

## PROGRAM NOTES

**Maurice Ravel** (1875-1937)

**String Quartet in F (1902-1903)**

Allegro moderato. Très doux. (in F Major)

Assez vif. Très rythmé (in a minor)

Très lent. (in Gb Major)

Vif et agité. (in F Major)

**Erno Dohnanyi** (1877-1960)

**String Quartet No. 2 in Db Major, Op 15 (1907)**

Andante — Allegro

Presto acciaciato

Molto adagio — Animato

**Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770-1827)

**String Quartet No 11 in f minor, Op 95 “Serioso” (1810)**

Allegro con brio

Allegretto ma non troppo

Allegro assai vivace ma serioso

Larghetto espressivo — Allegretto agitato — Allegro

**Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) String Quartet in F (1902-1903)**

Like his compatriot Debussy, Ravel was not a prolific composer. As a 28-year-old “perpetual student” at the Paris Conservatoire, Ravel composed his only String Quartet in 1902-1903. He dedicated it to his master, Gabriel Fauré, and submitted its first movement to the annual composition contest at the Conservatoire. The panel of judges rejected the work, and Ravel was — for the third and last time — expelled from the school. (Thus the French continued their grand tradition of vilifying their own great composers.)

Ravel did not seem to mind being the “bad boy” of French music, and spent most of his nights drinking and carousing with dissolute artists and young men about town, a group who called themselves “Les Apaches.”

Perhaps being rejected by august judges suited the young composer, a badge of pride. Ravel persevered and managed to get the Quartet performed by the Heymann Quartet at the Société Nationale in March 1904. The Société had been founded by Saint-Saens some decades earlier as a venue to champion the music of French composers. As far back as the 1850’s, Saint-Saens had observed that a French composer’s name on a concert program in Paris was sufficient to guarantee that no one would come. Paris only cared about Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Mendelssohn.

Although the audience loved Ravel's work, local critics assailed the work as not German enough (in other words, it didn't sound like Beethoven). The Paris correspondent for *The New York Herald Tribune* said the first theme reminded him of clarinets wailing in a Chinese theater.

By the time Ravel published the Quartet in 1910, he had made some revisions — perhaps. No original score survives, so we don't know what he changed. Fauré disliked the brevity of the finale, but it is still shockingly brief. Debussy reputedly told Ravel, “Don't change a note.”

Ravel himself, who had spent years of bitter tutelage at the Conservatoire, learning how to write music the “correct” way, had very little to say about this Quartet. In an autobiographical note, he wrote: “My Quartet in F ... responds to a desire for musical construction, which undoubtedly is inadequately realized but which emerges much more clearly than in my preceding compositions.” So much for pride of authorship.

Ravel's biographers are quick to explode this false modesty. Norman Demuth writes: “The Quartet is an important work, as important as Debussy's one quartet ... [B]oth contributed new lines of thought and approach to the quartet species. ... [Ravel] proved that it was possible for a composer to place counterpoint second, the first essential being the making of lovely sounds without any suggestion of programmatic or even romantic background. In this respect his string Quartet is a landmark in the history of French music.”

Ravel's Quartet has a feeling of classical restraint, and the listener apprehends, even on the first hearing, that thematic transformation is the key to the work's structure. Just let it, shall we say, un-Ravel. The first movement offers a the expected two themes, with the second introduced in what would become a very characteristic Ravel touch: doubling the tune at the interval of the fifteenth. Beauty of tone and sheer voluptuousness of sound prevail, and it is in vain to look for more than what this joyful serenade offers. If Beethoven is Rhine wine, this is fresh, sparkling cider.

In the second movement, marked *Assez vif*, some have heard the influence of Javanese gamelan music, one of the exotic strains that impacted French musicians in the first decade of the 1900s. The first theme is played pizzicato in the Aeolian mode, which does suggest an “oriental” influence, but this is only a passing impression. There are cross rhythms, with triple-time figures played over figures in double-time. The tonality wanders afield through E minor and G# minor, risky places to be if F Major is “home.” (Strange as it may seem to the uninitiated, keys adjacent to the main key of a piece are not close to it harmonically at all.)

The third movement, although marked as a slow one, “Très lent,” has many tempo changes, as well as intentional use of the “parallel fifths” which first-year harmony students are told never to use (anything that sounds that nice just has to be illegal!). At one point the players play on the fingerboards of their instruments, and at another point, everyone plays in the treble clef, as though they were performing in a bell jar from which the air was being drawn.

The fourth movement is more “orchestral” in timbre, alternating tremolo passages with more songful ones. It refers back to the first movement often, and provides a vigorous, if startlingly brief, conclusion to the quartet.

Today, the Ravel Quartet is regarded as one of the staples of the string quartet literature, and our only regret is that Ravel did not turn his hand again to the medium as a more

mature artist. The work has been recorded many times, and has also been arranged for string orchestra by Russian conductor Rudolf Barshai.

