

The Muir String Quartet

Peter Zazofsky, Violin
Lucia Lin, Violin
Steven Ansell, Viola
Michael Reynolds, Cello

with guest artist
Gilbert Kalish, Piano

PROGRAM

Quartet in C minor, Op. 18, No. 4

Allegro, ma non tanto
Scherzo: Andante scherzoso, quasi allegretto
Menuetto: Allegretto
Allegro

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770 – 1827)

Five Pieces for String Quartet (1923)

Alla Valse Viennese (Allegro)
Alla Serenata (Allegretto con moto)
Alla Czecca (Molto allegro)
Alla Tango milonga (Andante)
Alla Tarantella (prestissimo con fuoco)

Erwin Schulhoff
(1894 – 1942)

INTERMISSION

Quintet in F minor, Op. 34

Allegro non troppo
Andante, un poco Adagio
Scherzo: Allegro
Finale: Poco sostenuto - Allegro non troppo

Johannes Brahms
(1833 – 1897)

The Muir Quartet is in residence at Boston University

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Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Quartet 4 in C minor, Opus 18, No. 4

In his first string quartets, Beethoven summed up the styles and the accomplishments of his two great predecessors, Haydn and Mozart, and prepared for the great advances in technique and expression that were to mark his mature quartets. His Opus 18 is a set of six that he wrote between 1798 and 1800. Beethoven had already begun to suffer the progressive hearing loss that burdened him during his entire adult life, but he was just approaching the full command of the enormous creative powers that account for his special place in history.

“Some excellent works by Beethoven are outstanding among recent publication,” a reviewer wrote shortly after the first three quartets appeared. “They give perfect proof of his art - but they need to be played well and heard often, for they are very difficult to perform and are in no sense ‘popular.’ ” Since then, they have become very nearly the most popular works in all the string quartet literature - and “popular” in the best sense. Historically, they are at once the climactic masterpieces of the eighteenth century and the first forward-looking ones of the nineteenth.

The six quartets were published in two books of three, each book presenting its contents in a sequence that a group of players might best enjoy when reading through them from beginning to end. This quartet opens the second book with a melodious, strong, thoughtful work— the only one of the six in a minor key. Its origins are shrouded in mystery for none of Beethoven’s preliminary sketches or any other early documentation of its existence has been found.

The first movement of the Quartet is an expressive, soaring *Allegro, ma non tanto*. There is no real slow movement. Instead, Beethoven calls the delicate second movement a scherzo, and marks it *Andante scherzoso, quasi allegretto*, but in fact it is constructed like a sonata-form movement, and not a scherzo at all. It opens with a fugato and features contrapuntal imitation throughout its entire length. The third movement is a minuet, *Allegretto*, that brings back the darker mood of the opening movement. The finale, *Allegro*, is a spirited rhythmic rondo that is sometimes thought to resemble Haydn’s popular *Gypsy Rondo* or the finale of Mozart’s great G minor Symphony, or both.

Erwin Schulhoff (1894 –1942)

Five Pieces for String Quartet

Schulhoff was born in Prague, and, recommended by Dvorak, was accepted at age ten as a piano student at the Prague Conservatory. He continued his studies in Austria and Germany and served in the Austrian army in the First World War. When he returned from the battlefields, Schulhoff realized that he could not go on composing as he had done before.

Schulhoff arrived in Dresden in January 1919, and soon became fully involved in the city's music scene, making new contacts with a variety of contemporary postwar composers. The Schoenberg school held a special appeal for him at this time, and he propagated the works of the school in his own piano recitals— he was particularly fond of Alban Berg's *Piano Sonata Opus 1* – and also found in them a source of inspiration for his own compositions. In this essentially atonal, expressionist style - parallel to his provocative Dada pieces - Schulhoff wrote several works between 1919 and 1921, the first movement of his *String Sextet* among them. He then saw that it was impossible to bring Expressionism and Dada together, and he also realized that arbitrary skepticism and fatalistic despair were alien to his artistic disposition. Thus he laid the *String Sextet* aside, and did not take it up again until April 1924, some six months after he returned to Prague from Germany. He completed the remaining three movements of the sextet, and these bear witness to the new stylistic direction Schulhoff had chosen to follow. The change in style is particularly striking in the *Burleske*, whose score reveals a Neo-Classical tendency at first glance. From this point, Schulhoff's music oscillated with incredible bravura between two different styles - Expressionism and Neo-Classicism - that developed alongside one another in the 1920's, and created a lasting polarization in the world of modern music. Schulhoff actually abandoned Dadaism at an earlier stage, but he retained his wit and his gift for shocking surprises and gentle provocation, as well as his undogmatic view of all kinds of doctrines.

