



Elias String Quartet

Sara Bitlloch / *Violin*

Donald Grant / *Violin*

Simone van der Giessen / *Viola*

Marie Bitlloch / *Cello*

Sunday Afternoon, March 11, 2018 at 4:00

Rackham Auditorium

Ann Arbor

This afternoon's performance is supported by Joel Howell and Linda Samuelson.

Media partnership provided by WGTE 91.3 FM and WRCJ 90.9 FM.

The Elias String Quartet appears by arrangement with David Rowe Artists.

In consideration of the artists and the audience, please refrain from the use of electronic devices during the performance.

The photography, sound recording, or videotaping of this performance is prohibited.

PROGRAM

Franz Schubert

Quartettsatz in c minor, D. 703

Allegro assai

Antonín Dvořák

String Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 51

Allegro ma non troppo

Dumka: Andante con moto — Vivace

Romanze: Andante con moto

Finale: Allegro assai

Intermission

Schubert

String Quartet in d minor, D. 810

Allegro

Andante con moto: Variations

Scherzo: Allegro molto

Presto — Prestissimo

The Elias Quartet is grateful to welcome Simone van der Giessen as a temporary member of the Quartet while violist Martin Saving recovers from an injury which prevents him from participating in this tour.

QUARTETTSATZ IN C MINOR, D. 703 (QUARTET MOVEMENT) (1820)

Franz Schubert

Born January 31, 1797 in Himmelpfortgrund, near Vienna

Died November 19, 1828 in Vienna

UMS premiere: Budapest String Quartet; February 1941 in Hill Auditorium.

Snapshots of History...In 1820:

- Indiana University is founded
- Ampere discovers left-hand and right-hand rules of the magnetic field
- Washington Irving writes *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*

By the time he was 20, Schubert had written more than a dozen string quartets. In 1820, after a hiatus of several years, he wrote this unfinished work, which stands as the first string quartet of his maturity. He only completed the first movement; the second was barely started before Schubert abandoned the composition, for reasons unknown.

Having grown used to the “Allegro assai” as a string quartet in a single movement, we may feel that it is self-contained to the point of not even requiring a continuation. This sensation is reinforced by the unusual form of the piece: the tempestuous opening idea does not return at the beginning of the recapitulation as expected, but only at the very end, uniting the composition and functioning as a “curtain” rising and then falling. In the meantime, we hear melodies of unspeakable sweetness and many magical modulations, occasionally interrupted by agitated transitions. The *Quartettsatz* is one of Schubert’s “signature” pieces that summarizes the widely divergent aspects of his unique artistic personality.

STRING QUARTET IN E-FLAT MAJOR, OP. 51 (1879)

Antonín Dvořák

Born September 8, 1841 in Nelahozeves, Bohemia (now Czech Republic)

Died May 1, 1904 in Prague

UMS premiere: Detroit Philharmonic Club; May 1887, location unknown.

Snapshots of History...In 1879:

- The University Musical Society is founded in Ann Arbor
- Thomas Edison applies for the patent for the incandescent lightbulb
- The first female students are permitted to study at Oxford University in England

The present quartet is listed as No. 10 in Dvořák's catalog, but the earlier quartets have all remained rather little known, which almost makes it seem as if the mastery of Op. 51 had appeared overnight, with no preparation, in the composer's oeuvre. Indeed, here is a work from Dvořák's breakthrough years, from the time when his international reputation was growing apace, due in part to the resounding success of the *Slavonic Dances*. Dvořák as a Slavic composer was suddenly in high demand. Jean Becker, a German violinist living in Florence where he had founded the Florentine String Quartet, commissioned Dvořák to write a string quartet with the explicit stipulation that it had to be Slavonic in spirit.

Dvořák was of course happy to oblige, and the Quartet has all the requisite Bohemian-isms such as the *dumka* and the *furiant* in the slow movement. Yet it has to be stressed that the local color would not be nearly as effective as it is without Dvořák's sophisticated handling of harmony and counterpoint, which make the Quartet the masterpiece

it is. The opening "Allegro ma non troppo" is based on two themes that are close enough to preserve a unity of tone but diverse enough to avoid monotony. In the development section, both themes are memorably combined when the first melody is played "in slow motion" while a variant of the second is heard at the original speed. And that is only one of the myriad tricks Dvořák plays in this remarkable movement.

The second movement ("Andante con moto") proclaims its Slavic inspiration in its title "Dumka" — one of many instances where Dvořák alluded to this melancholy song type whose various forms are at home in several Slavic countries. The subtitle "Elegy" expresses the same idea in terms that would be more familiar to non-Slavic audiences. The plaintive minor-key melody, played in alternation by the first violin and the viola, gives way to a middle section in a fast tempo ("Vivace"), evoking the typical rhythm of the *furiant* dance (mixing "one-two-three one-two-three" with "one-two one-two one-two"). When the *dumka* returns,

its sad mood seems to rub off on the *furiant* as well, for the fast dance returns a second time in minor instead of major. Also, the tempo becomes gradually slower and slower until the final measures restore the “Vivace.”

