

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM  
Escher String Quartet

**String Quartet No. 3 in C-sharp Major, Sz. 93, BB95**

**Béla Bartók  
(1881-1945)**

Béla Bartók's place in musical history is unique since he represents no one school of music. At a time when the German traditions of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms were giving way to the Second Viennese School led by Arnold Schoenberg, Bartók stood alone. While his early music was fed by the Romantic traditions of Brahms and Wagner, it is his own unique exploration of folk music, dissonance, rhythmic vigor and color, and a sense of the spiritual that most govern his important work. In a 1905 letter to his mother, he said knowingly, "I prophesy, I have foreknowledge that this spiritual loneliness is to be my destiny." Despite that loneliness, he breathed new life into an old system without joining the Serialists who would themselves ultimately suffer a kind of isolation.

With his friend Zoltán Kodály, he compiled a collection of Hungarian folk songs, a project that absorbed him from 1905 to 1921. This exploration was to influence his music greatly, but a word must be said about that. While he ardently espoused Hungarian nationalism, Bartók was firm that a composer does not simply use peasant melodies but devises an artful reference to them. For Bartók the art lay in complex devising, not simple imitation.

Bartók's life was not a happy one. Usually outside the mainstream of the European avant-garde of his time, he immigrated to New York in 1940 to become a research fellow at Columbia University working on Serbo-Croatian music. For his last five years, precarious finances, a sense of alienation, and poor health plagued him. Serge Koussevitzky, one of his few champions, went to Bartók's hospital room to offer a much-needed check for \$500, which represented half the commission for the *Concerto for Orchestra*. Harvard, where he was to deliver a series of lectures but was too ill to do so, and later the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) sponsored medical examinations for Bartók after his weight sank to eighty-seven pounds. He rallied enough to write the *Concerto for Orchestra* but, less than a year later, died of leukemia in New York's West Side Hospital.

Today his string quartets and orchestral works are monuments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century repertoire. The string quartet spanned Bartók's works from the first one in 1908 to the sixth and last written in 1939. The second came in 1917, the third in 1927, the fourth in 1928, and the fifth in 1934. As Beethoven's quartets mark his so-called "periods," so do Bartók's quartets divide his compositional life into three periods, the first ending with the First Quartet, the second with the Fourth Quartet, and the Fifth and Sixth quartets belonging to the third period. While the first period contained few references to folk music, the second was rich in them as well as in harmonic and rhythmic experimentation. The third period is a culmination of what came before but in sparer terms, not unlike the late works of Beethoven.

Like other composers, Bartók made his most intimate statements in the string quartet form as well as his most serious, inventive, and powerful. Bartók's music reflects, of course, his deep despair and protest over world conditions that would bring the spread of Nazism.

Today Bartók's string quartets are ranked with no less than those of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only those of Schoenberg, Berg, Shostakovich, and Carter approach Bartók's.

Although Bartók suffered a certain rejection of his work during his lifetime, this Third Quartet was awarded first prize in 1928 in a competition for new chamber music sponsored by the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia. By the time of its composition in 1927, Bartók had achieved a considerable worldwide status as both composer and pianist.

A surprisingly brief fifteen minutes in length and condensed into one continuous movement, the Third Quartet is still the most far-reaching of the six quartets in terms of forthright dissonance and harsh string sounds. To produce the strong and varied colors of the work, Bartók employed a myriad of special string techniques such as *col legno* (a striking of the string with the wood of the bow) and *sul ponticello* (bowing near the bridge). This is to say nothing of the multiple double stops (playing on two strings at once) that challenge the players.

With all this, the Third Quartet maintains a strict form related to Bartók's admiration for early Baroque music. Much has been said of his affinity for folk music, but we must always be reminded that his employment of it is done with the highest art. Along with his genius for form, we are left with his astonishing ability, particularly in this Quartet,

to accomplish a singular and powerful emotional effect. As Theodor Adorno said in his 1929 essay on the Third Quartet, “Hungarian types and German sonata are fused together in the white heat of impatient compositional effort; from them truly contemporary form is created.”

The Third Quartet was premiered by the Waldbauer Quartet in London on February 19, 1929.

### **String Quartet No. 4, Op. 25**

**Alexander von Zemlinsky  
(1871-1942)**

In Bruce Beresford’s 2001 film, *Bride of the Wind*, Alexander von Zemlinsky is portrayed attempting to seduce Alma Mahler during an apparent lesson in composition and piano, both fields of Zemlinsky’s expertise. Later in the film, Mahler’s infamous wife brags about her studies with Zemlinsky, but she is also quoted elsewhere as having described Zemlinsky as “a horrid little gnome – chinless, toothless and stinking of coffee houses.” Such contrasting reactions seem central to Zemlinsky’s problems as a composer. Although he died a forgotten man in America after fleeing Nazi oppression in 1938, his place in the complex world of *fin de siècle* Vienna was impressive. One could get lost in the great cast of artistic characters of that period: Mahler, Schoenberg, Webern, Klimt, Kokoschka, Schiele, Gropius, Werfel, and even Alma Mahler herself. Yet Zemlinsky triumphed both as pianist and composer and as a kind of consolidator of the troubled times. In the Wagner vs. Brahms dispute that divided Vienna, both sides admired Zemlinsky. Brahms championed his Clarinet Trio and Mahler his operas. He founded a musical organization for young professionals and amateurs, Polyhymnia, where he met and befriended Arnold Schoenberg who greatly admired him.

