TAKÁCS QUARTET

Friday, September 28 | 8 pm | The Folly Theater

Edward Dusinberre  violin
Károly Schranz  violin
Geraldine Walther  viola
András Fejér  cello

SCHUBERT
String Quartet No. 13 in A Minor, D. 804 ("Rosamunde")
   Allegro ma non trappo
   Andante
   Menuetto: Allegretto and Trio
   Allegro moderato

BRITTEN
String Quartet No. 2, Op. 36
   Allegro calmo senza rigore
   Vivace
   Chacony. Sostenuto

INTERMISSION

DVOŘÁK
String Quartet in F Major, Op. 96 ("American")
   Allegro ma non tanto
   Lento
   Molto vivace
   Finale: Vivace ma non troppo

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**String Quartet No. 13 in A Minor, D. 804**  
**“Rosamunde”**  
Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828)

Schubert was a frustrated opera composer. While he tossed off songs with amazing ease and rapidity – songs that often became the “top 40” of his day – he craved success in Vienna’s popular opera houses. That success eluded him, however. Plagued with poor libretti, he suffered one resounding failure after another. Still, he was drawn to the stage, and when he was approached in 1823 to compose incidental music for a four-act play entitled “Rosamunde, Fürstin von Zypern” (“Rosamunde, Princess of Cyprus”), he seized the opportunity.

The project went the way of Schubert’s other dramatic endeavors. Vienna’s press dismissed Helmina von Chézy’s drama (which has been lost) as improbable and silly. It closed after only two performances, despite some kinder critical words for Schubert’s score. The incidental music from the opera has become a staple of the orchestral repertoire. “Rosamunde’s” well known entr’acte is the theme of Schubert’s second movement in this quartet, hence the nickname.

Schubert often borrowed from himself; in fact, this quartet’s third movement takes its opening motive from his 1819 song “Die Götter Griechenlands,” (“The Gods of Greece”) also known as Strophe von Schiller, D. 677. Scholars now believe that the “Rosamunde” string quartet theme may also predate the incidental music. Schubert was comfortable writing for strings and composed many quartets during his ‘teens for family musicales. It is quite plausible that he expanded this theme to the larger instrumentation for “Rosamunde’s” incidental music.

Schubert completed the A minor quartet in early 1824 with a dedication to Ignaz Schuppanzigh, the Viennese violinist and conductor whose quartet premiered many of Beethoven’s works. The Schuppanzigh Quartet played the first performance of Schubert’s A minor quartet in Vienna on March 14, 1824. The “Rosamunde” quartet has been overshadowed by the fierce, dramatic “Death and the Maiden” quartet. Two works farther apart in temperament cannot be imagined. As Alfred Einstein has noted:

“. . . the A minor quartet was as far removed in style and character from Beethoven as it could be – as far removed from the ‘Unfinished’ in the symphonic field, and the chamber-music counterpart to the latter. Yet both quartets strain the confines of the chamber idiom, occasionally approaching symphonic textures.”

We know from Schubert’s letters and contemporary reports that he was profoundly depressed during this period. As his syphilis advanced, his sense of mortality intensified. In late March 1823, he wrote to Leopold Kupelweiser:

“Imagine a man whose health will never be sound again and who in despair only makes it worse and not better; imagine a man, I say, whose most shining hopes have come to naught, for whom the bliss of love and friendship offers nothing but the greatest pain, for whom the passion for beauty threatens to die away, and ask yourself then if that isn’t one wretched, unhappy man? My peace is gone, heavy is my heart, find it again shall I never, never again, this I can certainly sing now every day, for every night when I go to bed I hope I’ll never wake up . . .”

The text he quotes is the incipit to “Gretchen am Spinnrade,” (“Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel”) one of Schubert’s greatest songs. The quartet’s first movement has both a psychological and musical connection to the song.
The slow movement, marked *Andante*, is a hybrid form based on the lovely “Rosamunde” theme. Listeners who know the piano sonatas will hear echoes of those works. Those familiar with the complete incidental music from “Rosamunde” may be disappointed that Schubert did not grace us with a characteristic set of variations. As listeners, we acquiesce to his mournful mood; however, in an agitated passage near the end, he reminds us of his turmoil.

Wistfulness and melancholy shadow the third movement. The minuet’s motive comes from Schubert’s setting of the Schiller line, “Schöne Welt, wo bist du?” (“Beautiful world, where are you?”) The questioning, tentative motive sets the tone: this is hesitant, probing, private music. Only in the finale does Schubert emerge from the gloomy atmosphere. Indeed, the closing *Allegro moderato* has the “hail good fellow, well met!” jollity of the “Trout Quintet” finale. (It shares the key of A major with that finale as well.) Was Schubert trying to make amends for a quartet cloaked in *douleur?*

Several elements of Hungarian style are present: drones, emphasis on second beats, quasi-improvisatory passages, dotted rhythms, and violinistic flourishes reminiscent of Gypsy fiddling. Schubert’s flexible rhythms, switches from major to minor mode and back again, and occasional momentary stops remind the listener that the quartet is, at its heart, the mirror of a tormented soul.

