Program Notes
Takács String Quartet • October 15, 2020

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, String Quartet No. 15 in D Minor, K. 421 (1783)

Allegro Moderato

Mozart’s fifteenth string quartet begins with a fall: an octave descent in the first violin, hushed at first and then repeated in a higher, more insistent register. The other members of the quartet initially respond with sympathetic murmurs—clusters of repeated notes, ominous trills—before gently guiding the violin away from minor-key despair and toward more hopeful terrain. Slowly, collectively, the four voices move toward the light.

The reciprocal spirit that can be heard in the quartet’s opening moment reflects the circumstances of its creation. It is part of a set of six “Haydn quartets,” so named because Mozart dedicated them to the esteemed composer, 24 years his senior and regarded as the father of the string quartet genre. When he sent a copy of the quartets to Haydn, Mozart wrote, with a combination of warmth and reverence, “A father who had decided to send his sons out into the great world thought it his duty to entrust them to the protection and guidance of a man who was very celebrated at the time, and who happened moreover to be his best friend. In the same way I send my six sons to you.” That Mozart put considerable effort and care into these works is evident from the autograph scores, which are replete with measure-by-measure revisions, cross-outs, and other editorial marks. Clearly, he wished for these pieces to elicit the respect and admiration of his “best friend.”

Of these “six sons,” the Quartet K. 421 is certainly the moodiest. Its d-minor key aligns it with some of the darkest and most dramatic works in Mozart’s oeuvre, including the Requiem and the opera Don Giovanni. The quartet’s architectural heft and drawn-out, songlike lines connect it further to these large-scale works. Yet the quartet also relies upon a certain intimacy. As the first movement progresses, the four members of the ensemble rise and fall together. The anguished pull of the opening downward gesture remains strong, but glimmers of brightness shine through, propelled by the enthusiastic sixteenth notes of the inner voices’ accompaniment. Even if joy cannot be guaranteed, the movement seems to suggest, neither can we accept the inevitability of despair. Hope still retains its power.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Five Fantasiestücke for String Quartet, Op. 5 (1895)

Prelude
Humoresque

The Prelude of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor’s Fantasiestücke ushers the listener into a sonic world of rich variety. By turns brooding and elegant, it is harmonically restless, moving rapidly from key to key from its opening moments. Rhythmic shifts abound as the movement roams between duple and triple meters, and between lush melodic lines and spikier passages. The Humoresque—the third of
the five pieces—is similarly multifaceted. Folksy melodies swirl among the four instruments, followed by a lilting waltz. True to their name, both pieces have a fantastical feeling: adventurous, imaginative, bold.

Coleridge-Taylor—who was still a teenager and a student when he composed the *Fantasiestücke*—took these pieces as an opportunity to assert an original compositional voice while also locating his work within historical traditions. The Germanic title alludes to the Romanticism of Schumann and others, while the folk-inspired musical language evokes contemporaries like Dvořák and Brahms. In other early works, Coleridge-Taylor explored influences beyond the Western classical canon. After meeting the African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar in London in 1896, he collaborated with him on a set of songs titled *Seven African Romances* (1897) and *Dream Lovers* (1898), an “operatic romance.” Both works explore Dunbar and Coleridge-Taylor’s shared African diasporic heritage (Coleridge-Taylor’s father was from Sierra Leone, and his mother was a white Englishwoman). Like the *Fantasiestücke*, these works attest to the capaciousness and variety of Coleridge-Taylor’s musical interests. Indeed, perhaps part of the “fantasie” of these pieces was of a world less determined by racial and national classification, more open to movement and exploration.

Coleridge-Taylor’s life was cut tragically short when he died of pneumonia in 1912, at the age of 37. Yet even in his youth, he came to serve as an inspiration to future generations. He visited the United States three times in the first decade of the twentieth century; years later, the composer and author Shirley Graham would recall that on these occasions, Coleridge-Taylor “was a revelation.” “Each time he gave of his sympathy, advice and help,” she wrote, instilling in African American audiences a “new hope and broader vision.” As Coleridge-Taylor’s music continues to gain popularity on both sides of the Atlantic more than a century later, its potential to inspire remains as strong as ever.

**Béla Bartók, String Quartet No. 1 (1908)**

*Introduzione—Allegro molto*

Time is elastic as the final movement of Bartók’s String Quartet No. 1 begins. The tempo ebbs and flows at an unpredictable rate, and the four players toggle between fleeting moments of rhythmic unity and lengthier soloistic passages that sound almost improvisatory. Then an eighth-note ostinato transports the listener to a more regimented, rougher-edged world. The cello’s declamatory statements evince excited responses from the other instruments, and eventually all four come together to offer an expansive, tuneful song.

A dedicated scholar in the then-new field of ethnomusicology, Bartók was famously influenced by the Hungarian and Romanian folk melodies that he heard, collected, and analyzed. (During this period of his life, his wife later recalled, “He composed mostly at night. During the day he was busy transcribing and putting in order his folksong collections recorded on wax cylinders.”) His compositions, like many works by modernist artists, combine a conservative interest in the preservation of existing material with an interest in radical formal innovations. The six string quartets, which were composed over a span of more than three decades, exemplify this approach. As Bartók once observed, “The melodic world of my string quartets does not essentially differ from that of folksong, only the framework is stricter.” In this quartet, that framework is one of fragmentation and refraction. Bits of folk material are spliced into pieces that make them almost unrecognizable, then reassembled into new wholes. As a result, the quartet has a scientific quality: the listener is akin to a researcher peering into a microscope, observing familiar material from a perspective so unfamiliar that it becomes illuminating.
Claude Debussy, String Quartet in G Minor (1893)

*Andantino, doucement expressif*

*Très modéré—Très mouvementé et avec passion*

Introspection was Claude Debussy’s preferred way of interacting with the world. His small circle of friends recalled him as shy to the point of standoffishness, endlessly curious about art but uninterested in polite social fictions. “Those around me,” Debussy once remarked, “persist in not understanding that I have never been able to live in a real world of people and things.” He was far more interested in abstract, creative questions: why limit harmonic language to the standard major-and-minor model? What would it mean to represent the beauty of the Symbolists’ poetic language in music? How could one become, as a recent biographer described him, “a painter in sound”?

Debussy’s String Quartet, his sole composition for the ensemble, explores these questions with bracing inventiveness. The third movement is characterized by a surfeit of meditative beauty. As the four players amble curiously through a harmonically adventurous landscape, the viola takes a starring melodic role. Nothing is hurried or constrained; the listener can luxuriate in the movement’s all-encompassing stillness. The transition into the fourth movement is gentle. A brief, hushed introduction precedes the quartet’s brisk finale, which transforms themes introduced in the earlier movements into a whirlwind of vibrancy. By the quartet’s end, the listener might find herself understanding Debussy’s point of view: why stay within the limits of the “real world” when so many new horizons await?

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