A good example of this is offered by the *Five Pieces for String Quartet*, which he wrote in December 1923, immediately after his return to his native Prague. Schulhoff was in an excellent frame of mind at the time, with the result that he composed an uncomplicated work, full of charm and dance-like verve that takes its cue from the aesthetics of the group of French composers known as "Les Six". It was no coincidence that Schulhoff chose to dedicate the work to his colleague Darius Milhaud.

The *Five Pieces* represent a typical example of the Neo-Baroque dance suite, where - with the exception of the second piece - lively dances alternate with slow ones, irrespective of their origin: the result is a kind of musical travelogue. New, in comparison with Schulhoff's previous compositions, are the idioms taken for the most part from Slav folk music, the vivacious dances with acutely rhythmic figures being one typical element of the Slav musical tradition. These idioms are evident in the third piece, *Alla Czeca*, with its simple figure of a polka in 2/4 time inserted into the prevailing 4/4 time. In the first of the set, *Alla Valse Viennese*, Schulhoff creates even stronger tension between meter and rhythm by inserting the waltz into the 4/4 time. Perhaps this is an echo of the Dadaists' love of joking.

Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897)

Piano Quintet in F minor, Opus 34

The *Piano Quintet* is a particularly good illustration of a composition by the self-critical Brahms that underwent several major revisions before publication.

The original version was a string quintet for two violins, viola, and two cellos, which Brahms composed in 1862. Joseph Joachim, the composer's close friend and trusted musical advisor, liked the piece at first, but after rehearsing it, told Brahms that he thought it lacked charm and that the composer should "mitigate the harshness of some passages." A slightly altered work was played at another rehearsal, but it too proved unsatisfactory.

The following year, Brahms entirely transformed the piece into a sonata for two pianos, which he performed with Karl Tausig in Vienna early in 1864. (Although Brahms burned the original cello quintet version, he preserved the two-piano realization, which is published as Opus 34b). Critics gave it a generally poor reception saying it lacked the necessary warmth and beauty that only string instruments could provide.

Finally, during the summer of 1864, Brahms reworked the same musical material once more, this time shaping it into its final piano quintet form. Brahms, at long last, was satisfied. He allowed it to be published in 1865. It is now considered the composer's most epic piece of chamber music.

In the first movement, despite the rich diversity of melodic strains and rhythms, Brahms achieves a musical synthesis through the use of unifying techniques that are skillfully woven into the music. For example, the movement opens with piano, first violin, and cello singing the noble, sonorous first theme. After a pause, the piano begins a passage of running notes that seems unrelated to the opening statement. Careful listening, though, reveals that the passage is a free, speeded-up transposition of the melody we have just heard! Brahms' delight in counterpoising twos against threes is evident in the subdued second subject, with its *ostinato* triplets underpinning the equal pairs of notes in the melody. A closing theme that contrasts sustained, legato measures with staccato, rhythmic measures leads to a brief development, a recapitulation and a coda that starts slowly and quietly, but builds to a brilliant climax.

The slow movement is serene, tender, and simple – especially in comparison with the majestic sweep of what has come before. The *Scherzo* has great rhythmic verve and a plenitude of melodic material. There are three basic musical ideas: an eerie, slightly offbeat melody over an insistent cello pizzicato; a crisply rhythmic figure in the strings; and an exultant, full-voiced exclamatory statement from all five players. After expanding and developing these themes, the music builds powerfully to a sudden cut-off, which is followed by the contrasting cantabile melody of the Trio. Brahms then directs the players to repeat the *Scherzo* section.

The *Finale* opens with a slow introduction that casts a mood of dark foreboding. Then, the shadows disperse as the cello saunters forth with a fast, jolly tune. After a dramatic outburst, a second melody appears, slightly faster in tempo, but drooping with feigned sorrow. A vigorous, syncopated theme brings the exposition to an end. The freely realized development and recapitulation lead to the coda, a summing up of the entire movement in an unrestrained whirlwind of orchestral sonority.

Program notes courtesy of Arts Management Group, Inc., New York and Schott Musik International, www.Schott-music.com