String Quartet No. 2 in C Major, Op. 36
Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

England’s greatest Baroque composer was Henry Purcell, who lived from 1659 to 1695. Until the renaissance in English music that flourished starting at the turn of the 20th century – through Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Delius, Holst, and others – Purcell reigned supreme as the principal figure in the country’s musical heritage.

As the 250th anniversary of Purcell’s death approached, plans were underway in England for a series of concerts commemorating his life and work. These included new compositions that paid tribute to Purcell’s legacy. Benjamin Britten wrote two pieces for the occasion: a set of nine “Holy Sonnets of John
Donne” for voice and piano, and a second string quartet. The Zorian String Quartet introduced the new string quartet on November 21, 1945, the 250th anniversary of Purcell’s death, at London’s Wigmore Hall. The following evening, Britten and Peter Pears premiered the Donne sonnets, also in Wigmore.

Britten admired Purcell’s songs and instrumental music, and freely acknowledged his indebtedness to the 17th-century master. Indeed, one of his best known compositions, “A Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra,” is variations on a hornpipe by Purcell. The Quartet No. 2 adapts Purcellian features in a different fashion, and owes much of its mood and harmonic vocabulary to the opera “Peter Grimes,” which Britten completed early in 1945. His biographer Eric Walter White calls the quartet “an instrumental sequel to Peter Grimes.”

Certainly its form is original. By limiting himself to three movements, Britten distanced himself from the traditional four movement sonata structure of classical quartets, yet his first movement is in a recognizable – albeit flexible – sonata form. The second movement, a scherzo/trio, functions more as an interlude, a scant few minutes interpolated between the giant pillars of the two outer movements. In Britten’s finale, a giant Chacony, (he uses Purcell’s spelling of the French chaconne; see sidebar) is the most overt gesture of homage to his Baroque predecessor. Yet its musical language is full of surprises.

### About the music

The quartet opens with the two violins and cello in unison over a double-stopped drone in the viola. Was Britten alluding to Purcell’s “Fantasia upon One Note,” which sustains a single pitch as a drone for its duration? The quartet continues its remarkable texture for nearly a minute and a half before introducing a new, imitative idea in staccato eighth notes. The pedal point has not disappeared, however, and recurs at strategic moments throughout the movement.

Still more ideas unfold, now lyrical, now energetic. Then Britten starts recalling fragments of each musical paragraph, intertwining them – remembrance of things past? – never stopping the stream of varied material. Listen for a glissando leap, usually in tenths, same as the interval of the opening viola drone.

Imitation between and among the four players is nearly constant, but not so methodical as it might be in a Baroque piece. Britten writes as if the four musicians are both flirting and arguing with one another, in the animated conversation of great chamber music that so often defies analysis.

All four players are muted for the duration of the Scherzo, which is constructed of rapid arpeggios played staccato. The mutes alter the string sound, but cannot

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### TRAGEDY, FRIENDSHIP, AND A COMMISSION

Britten composed his Second Quartet on commission from Mary Behrend, the wife of John Louis Behrend. The couple were wealthy patrons of the Bloomsbury Group of writers and artists; later, they expanded their philanthropy to architects and musicians. Britten met them in March 1937 through their protégé, the critic and poet Peter Burra. Six weeks later, on April 27 of that year, Burra was killed in an airplane crash near Reading.

The tragedy drew Britten closer to the Behrends. He and Mary corresponded regularly during the early years of the war, including the period when he and Pears were in Canada and the United States. Upon their return to England in 1942, the Behrends sponsored Britten’s and Pears’ first recital.

Mary Behrend’s request for a quartet coincided with Britten’s final touches on the opera “Peter Grimes.” He replied on February 10:

> I am terribly touched that you’d like a quartet of me, & honoured too. As you know, I value your criticism & appreciation very highly, and you couldn’t give me a higher testimonial than this. I have had a quartet at the back of my mind for sometime, & your sweet offer will do a lot towards bringing it to life.

