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Ying Quartet with Menahem Pressler, piano
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## Haydn

### String Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 33 no. 4 (1781)

When Haydn finished the six Op. 33 string quartets in 1781, they comprised his first return to that genre since the Op. 20 quartets nine years earlier. In a famous letter to potential subscribers, Haydn remarked that he wrote them in a "new, quite special way." Aside from perhaps being a marketing ploy, their new title might support this assertion. Haydn uses the modern term "String Quartet" for the first time (his earlier quartets used the broader 18th-century term "Divertimento"). Yet as the Op. 20 quartets already reflected Haydn's mature style, the "new" style might instead be a different emphasis on a style previously established. From beginning to end, Op. 33 represents a more popular tone. Haydn employs lighter Rondo movements as finales instead of the weighty fugues of Op. 20, and above all else, humor and wit.

The wit begins immediately, with the first chord of the quartet. Instead of the expected stability of the tonic chord in B-flat major, Haydn opens with a dominant 7th chord in last inversion — its most unstable position. While he quickly establishes the B-flat tonic, such an unusual opening often bears fruit later in the movement. Sure enough, Haydn saves it for the most important moment in a **Sonata-form** movement — the recapitulation. Haydn introduces this same figure in the wrong key, and then repeats it in several more keys, disguising with humor the actual opening of the recap.

This movement maintains ambiguity in another field as well — meter. Haydn, Mozart and their late-18th century contemporaries usually follow the 4/4 bar line, but that is definitely not the case in this opening movement. Haydn begins in the middle of the bar, and shifts back and forth constantly. Furthermore, thanks to some humorously disorienting six-beat motives that violate the 4/4 bar line, Haydn continuously keeps us searching for a consistent 4/4 downbeat.

Along with "Quartet," Haydn also adopts another new title: "Scherzo" instead of "Minuet." However, this is truly the marketing department speaking. Though titled Scherzo, Haydn writes a delightful **Minuet**

**and Trio** for the second movement. As the Trio section shifts to minor, note Haydn's penchant for motivic development. Anticipating a favorite Beethoven obsession, he restates the same motive in every bar. In the following slow movement, Haydn saves his richest harmonies of the quartet for the passionate *Largo* in abbreviated **Sonata Form**.

As is often the case, Haydn's humor resurfaces in the **Rondo** finale, but we have to wait for the coda. Each letter in this **A B A C A** structure corresponds to a complete section (opening melody, contrasting material, and return to opening melody). After the final "A" section, Haydn expects that the audience is ready for some closing flourishes — so he offers anything but. Unexpected pauses, pedantic augmentation, soft *pizzicato* — don't say you weren't warned!

Haydn's first quartets in nine years proved enormously popular. The many reprints attest to that, as do the editions in alternate scoring: "for flute quartet, keyboard trio, pairs of wind and string instruments, keyboard solo, [even] voice and keyboard accompaniment" (Haydn scholars Floyd & Margaret Grave). These quartets are also known as "Gli scherzi" (The jokes), and many reviews focused on the humor and wit. Haydn wrote this B-flat quartet as the last of the six, and that's how it appeared in early editions. The fact that he would end the last movement of the set in the broad humor described above showed the reviews indeed responded to part of this "new, special way."

**Barber**

**String Quartet no. 1, Op. 11 (1936)**

The 2001 New Grove article on "Modernism" in music talks about the cresting of serialism and other *avant garde* styles by the mid-1970s. It ushered in an era of great musical eclecticism that still governs contemporary music. After the progressive fervor of the mid-20th century, it also makes the case that a re-examination is in order. "Copland, Barber, Britten and Shostakovich increasingly appear central to any musical characterization of the century." Samuel Barber is perhaps the biggest surprise on that eminent list. His conservative style — a lifelong penchant for themes of passionate, sophisticated lyricism, 19th-century formal structures, and primarily tonal harmonies, evoked considerable condescension from progressive critics during his career. Yet according to Barber biographer Barbara Heyman, he was also "one of the most honored and frequently performed American composers in Europe during the mid-century decades."

Barber wrote masterpieces in almost every major genre: symphony, overture, concerto, opera, ballet, sonata, string quartet, chorus, song cycle and song. His 1936 *Symphony in One Movement* became the first-ever American work performed at the Salzburg Festival. Most of his published works "entered the repertory soon after he wrote them, and remain popular to this day" (2001 New Grove). Barber's first major work, the 1931 overture to *The School for Scandal* exemplifies key elements of his style. He set it in sonata form, and the secondary theme for oboe solo reflects the lyricism that characterizes his career. As music critic Stephen Schwartz said, "Everything he wrote contains at least one gorgeous melody or memorable theme."