### **Erno Dohnanyi String Quartet No. 2 in Db Major, Op 15 (1907)**

Erno Dohnanyi, or Ernest von Dohnanyi as he is known outside of Hungary, was the foremost Hungarian composer of the generation before Bela Bartok (in fact he was a frequent champion of Bartok's music), as well as a brilliant pianist and a conductor. Although spared the horrors of being a child prodigy by his musician father, Dohnanyi blossomed early as a gifted pianist, and was blessed with the friendship with Brahms, and that of Brahms' best friend, the violinist Joseph Joachim.

Dohnanyi played in chamber music continually during his student years at the Budapest Music Academy. So it is no coincidence that his first published work was a Piano Quintet. When Brahms played the young Dohnanyi's Quintet with some friends in 1895, the not-easily-impressed old master declared, "I could not have written it better myself." Dohnanyi's music is only now being rediscovered by appreciative players and audiences. As a composer in the Austro-Hungarian style we know from Haydn through Brahms, Dohnanyi was more traditional, and though he used folk materials, he did not produce the kinds of almost astringent new soundscapes that we associate with Bartok. During the recent "dark ages" of 12-tone music, Dohnanyi's music was completely neglected, scorned by academics and seldom performed in public. Now that the people who made us listen to Berg and Webern and Schoenberg are in nursing homes or confined to madhouses, the rest of us can get back to the business of playing and hearing the lost gems of 20<sup>th</sup> century chamber music. And this is one of them.

There is another reason why Dohnanyi's music hasn't been heard much, and since it involves one of modern music's unresolved dilemmas, it bears mentioning here. It is best summed up in the fewest words by James A. Grymes, editor of the definitive biography of Dohnanyi: "[H]is homeland turned its back on him in 1945 when he was falsely accused of being a Nazi sympathizer. Dohnanyi was eventually able to disprove the allegations, but rumors would follow him for the rest of his life, causing irreparable damage to his reputation. It was not until 1968, twenty-three years after Dohnanyi's expatriation [to Latin American and then to the United States] and eight years after his death, that his name was finally removed from the blacklist in Eastern Europe ... In 1990, Dohnanyi was posthumously awarded the Kossuth Prize, the highest award a Hungarian citizen can achieve."

Behind all this was denunciations by fellow musicians and political hacks, as Hungary sank into its Soviet-dominated postwar era. The composer had made the fatal error of not embracing Communism.

In fact, one of Dohnanyi's sons was killed by the Nazis for being a leader in the famous plot to assassinate Hitler (!), and a second son died in Russian captivity. In a further ironic twist, one of Dohnanyi's accusers was a musician the composer had quietly, and anonymously, helped rescue from the death camps. The biography, *Ernst von Dohnanyi: A Song of Life*, written by Dohnanyi's wife Ilona and edited by Grymes, includes letters and newspaper articles documenting the shabby denunciations of Dohnanyi from his homeland, and how they were repeated verbatim for years, even after they were thoroughly disproved. The book offers a humbling lesson in what constitutes "proof."

But back to music. The Quartet we hear tonight has been recorded several times, but the only copy of it in any library in Rhode Island is in Kingston, and there was no time to go over the river and through the woods to find it (they won't let the CD leave the building). The Providence Public Library had an LP but apparently discarded it when a mountain of classical LPs were put out to pasture this last year. Nor was there a score to be found. Since recordings are as rare as hen's teeth, prior reviews are not readily found. When Lionel Salter reviewed a 1989 recording of the work, he noted its "much developed harmonic sense and some interesting structural ideas," but that's rather like saying a car is a vehicle with wheels. More promisingly, he saw, "in the long finale, a degree of intensity comparable to that in a great slow movement by Beethoven." So far so good. The *Presto acciaciato* second movement has been cited by several critics (including Tovey) for its resemblance to the storm music that opens Wagner's *Die Walküre*. (If so, quite an accomplishment for four players.) I managed to hear a snippet of this movement on the Internet, and, yes, it sounds very much like the famous Wagner passage! And this can be no coincidence — Richard Strauss cites this Wagner passage and reprints it in full score right at the beginning of his *Treatise on Instrumentation*, the definitive textbook for orchestrators which Dohnanyi would have studied.

Echoes of the manner of Mendelssohn, Brahms and Richard Strauss have also been noted, and the slow final movement may have influenced Bartok's Second Quartet, composed a decade later.

Dohnanyi composed this quartet in the summer of 1907, a season he spent writing music and mountain climbing in the Dolomites. Did a mountain storm suggest the use of the Wagnerian passage, I wonder? He dedicated the work to his doctor and Viennese friend, Dr. Adalbert Lindner. The Quartet was first performed in Berlin in 1908 by the Klinger Quartet.

Since Dohnanyi's biography says nothing else about the work, and as there are no musicological articles about it in the literature, we must – horrors! – use our ears and react to the work in "real time" as we experience it. My word, isn't that what they did in Berlin in 1908? How quaint!

