1891]), he is a charming fellow..." The Quintet was first performed in Prague on January 6, 1888.

*Program note © Margaret Bragg, July 2009.*

### *The American String Quartet*

Internationally recognized as one of the world's finest quartets, the American String Quartet has spent decades honing the luxurious sound for which it is famous. The Quartet will celebrate its 35th anniversary in the 2010-2011 season, and, in its years of touring, has performed in all fifty states and appeared in virtually every important concert hall throughout the world. Their presentations of the complete quartets of Beethoven, Schubert, Schoenberg, Bartok, and Mozart have won widespread critical acclaim. The American performs frequently with celebrated guest artists as they are doing this evening with pianist Menahem Pressler. The American String Quartet and Mr. Pressler will tour South America during the 2009-2010 season.

Formed in 1974, when its original members were students at The Juilliard School, the American String Quartet was launched by winning both the Coleman Competition and the Naumburg Award in the same year. Individually, the members devote additional time outside the quartet's active performance and teaching schedule to solo appearances, recitals, and master classes.

Resident quartet at the Aspen Music Festival since 1974 and the Manhattan School of Music in New York since 1984, the American has also served as resident quartet at the Taos School of Music, the Peabody Conservatory, and the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. The Quartet's diverse activities have also included numerous international radio and television broadcasts, tours of Asia, and performances with the New York City Ballet, the Montreal Symphony, and the Philadelphia Orchestra. In 2008, the Quartet returned to Beijing for its fourth residency at the Great Wall International Music Academy.

The quartet's extensive discography can be heard on the Albany, CRI, MusicMasters, Musical Heritage Society, Nonesuch, and RCA labels. The 1998 MusicMasters "Complete Mozart String Quartets" performed on a matched quartet of instruments by Stradivarius, are widely considered to have set the standard for this repertoire. The quartet is popular with national

radio audiences and has been featured on American Public Media's *St. Paul Sunday Morning*, National Public Radio's "All Things Considered," and live broadcasts on WFMT.

*Visit the American String Quartet on the World Wide Web at [americanstringquartet.com](http://americanstringquartet.com).*

### *Menahem Pressler*

Honored and decorated by the French and German governments with the highest honors those countries award to civilians, Menahem Pressler continues as a founding member and the pianist of the Beaux Arts Trio for all of its 51 years. He established himself among the world's most distinguished and honored musicians, with a career that spans over five decades. Both an outstanding chamber and solo performer, Mr. Pressler's talents have brought him to all of the world's major music capitals. His musical precision and overwhelming knowledge of piano and chamber music literature have also gain him an international reputation as a remarkable teacher.

Born in Magdeburg, Germany in 1923, Menahem Pressler received most of his musical training in Israel, to which his family, fleeing from the Nazis, immigrated in 1939. His life has always been completely devoted to his music. Mr. Pressler's world renowned career was launched after he was awarded first prize at the Debussy International Piano Competition in San Francisco in 1946. This was followed by his successful American debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra under the baton of Maestro Eugene Ormandy. When not on tour or teaching master classes worldwide, Pressler can be found in his studio at Indiana University in Bloomington, where he holds the rank of Distinguished Professor.

In 2007 Menahem Pressler was appointed as an Honorary Fellow of the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance in recognition of a lifetime of performance and leadership in music. In 2005 Pressler received two additional awards of International merit: the German President's Deutsche Bundesverdienstkreuz (Cross of Merit) First Class, Germany's highest honor, and France's highest cultural honor, the Commandeur in the Order of Arts and Letters award. Internationally active as soloist and chamber musician, In addition to his busy schedule as a performer, he has given master classes in Germany, France, Canada, and Argentina, and continues to serve on the jury of the Van Cliburn, Queen Elisabeth, and Artur Rubenstein competitions.

*Visit Menahem Pressler on the World Wide Web at [menahempressler.org](http://menahempressler.org).*