Despite such testimony, Zemlinsky fell down a certain proverbial crack, probably because he was too radical for the conservative Viennese who favored the waning Romanticism of the 1890s and not radical enough for the emerging Second Viennese School led by Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg. Still, he was instrumental with Schoenberg in founding the famous Society for Private Musical Performances, which fostered new music and led to the establishment of such other organizations as the International Society for Contemporary Music and the International Composer’s Guild of New York.

Zemlinsky's work could be described as lushly Romantic with a sharp modern edge. Once the furor of Modernism died down, it was probably this combination of the best of both worlds that led to the recent and positive reassessment of his music.

The splendid String Quartet No. 4 of 1936 is a work that combines impressive and inventive musical structure with emotional power. It was conceived as a memorial to Zemlinsky's close friend Alban Berg, who admired the darkness and sobriety of his style. Forced to leave Germany and return to Vienna, Zemlinsky interrupted work on his opera, *Der König Kandaules*, in order to complete the Quartet. He subtitled the fourth movement, "Lyric Suite," in honor of Berg's great work which, in turn, was dedicated to Zemlinsky. Like the Berg's *Lyric Suite*, the Zemlinsky's Quartet is in six movements or, more accurately, three pairs of movements with interrelated themes.

With its *Poco adagio* tempo marking, the *Præludium* is a chorale that serves as a funeral march. The fast *Burlesque* is a reworking of the same theme but in an entirely different manner. The *Adagietto* suggests the opening of the prelude to Act III of Wagner's *Parsifal*. In the *Intermezzo*, that theme becomes a jazz-like dance. The theme of the fifth movement is stated in a *Barcarole* (literally a gondolier's song) for solo cello and then developed into a set of variations in counterpoint. The dissonant and complex double fugue of the final movement has been compared to the contrapuntal writing in Beethoven's late quartets.

Despite its composition in 1936, the work was not heard until 1967 when it was played by the La Salle Quartet.

### **String Quartet No. 14 in A-flat Major, Op. 105**

**Antonín Dvořák  
(1841-1904)**

Son of a poor but musical butcher and innkeeper, Dvořák escaped that destiny and went instead to Prague where he began composing immediately after completing his studies at the Organ School. He was a violist in the orchestra of the National Theatre in Prague and little known as a composer until he was befriended by Brahms who recognized his rare genius and championed him throughout his life. Dvořák traveled to England in 1844 where he was immediately acclaimed and then to America in 1892 where he won fresh approval. He returned to his native Bohemia in 1895 where he became professor

of composition and later director at the Prague Conservatorium until his death in 1904. He was given a national funeral and buried with other national heroes in Vyšehrad cemetery.

Chamber music permeated Dvořák's compositional life from his Op. 1 String Quintet of 1861 to his Op. 106 String Quartet of 1896. While his love of folk music is ever present in his some forty chamber works, he was not confined in them by his nationalistic interests. More important than any national identification are the freshness, spontaneity, and sense of exploration which pervade his chamber music.

No greater compliment has been paid Dvořák than by Brahms himself when he said, as quoted in Otakar Šourek's *Antonín Dvořák: Letters and Reminiscences* (Da Capo Press, 1954), "I should be glad if something occurred to me as a main idea that occurs to Dvořák only by the way." Threading its way through the many compliments to Dvořák is an admiration for his freshness of musical ideas, particularly in terms of his beautiful melodies, colorful harmony, rich sonorities, and rhythmic inventiveness. Interspersed are an awareness and a respect for the strong national identity and richness he brings, in different ways, to both his symphonic and chamber music outpourings.

Dvořák's admiration of Brahms, on the other hand, was far more than hero-worship. Between the two masters were a mutual admiration and respect as well as a difference in their genius. For Dvořák it was a natural wellspring, for Brahms a convoluted struggle cast with self-doubt. Although the number of works is not an indication of genius, Dvořák wrote fourteen string quartets, Brahms three. Curiously, Dvořák never acted on Brahms' encouragement to move to Vienna and share in the sophisticated musical culture there but chose to remain in his native Bohemia.

Despite its national flavor, a word should be said about Dvořák's transcendence of nationalism in his music. For all his championing of the Czech folk spirit, Dvořák was not slave to it nor imitative of it in any simple way.

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