The third-movement “Romanze” is based on a single, peaceful melody in B-flat Major that visits other keys, but for the most part projects a sense of stasis, a respite after two movements that were constantly on the move.

The last movement is an undisguised folk dance whose model was the *skočná* (leaping dance). Its engaging main theme is taken up later as the starting point for a brilliant *fugato*. The second theme is in a slightly slower tempo, contrasting with the *più allegro* (faster than Tempo I) of the Quartet’s final measures.

STRING QUARTET IN D MINOR, D. 810, “DEATH AND THE MAIDEN” (1824)

Schubert

UMS premiere: Detroit Philharmonic Club; June 1887, location unknown.

Snapshots of History...In 1824:

- Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony is first performed
- The tombs at Thebes are excavated in Egypt
- Lord Byron dies in Greece

In 1824, Schubert began what musicologist John Michael Gingrich, in an influential study, calls his “Beethoven project”: he “abandoned his hopes of making a living and a reputation by composing operas, and instead began to compose in earnest in the elevated instrumental genres in which Beethoven had made a reputation — the piano sonata, the string quartet, the piano trio, and the symphony.” It looks like Schubert consciously tried to compete with the older master, or at least to emulate “Beethoven’s success in selling his serious compositions to publishers for serious money, and [his] success in disseminating his published works to an international public.” Schubert’s ambitions were thwarted by his early death, but during the last four years of his life he produced a series of masterworks in the major Beethovenian genres that are in every way worthy of their model. Schubert, a member of the next generation, was able to continue Beethoven’s work like no other composer could.

The first great products of the “Beethoven project” were the *Octet in F Major* (which took its cue from Beethoven’s popular Septet and

expanded on it considerably), and the two String Quartets in a minor and d minor, written for the same Schuppanzigh Quartet that had made Beethoven’s quartets their specialty. These ambitious works were written at a time when Schubert suffered his first major bout of illness, as a result of the syphilis he had contracted the year before. It was in March 1824, the very month of the d-minor Quartet, that Schubert wrote his often-quoted letter to his friend, the painter Leopold Kupelwieser:

Imagine a man whose health will never be right again, and who is in sheer despair over this ever makes things worse and worse, instead of better; imagine a man, I say, whose most brilliant hopes have perished, to whom the felicity of love and friendship have nothing to offer but pain, at best, whom enthusiasm (at least of the stimulating kind) for all things beautiful threatens to forsake, and I ask you, is he not a miserable, unhappy being?

The slow movements of both the a-minor and the d-minor Quartets were based on themes from earlier works by Schubert: the entr’acte from the incidental music *Rosamunde*

and the song *Death and the Maiden*, respectively. In both works, these choices had a far-reaching impact on style and general mood. The a-minor Quartet is nostalgic and introspective in tone, reflecting the connection to Helmine von Chézy's romantic play — or rather what Schubert was able to bring out in what was, by all accounts, much less than a literary masterpiece. The d-minor work is tragic through and through, with *all four* movements in minor keys — a most unusual decision, prompted, no doubt, by Schubert's physical and emotional state at the time of writing. The macabre song clearly put its stamp on the entire Quartet.

Der Tod und das Mädchen (Death and the Maiden) is one of 12 Schubert songs written in 1816–17 on texts by Matthias Claudius (1740–1815), a German poet and essayist. In two strongly contrasted stanzas, we first hear the anguished plea of a young girl, followed by the eerie yet consoling voice of Death, assuring the girl that death is not punishment but gentle sleep. For his variation theme in the quartet, Schubert used the piano introduction to the song, in which the austere harmonies and rhythms of Death appear for the first time. Schubert had at first incorporated those harmonies and rhythms into the other movements of the Quartet as well, but during the composition process he made those connections less obvious. Still, each movement has its own relentlessly repeated rhythmic pattern; moreover, each of those patterns is extremely terse and “implacable” like death itself.

The first “Allegro” is built upon the contrast of a dramatic opening theme

and a contrasting lyrical melody. We hear many intriguing modulations and virtuosic fireworks as one of Schubert's most eventful sonata movements unfolds before our ears.

The theme of the second movement (variations on the song) contains some material that is not in the song but was included here to expand the introduction to the song into a complete, self-contained melodic statement. The first two of the five variations feature the first violin and the cello, respectively, in soloistic roles. In the third, the fundamental rhythmic pattern of the movement is presented at four times its original speed, changing the solemn song of death into a wild gallop. The fourth variation is similar to the first in that the first violin once more weaves virtuosic figurations around the melody, as played by the other instruments; yet the tonality is major, which makes all the emotional difference. The final variation begins *pianissimo*, works its way up to a furious *fortissimo* climax with rhythmic complexity reaching its highest level, only to fade back into *pianissimo* as the tonality unexpectedly changes back to major. The combination of the major mode with extremely soft volume creates a mysterious and transcendent effect at the end of the movement.

