

TUESDAY EVENING CONCERT SERIES PRESENTS

Takács Quartet

25 October 2022 at UVA's Old Cabell Hall

Program Notes by Laurie Shulman © 2022

String Quartet in E-flat Major
Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805-1847)

The eldest of Abraham and Leah Mendelssohn's four children, Fanny Mendelssohn was three and a half years older than her brother Felix. She was equally gifted as a pianist and composer, but was discouraged by her father from pursuing a professional career in music. Felix supported her composition efforts, but disapproved of her publishing any of her pieces. (Ironically, several of her songs were published under Felix's name in the 1820s.)

In 1829, Fanny married the artist Wilhelm Hensel, court painter to the Prussian king. Hensel had a more progressive view with respect to his wife's talents, and encouraged her to continue composing. Under Fanny's stewardship, their Berlin home became a favored spot for house concerts; she was the salon hostess *par excellence*. The majority of Fanny's more than 300 compositions were songs and piano miniatures, but she did produce some larger dramatic pieces in the 1830s. In the 1840s, contravening her father's and brother's wishes, she began to publish her music. Her works were starting to garner critical acclaim when she died of a massive stroke in May 1847. She was 41.

Her Piano Trio Op. 11 (1846, and one of her few works to be published in her lifetime) and String Quartet are regarded today as her finest chamber compositions. The Quartet dates from 1834, but remained unpublished until 1988. That delay is emblematic of the belated recognition her music is receiving.

The Quartet shows a secure command of harmony and counterpoint, and an original approach to form. She opens with a reverent slow movement that reveals itself so seamlessly one hardly notices the imitative exchanges that tie it together. Her second movement is an Allegretto in C minor. It functions as a scherzo, and sounds remarkably like her brother's music: a great compliment, since Felix was a master of the scherzo idiom. The contrasting trio section has lively imitative writing and an unusually demanding cello part. The writing for all four players is demanding.

Hensel's *Romanze* has the character of a 'song without words,' with its emphasis on melody and restrained beauty. An extended passage in the middle injects some romantic *angst*, with powerful, emotionally charged intensity. Calm eventually prevails, and Hensel's coda drifts upward into the ether.

The gloves come off in the finale, a brilliant Allegro molto vivace requiring razor sharp ensemble and intonation from the quartet. A profusion of melodies and attractive accompaniment figures in perpetual motion show Fanny to have been as gifted a melodist as her brother. This music is not only pleasing to the ear; it sounds as if it is *fun* to play.

String Quartet No.6, Sz.114 (1939)
Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

In August of 1939, while staying with friends in Saanen, Switzerland, Bartók wrote to his son Peter in Hungary: "Now I have another commission to fulfill, this time a string quartet for Z. Székely (i.e. for the 'New Hungarian Quartet'). Since 1934 virtually everything I have done has been commissioned." These are telling words, for indeed that pattern was to dominate the few remaining years of his life. In fact, the Sixth String Quartet was the last of Bartók's compositions to be conceived in his native Hungary. Though encouraged by Zoltán Székely to compose the quartet, Bartók dedicated the work to the ensemble that eventually premiered it in the United States. A letter from the composer dated January 15, 1941 reads:

On Jan. 20 there will be the world premiere performance of my 6. String Quartet in New York. It is rather important for me to be present at this performance, and also perhaps a duty towards my friend, the Kolisch quartet who will play the work.

The Sixth Quartet, though played far less often than the first two, is in many ways the most accessible of Bartók's string quartets. The key to grasping its form lies in the predominant word in its movement titles: *mesto*. Defined as "sorrowful, sad, mournful" in Italian, *mesto* clearly dominated Bartók's sensibilities as he composed; it is worth noting that his mother died while he was composing the Sixth Quartet. The *mesto* music functions as a slow introduction to each movement and as the unifying musical idea. The first movement opens with unaccompanied viola playing the *mesto*, then evolves into a traditional sonata-form structure. The second movement opens with the *mesto* in two parts; the cello has the melody, and the other three instruments combine as one voice in a tremolo unison. A Beethovenian, strongly rhythmic march follows.

