

About the Program

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Joseph Haydn

Born March 31, 1732, in Rohrau, Austria
Died May 31, 1809, in Vienna

String Quartet in D Major, Op. 64, No. 5, “Lark”
Composed in 1790; duration: 18 minutes

Joseph Haydn began the year 1790 ensconced in his post as *Kapellmeister* to the powerful Esterházy family, a position he had held since 1766. Though he was officially little more than a mere household servant, Haydn had the security to devote his energies to composing – plus a court orchestra and even a small opera company at his disposal. His contract allowed him to publish his chamber music abroad, which in turn enabled Haydn to cultivate a burgeoning international reputation. This comfortable situation came to a sudden end when Prince Nikolaus Esterházy died in September of 1790. The new Prince Anton, no music lover, sought to rein in his father’s extravagances: he dismissed the orchestra, closed the opera house, and put Haydn into semi-retirement. This ended up being a blessing in disguise for the eminent composer, however, as it permitted him to take advantage of some of the numerous offers that were coming his way from cities throughout Europe. By the end of 1790, Haydn was already on his first trip to London, where he would be fêted beyond his wildest expectations.

Most of the operas and symphonies Haydn wrote between 1766 and 1790 were intended for performance in the Esterházy court, but his string quartets were another matter altogether: those he wrote for publication in Vienna, and their innovativeness was an important reason why Haydn’s contemporaries – particularly Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – held him in such high esteem. During the autumn of 1790, just as his tenure with the Esterházys was coming to an end, Haydn began a new set of six string quartets as a kind of follow-up to his renowned 1781 Opus 33 and his equally remarkable Opus 50 set from 1787. These new quartets, which may have been premiered during Haydn’s London visit, were published upon his return to Vienna as his Opus 64.

The fifth of the six Opus 64 quartets, in the key of D major, has come to be known as the “Lark” quartet due to a birdsong quality audible in the first violin line in the opening movement. This *allegro moderato* movement is in a very compact sonata form, with its chirping first theme and staccato accompaniment segueing quickly into a flowing yet syncopated second. The brooding development section that follows culminates with a turbulent *sturm und drang* outburst before the main themes recapitulate. The violin dominates the *adagio cantabile* second movement, playing a stately theme that is subject to variations throughout. The minuet dance was considered to be a genteel relic of a bygone era by Haydn’s time, but in the *allegretto* third movement, he brings the dance

back to its rustic roots. This is followed by a *vivace* finale, which appropriately imitates an English hornpipe dance to close the quartet in a flurry of perpetual motion.

Paul Hindemith

Born November 16, 1895, in Hanau, Germany
Died December 28, 1963, in Frankfurt am Main

String Quartet No. 4, Op. 22
Composed in 1921; duration: 26 minutes

Paul Hindemith rose from humble beginnings to gain recognition as one of the twentieth century’s most naturally gifted composers and pedagogues. Born just outside of Frankfurt, Hindemith began his musical career as a professional violinist at the tender age of eleven, augmenting his family’s meager income by playing in local dance orchestras. By twenty-two, he was the leader of the Frankfurt Opera violin section, just before being drafted into the German army in the last months of World War I. After the war, Hindemith resumed his musical career, playing second violin and later viola in the string quartet of his teacher, Adolf Rebner. In 1921, Hindemith quit the Rebner Quartet over its musical conservatism and, with three likeminded young musicians, co-founded the Amar Quartet. For the remainder of the 1920s, the Amar – with Hindemith on viola – became one of the leading contemporary music ensembles in Europe, performing quartets by Bartók, Krenek, Ravel, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Webern, and Hindemith himself.

Hindemith composed a total of seven string quartets, plus a few smaller pieces for the ensemble. The quartet he published as his Opus 22 was long considered his Third, until an earlier work was rediscovered in the 1970s, bumping Opus 22 down to Fourth. Regardless of its number, the Opus 22 quartet has become one of Hindemith’s most popular chamber works since its premiere by the Amar Quartet in 1922. Over an unusual five-movement layout, the piece illustrates the composer’s ongoing musical evolution from late romanticism, to Schoenbergian expressionism, to a highly contrapuntal style heavily influenced by Johann Sebastian Bach.

Counterpoint is apparent in the Fourth String Quartet from the very first movement, a *fugato* marked *sehr langsame Viertel* (“very slow quartet note”), which opens with a haunting melody in the solo violin that gets passed to the other three instruments as the movement builds and ebbs. The second movement, marked *sehr energisch. Schnelle Achtel* (“very energetic; fast eighth note”), opens with a relentless, driving theme that briefly subsides at the midpoint and then again near the end. This is followed by a quiet, almost march-like third movement, indicated *stets fließend. Ruhige Viertel* (“always flowing; slow quarter note”), in which the persistent flowing melody explores keys far removed from the accompaniment.

The brief fourth movement, marked *mäßig schnelle Viertel* (“moderately fast quarter note”), is a brash solo cadenza from the cello, supported by the other three instruments, that plunges right into the finale. The rondo finale, which Hindemith directs to be played *gemächlich und mit Grazie* (“serene and with grace”), returns to the contrapuntal world of Bach, updated for the twentieth century. It opens with a kind of two-part invention between the viola and cello, soon augmented by the violins, which recurs in alternation with melodic interludes as the movement presses toward a resounding close.

Caroline Shaw

Born in 1982 in Greenville, North Carolina, U.S.A.