Perhaps no work encapsulates these central features more effectively than his String Quartet Op. 11. Barber wrote the first version of the quartet in 1936, during a two-year residence in Italy after winning both the Rome Prize and a Pulitzer. The sonata-form first movement opens with a strongly energetic theme that dominates much of the remaining discourse. But characteristically, he saves the most memorable first-movement theme melody for the softly lyrical secondary theme.

His theme for the *Adagio* second movement, however, guaranteed Barber a piece of musical immortality. The tender passionate style of this long-breathed theme, built upon simple sequences and poignant harmony, became one of the most popular works of the 20th century. Each repetition deepens the elegiac mood, providing such strong effect that it was chosen for performance at the funerals of Franklin Roosevelt, Albert Einstein and John Kennedy. Barber struggled with the third movement, though. He withdrew it after the first performance in December 1936. Performances over the next few years featured just the two-movement shell, until Barber finished a brief finale in 1938, which drew on themes from the first movement.

In that same year, Toscanini performed Barber's string orchestra arrangement of the second movement. This "Adagio for Strings" established the international reputation Barber maintained for the rest of his career. The high level of all his work, according to Barbara Heyman, enabled him to "[make] his living almost entirely by composing, perhaps one of the few composers who could make this choice."

**Dvorak**

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

Eight years after the "Slavonic Dances" thrust Dvorak into international prominence in 1878, the German publisher Simrock urged him to consider a second set of dances. Dvorak obliged, and finished them in 1887. His relationship with Simrock was complex, however, as for years he pleaded with him to print the Czech version of his name (Antonin) instead of the German form (Anton). So this immersion back into Bohemian folk style was also a political act, a celebration of his heritage aimed for the broader European market. In this same spirit, Dvorak also wrote the A Major Piano Quintet later in 1887. He fashions a marvelously tuneful and lyrical quintet, and not surprisingly he also draws upon several Czech dances (Dumka and Furiant).

But with Dvorak, never overlook the framework. Its four movements proceed straight out of the Viennese classical playbook — an opening movement in Sonata form, a slow-movement Rondo, a Scherzo & Trio of breathtaking speed, and a lively, Sonata-Rondo finale. The sophisticated manipulation of much of this folk-like material helped broaden its appeal to a wider audience.

The opening theme of the **Sonata-form** first movement establishes the genial, lyrical mood that prevails in much of the quartet. But Dvorak immediately turns to a passionate, prolonged outburst, soon followed by another lyrical passage. At this point in a work by Haydn, Mozart or Beethoven, such new lyricism would indicate the secondary key area after a dramatic transition passage. But not with Dvorak; in a work of enormous breadth, Dvorak again presents the opening theme in the tonic. The transition and wonderfully lyric secondary theme have yet to appear. When they do, listen to the lovely response to the secondary theme in the piano. And Dvorak's classical technique turns this soft, gentle response, via thematic transformation, into the powerful conclusion of the exposition.

The Dumka folk dance originated in Eastern Europe — in Ukraine and Poland. But thanks to Dvorak, "the most familiar examples are Czech" (2001 New Grove Dictionary). The Dumka usually opens in a melancholy mood, often in minor mode (as is the case in the second movement). It alternates with at least one more exuberant dance, before returning to the opening lament. In this case, Dvorak provides two delightful upbeat dances. But once again he sublimates this quintessentially Czech dance into a typical classical form, a slow-movement **Rondo**: A B A C A B A.

A similar outcome governs the sparkling third-movement Furiant. Dvorak sets it as a **Scherzo and Trio**, one of the most lively and

delightful ever written. Listen especially for the beautiful transformations of the opening theme in the following *Poco tranquillo* section. Dvorak begins with the key ingredient of a Furiant — an exuberant dance in triple meter. But it is also supposed to alternate with passages of duple meter, and those are missing. Instead, Dvorak provides several varieties of duple hemiola figuration (2/4 patterns within 3/4) in the Trio. For the energetic finale, Dvorak could have chosen a simple Rondo format. But given his formal mastery, he opts for the more complex **Sonata Rondo**, with a central episode development section and a return of the first episode in the tonic.

Almost 40 years after Brahms wrote his first chamber work — the Piano Trio in B Major, Op. 8 — he returned to it, and substantially revised the entire work. However, Dvorak preceded Brahms in this manner. In 1887, Dvorak started to revise his first Piano Quintet in A Major, Op. 5 (written in 1872). He grew so dissatisfied that instead he wrote an entirely new quintet in A Major — tonight's work. Bless that frustration, for in the judgment of many, he ended up creating one of the three greatest examples of the genre, along with those of Schumann and Brahms.

*Program notes by Ed Wight*