Although preparation for “Peter Grimes” premiere in June 1945 kept Britten busy, he began work on the “Holy Sonnets of John Donne” for high voice and piano, and the quartet, completing both that autumn. The premiere of the quartet took place on November 21, 1945 in London’s Wigmore Hall as part of the Purcell 250th anniversary celebrations. On December 3, 1945, he wrote to Mrs. Behrend:

I am so glad you got pleasure from (the quartet) because to my mind it is the greatest advance that I have yet made, & altho’ it is far from perfect, it has given me encouragement to continue on new lines.

His synthesis of old and new elements is one of the quartet’s great achievements.

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mask the irrepressible energy of Britten’s string writing. This is a tarantella in overdrive. The central trio section switches to the pulse of duple time, even though the meter nominally remains in 6/8. A six-measure ground bass hints at the Chacony to follow. This is fantasy music, with a vague weirdness, as if Britten had absorbed some Hungarian Gypsy flavor. It goes like the wind and evaporates into nothingness.

A stern opening with all four players delivering the sarabande rhythm in music makes it clear that the Chacony (see sidebar) is serious business. Sharply dotted, rhythmic figures suggest a French overture. Britten’s phrases are in nine-bar paragraphs, which would have been radical for Purcell, but it works. The lead voice switches among the players, sometimes featuring one as soloist, sometimes as a duet with the other two players accompanying, occasionally returning to dramatic unison as at the opening.

The 20 variations of the Sarabande grow seamlessly, one unfolding from the previous and proceeding to the next, with seemingly endless imagination in texture, pacing, and melodic flow. If the cello sustains a single pitch through one variation, it will have the only moving part in the next, with the other three players relatively static. A chorale that blends the four players in chordal sonorities gives way to a cello cadenza (later, viola and first violin have their own cadenzas). You can track the variations by following the changes in texture, but some are very subtle.

One of the quartet’s most startling traits is occasional passages of bitonality. In one variation, the upper three strings trill in sweet inverted triads, while the cello plays pizzicato chords in a different key. At the end of this monumental Chacony, Britten sets forth an argument between C major and several other key centers. C major is clearly determined to win, and asserts itself with four decisive iterations at the end. A word to the wise: wait to applaud until the players have lowered their bows!

String Quartet in F Major, Op. 96 ("American")
Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

The “American” Quartet holds an analogous position among Dvořák’s chamber works to the “New World” Symphony in his orchestral music. Both are especially beloved to American audiences because of their origins in the United States.

Dvořák had been in New York City for a year, directing the National Conservatory, when he decided to take a summer holiday in 1893. Homesick for his native Bohemia but contractually bound to remain in the United States for another year, he chose a destination where he could at least speak his mother tongue. He traveled to the remote hamlet of Spillville, Iowa, literally halfway across the American continent. After a season of big city hustle and bustle, this small farming community provided welcome relief. Spillville’s 400 Moravian immigrants welcomed their famous countryman with open arms.

The summer months in Iowa proved fruitful both personally and professionally. Dvořák’s children joined him for the sojourn, and he was extremely happy to have family around him and to be among other Czech speakers. Filled with energy, enthusiasm, and a host of melodic ideas, he began to sketch a new string quartet on June 8, 1893. Two days later, after apparently effortless work, he completed the sketch, marking on the manuscript, “Thanks be to God, I am satisfied, it went quickly.” On June 23rd, he finalized the full score.
Perhaps because it is suffused with the excitement and immediacy of the moment, the F major work has become Dvořák’s most popular string quartet, and is only rivaled by the A major Piano Quintet in his chamber music. That stated, it would be an injustice to Dvořák not to mention that he composed fourteen quartets in all, at least six of which contain a wealth of wonderful music. Anyone who enjoys this one should seek out the other mature quartets, which generously reward the curious.

The "American" is one of a group of works that Dvořák sent to Fritz Simrock, his German publisher, from the United States. In order to expedite prompt issuance of the new compositions, Simrock asked Johannes Brahms to proofread the musical galleys. When he learned of Brahms's labor on his behalf, Dvořák was overwhelmed, writing to Simrock, “I can scarcely believe there is another composer in the world who would do as much.” The story is heart-warming testimony to the depth of the friendship between Dvořák and Brahms, and the exceptionally high regard in which Brahms held his younger friend.

The music of the “American” quartet, like that of the "New World" symphony, has mistakenly been associated with that of Negro spirituals and American folk song. In fact, its syncopations, dotted rhythms, and propensity for pentatonic scales all share roots in the folk songs of Dvořák’s native Bohemia. In addition, Bedrich Smetana’s autobiographical quartet, "In my Life," also served as an important model for Dvořák’s first movement. British commentator Richard Graves once described Op. 96 as “eating blueberry pie and washing it down with Slivovic.” The wholesome melodies and vigorous rhythms may well prompt aural memories of folk songs we know from our American youth, but ultimately this quartet is Czech through and through.

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