In the *Burletta*, the *mesto* introduction has grown to three voices. As Bartók scholar Halsey Stevens has written:

This time there is no transition: the quartet plunges abruptly into a grotesque, sardonic *Burletta*, which brings forth a whole arsenal of technical devices from Bartók's storehouse, including some that have not been used in any of the preceding quartets. It is a movement of violent contrasts, rather ponderous humor, and (in the Trio) a momentary tenderness.

The score directs first one, then the other violinist to play a quarter tone flat on the first page of this movement, lending the music a sassy dissonance that is sustained for the duration of the *Burletta*, even after the violins resume playing normally.

Bartók's finale expands the *mesto* so that it grows out of itself into the entire movement, rather than functioning as introduction. Melancholy has prevailed; profound sorrow emerges as the predominant mood of the piece. By placing this restrained slow movement at the end, Bartók leaves us with his own thoughtful introspection as our most enduring impression.

String Quartet No.13 in G Major, Op.106 Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

In certain respects, Dvořák's late works were retrospective. He was trained in the Germanic school and struggled, successfully, to develop a highly personal nationalistic style. During his final creative years, however, he was drawn to the programmatic tone poem style of Franz Liszt, which had found new energy in the more recent works of Richard Strauss. After a distinguished career with strong commitment to the forms of absolute music, Dvořák wrote five symphonic poems based on Bohemian legend.

Before turning to these late orchestral pieces, however, he made his musical farewell to absolute music with two string quartets, published as Opp.105 and 106. He began the A-flat major work in 1895 while in New York City, during the final month of his lengthy stay in the United States. He returned to Prague in late April 1895. Within a month, he was relaxing at his beloved country house, Vysoká. Enormously happy to be back in his homeland but exhausted from travel, Dvořák took an unprecedented seven months' leave from composing. That autumn, he resumed teaching at the Prague Conservatory, and soon took pen to music paper. In a fever of inspiration, he composed the G major quartet from 11 November to 9 December 1895, and finished the A-flat major work shortly afterward. Fritz Simrock published the pair in summer 1896. These final quartets are widely considered to be the crowning glories of Dvořák's chamber music.

The overall impression the G major quartet communicates is a marvelous sense of movement. Each player has singular importance in a constantly shifting landscape of textural variants and countermelodies. The quartet opens with more of a gesture than a theme: a rising sixth and a brief trill followed by a cascade of triplets. This is Bohemian birdsong, and a clear reflection of Dvořák's untethered joy at being home. The second theme is – remarkably – in B-flat major, a daring harmonic move that works beautifully. While embracing the disciplined craftsmanship of the Viennese classical tradition, Dvořák is clearly comfortable with diverging from expected norms.

The heartfelt and introspective slow movement has a hymn-like reverence reminiscent of the “Going Home” movement in the *New World* Symphony. In *dumka*-like style, Dvořák alternates between peaceful sections in major mode and passages of increased agitation in minor mode. The structure is free variations.

His scherzo, nominally in B minor, pulsates with the energy of the analogous movement in the *New World* Symphony, and continues the adventuresome modulations and extended chromaticism of the preceding movements. An interlude in A-flat major introduces polyrhythms, including duplets against a pulse in triple meter. The central trio, now in D major and a relaxed tempo, suggests more bird song.

A brief slow introduction opens the finale, before launching into a rumbustious Bohemian folk dance. The movement is in the home key of G major, but Dvořák spends a considerable amount of time in E-flat major. Here again, shifts between major and minor mode

cast occasional shadows. Triplet figures provide textural variety to the strong duple pulse. A mysterious, vaguely Arabian passage over a bass drone frames reminiscences of themes from the first movement. The coda is a frenetic, dizzying dash, bringing this monumental quartet to a convincing close.