### **Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) String Quartet No 11 in f minor, Op 95 "Serioso" (1810)**

With a nickname like "serioso," we expect four dour musicians to hack away through four interminable movements, as an equally dour audience winces and squirms, a few members glancing nervously at their watches, and others marking time waiting for something resembling a coda. Beethoven, at the end of the "Middle Period" that produced the Razoumovsky quartets (almost symphonic in their drama and weight), used the Op. 95 quartet as a launching pad into the completely new, laconic and compressed language that would characterize his final quartets. Beethoven's admonition to "seriousness" really means, "on guard, players and audience — this is not going to be a Haydn quartet! Nor, for that matter, even what you think is a Beethoven quartet! Although the details may not be apparent to the passive listener, players and musicologists grappling with this quartet recognize that the tonalities and harmonies Beethoven employs seem to represent storm, stress, and struggle. Is there "meaning" in this? I take it as an almost existential statement that the universe is a place where things take unexpected turns, and where trite and happy resolutions may be a fool's solace. It's a

world-view in sound closer to ancient Greece than to modern Europe. Or perhaps it suits Vienna after the Napoleonic wars – since Beethoven had seen his city invaded and his aristocratic patrons driven from their palaces.

The key of F minor is always associated, in Beethoven, with music of defiance and great drama. The first piano sonata of his youth hurled its gauntlet at the foot of Haydn, in F minor. The great middle-period Appassionata piano sonata is in F Minor, too, and I have always regarded its finale as a romantic depiction of an Alpine thunderstorm. And there's the great storm sequence in the Pastoral symphony, also set in F minor.

From the outset of the first movement, Beethoven alerts us that he is going to hurl thunderbolts with his themes, and his harmonies. There's no let-up. Dainty bridge passages and cadences are by-passed in favor of abrupt and brilliant changes. The instruments don't "fiddle;" they are four philosophers, poised in a life-and-death struggle with the tension-laden material.

Musicologists have gone to great length about how the first movement uses the tension created by a half-tone slide of the theme (a "Neapolitan step") to throw everything off balance; how Beethoven modulates to unexpected keys that create strange tensions around the key of Db; and how makes even the expected return to the tonic at the end unexpected because of what has come before. A variety of uncanny half-tone slides throughout the movement lead to strange places and undermine the listener's desire to hear a sweet, diatonic "tune." This movement, which seems to pass so swiftly in its titanic compression, is like opening a door into a room in which a tornado has been imprisoned. Or it is like being struck between the eyes by a god.

The second movement, *Allegretto ma non troppo*, starts with a chromatic cello solo. The notes are chosen, like the footsteps of someone walking on a carpet littered with broken glass, note by painful note, and the destination is uncertain. When the melody is picked up by the other strings, we find ourselves in the world of D Major – normally a bright tonality, a happy place to be. But D Major is so remote from where the first movement left us that what we feel is dislocation, a quietude that does not comfort, the desolation of Troy, abandoned by its gods. A fugue appears, and mingles with the disconsolate main theme. Tritones, the evil intervals regarded as the bane of Western music, begin to appear, and the fugue builds up to its own catastrophe. The opening chromatic cello theme attempts to come to the rescue – the fugue resumes. The fugal voices, more compressed upon one another, come in quicker and seem to find a way to toss around the tritons that want to disrupt. A serene coda follows, as though the fugues were just nightmares of the intellect. And perhaps they were.

Even Beethoven may have reeled back from what he had just done, and it may be no surprise that the ensuing *Allegro assai vivace ma serio* is a kind of grumpy scherzo. Musicologist Joseph Kerman called it "a march – a serious, three-legged, tough little quick-march." The central Trio section has a kind of half-hearted chorale theme that doesn't quite materialize. Beethoven accomplishes some odd key changes and transitions, with an almost awkward abruptness, and then the "march" returns to end the movement. The finale starts with eight bars marked *Larghetto espressivo*, which serve to drop the level of tension momentarily, letting the listeners clear their brain cells. The *Allegro agitato* that ensues offers a Russian-sounding, dancing theme. Even though the episodes in the movement are as far-reaching as those that came before, the return to the familiar lilt of the main theme makes Beethoven's explorations and digressions more decorative

than threatening. He is painting bold colors on your wall, not tearing your house apart and rebuilding it.

But how does one end a “serious” quartet whose last movement seems to want to be a folk dance? Does another thunderstorm burst onto their heads, send them scattering, and end the piece with Olympian fury? Beethoven, long a careful student of Bach’s music, knew well that the old master sometimes tacked major-key chords onto the ends of minor-key movements. Beethoven’s own Egmont overture, written at the same time as this quartet, veers from tragedy to triumph through just such a switch from minor to major, and this is exactly what Beethoven does here. The coda bursts like a Rossini overture out of the shadows of F Minor and hurtles the work into a major-key ending. Some critics have regarded this as a failure on Beethoven’s part, but considering the abrupt shifts of tonality, dynamics and tempo throughout the work, can we not just regard this as another “surprise?” Deeper still, Beethoven may be telling us that while life may throw us its F Minor shadows, the ultimate meaning of life for mortals is the joy of living it, and such a joy can only be won in the full light of the major keys. We may struggle in F Minor, but let us celebrate in F major.

—Program notes by Brett Rutherford