First Essay: *Nimrod*

Composed in 2016; duration: 10 minutes

New York-based composer Caroline Adelaide Shaw made history in 2013 when she became the youngest recipient of the Pulitzer Prize in Music for her *Partita for 8 Voices*. A native of North Carolina, Shaw trained as a violinist, earning degrees in performance from Rice University and Yale. Since 2010, she has been a doctoral fellow in composition at Princeton. Shaw continues to maintain an active freelance performance career as both a violinist and a singer. She currently sings with the contemporary vocal octet Roomful of Teeth (for whom she composed her Pulitzer-winning *Partita*) and plays violin with the American Contemporary Music Ensemble, in addition to collaborations with the Trinity Wall Street Choir, Alarm Will Sound, The Knights, and Kanye West. Shaw was the inaugural musician-in-residence at the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection in Washington, D.C., in 2014–15, and was composer-in-residence with Vancouver’s Music on Main in 2016. On a personal note, Shaw professes to love “the color yellow, avocados, otters, salted chocolate, kayaking, Beethoven’s Opus 74 quartet, Mozart’s operas, the smell of rosemary, and the sound of a janky mandolin.”

Shaw has been particularly drawn to chamber music throughout her twin careers as a performer and a composer. She composed her sixth work for string quartet, titled *First Essay: Nimrod*, in 2016 for the Calidore String Quartet through a commission by Yarlung Artists Coretet. Regarding the significance of the piece, Shaw wrote:

“*First Essay: Nimrod* began as a simple exercise in translating the lilt and rhythm of one of my favorite authors, Marilynne Robinson, into music. She writes beautifully and bravely on notions of the human soul, weaving delicately in and out various subjects (politics, religion, science) in each of her rich, methodical essays. In addition to thinking deeply about how the Calidore String Quartet approaches music and who they are as musicians, my jumping off point for this piece was considering Robinson and other ers. Usually my music is inspired by visual art, or food, or some odd physics quirk, but this time I want-

ed to lunge into language, with all its complex splintering and welding of units and patterns! The piece begins with a gentle lilt, like Robinson herself speaking, but soon begins to fray as the familiar harmony unravels into tumbling fragments and unexpected repetitive tunnels. These unexpected musical trap doors lead to various worlds that are built from the materials of the beginning, like the odd way dreams can transform one thing into another. The title refers to the legendary biblical figure Nimrod, who oversaw the construction of the Tower of Babel – a city designed to be tall enough to reach heaven but which resulted in confusion and scattering of language. This image of chaos and fragmentation, but also of extraordinary creative energy, may serve as a framework for listening to this musical essay.”

Felix Mendelssohn

Born February 3, 1809, in Hamburg, Germany

Died November 4, 1847, in Leipzig

Quartet No. 4 in D Major, Op. 44, No. 1

Composed in 1838; duration: 30 minutes

Although he was part of the iconoclastic Romantic generation of composers like Frederic Chopin, Franz Liszt, and his close friend Robert Schumann, Felix Mendelssohn preferred to draw his musical inspiration from the past. A child prodigy, Mendelssohn published his first compositions at the age of thirteen. As an adult, however, he was equally renowned as a conductor, and particularly for his performances of the then-underperformed music of Johann Sebastian Bach. In 1829, Mendelssohn organized and led one of the first performances of Bach’s monumental *St. Matthew Passion* since the composer’s death in 1750. Bach’s music continued to loom large for Mendelssohn when, in 1835, he moved to Leipzig to become director of the venerable Gewandhaus Orchestra. There, Mendelssohn continued to focus on the works of the past masters, including the posthumous premiere of Franz Schubert’s Great C Major Symphony in 1839, while snubbing his more forward-looking contemporaries like the young Richard Wagner.

Not long after moving to Leipzig, in March of 1837, Mendelssohn married Cécile Jeanrenaud, the daughter of a French minister. Less than a year later, the Mendelssohn-Bartholdys (as Felix was known after his father’s conversion to Lutheranism) welcomed their first son, Carl. It seems that balancing his responsibilities as a new husband and father with his demanding job as music director left precious little time for Mendelssohn to write music, as the formerly prolific composer started and finished relatively few new works during his first few years in Leipzig. One notable exception was a set of three string quartets that he composed between 1837 and 1839, which he published together as his Opus 44.

The first of the three Opus 44 quartets was actually written last, though its exuberant character makes it clear why Mendelssohn would want to open the set with it. De-

scribing the recently completed quartet in a letter to the violinist Ferdinand David, Mendelssohn called it “fierier” and “more rewarding to the players” than the other two. This fire is obvious at the outset of the *molto allegro vivace* first movement, which begins with a fiercely extroverted theme in the violin over a shimmering accompaniment; this excitement is contrasted by a much more subdued second theme, and both themes are subjected to intense development before returning intact. Unusually, for Mendelssohn, the second movement is not a scherzo

but a minuet; *marked un poco allegretto*, this gently lilt-
ing homage to Haydn and Mozart allows some respite
after the previous excitement. The *andante espressivo
ma con moto* third movement is, in Mendelssohn’s fash-
ion, a kind of song without words, transformed by in-
ventive Bach-inspired counterpoint throughout the ac-
companying parts. The *presto con brio* finale returns to
the exuberant character of the opening movement, bring-
ing the quartet to a brilliant close with a spirited round
dance.