The third-movement “Scherzo” has a descending bass line long associated with Baroque laments; yet the strong rhythmic accents and the frequent chromaticism (use of half-steps not normally part of the scale) give it a distinctly “modern” sound. The trio, or middle section, switches to the major mode. Instead of repeating each of its halves literally, as tradition

would require, Schubert changes the instrumentation completely the second time around, and introduces elaborate flourishes for the first violin.

The finale is a breathtaking “Presto” based on the rhythm of the *tarantella* dance (which Schubert used in other finales as well, for instance in his *Piano Sonata in c minor*, dating from the last year of his life). As in the first movement, the rhythmic idea alternates with more melodic material as well as with a great deal of virtuoso writing. The “sweep” and a dynamic energy of the movement never let up until the very end, which — contrary to what happens in most classical finales in minor keys — does not modulate to the parallel major but remains unremittingly anchored in the tragic minor mode.

Program notes by Peter Laki.

UMS ARCHIVES

This afternoon's concert marks the **Elias String Quartet**'s second appearance under UMS auspices, following the Quartet's UMS debut in March 2014 in Rackham Auditorium. UMS welcomes violist **Simone van der Giessen** in her UMS debut this afternoon as temporary member of the Quartet during Martin Saving's recovery from an injury.

ARTISTS

The **Elias String Quartet** is internationally acclaimed as one of the leading ensembles of their generation. Known for their intense and vibrant performances, the Quartet has traveled the globe collaborating with some of the finest musicians and playing in the world's great halls.

In 2015, they completed their groundbreaking Beethoven Project: performing and recording the complete string quartets of Beethoven. Broadcast by BBC Radio 3 and performed in 11 major venues in the UK, the Quartet also recorded the cycle for the Wigmore Hall Live record label. Of six albums in total, the first was released in January 2015. The Quartet also took all-Beethoven programs to Carnegie Hall and San Francisco Performances. They have documented their journey on a dedicated website supported by the Borletti-Buitoni Trust: www.thebeethovenproject.com.

The Quartet was chosen to participate in BBC Radio 3's New Generation Artists' Scheme 2009–11 and is the recipient of a 2010 Borletti-Buitoni Award. They were awarded the 2010 *BBC Music Magazine's* "Newcomer of the Year" Award and were nominated in 2013 and 2014 for an RPS Award and in 2014 for an Australian Art Music Award. In 2013 they were awarded a Mentoring Scholarship from the Beethoven-Haus in Bonn. They received second prize and the Sidney Griller Prize at the ninth London String Quartet Competition.

They have performed alongside such artists as Leon Fleisher, Michael Collins, Christian Zacharias, Pascal Moragues, Ralph Kirshbaum, Dame Anne Murray, Joan Rogers, Mark Padmore, Michel Dalberto, Peter Cropper, Malin Broman, Simon Crawford-Phillips, Piers Lane, Ettore Causa, Anthony Marwood, Huw Watkins, Roderick Williams,

Allan Clayton, Melvyn Tan, and the Endellion, Vertavo, Navarra, Heath, Belcea, and Jerusalem quartets.

The Elias are passionate about new music and have premiered pieces by Sally Beamish, Colin Matthews, Matthew Hindson, and Timo Andres. They worked with Henri Dutilleux on his string quartet *Ainsi la Nuit* and recently recorded Huw Watkin's *In My Craft or Sullen Art* with Mark Padmore for the NMC label. The Quartet is steadily building a recording catalogue that has been met with widespread critical acclaim. Alongside three releases on the Wigmore Live label, they have released discs of Mendelssohn and Britten. They have also released a disc of French harp music with harpist Sandrine Chatron for the French label Ambroisie, Goehr's *Piano Quintet* with Daniel Becker for Meridian Records, and most recently, Schumann and Dvořák Piano Quintets with Jonathan Biss.

The Quartet takes their name from Mendelssohn's oratorio, *Elijah*, of which Elias is the German form. They formed at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester where they worked closely with the late Dr. Christopher Rowland and later became junior fellows and associate quartet at the College. They also spent a year studying at the Hochschule in Cologne with the Alban Berg String Quartet. Other mentors in the Quartet's studies include Peter Cropper, Hugh Maguire, György Kurtág, Gábor Takács-Nagy, and Rainer Schmidt. For four years, they were resident string quartet at Sheffield's "Music in the Round" as part of Ensemble 360, taking over from the Lindsay Quartet. The Elias Quartet is grateful to welcome Simone van der Giessen as a temporary member of the Quartet while violist Martin Saving recovers from an injury which prevents him from participating in this tour.

THIS AFTERNOON'S VICTORS FOR UMS:



Joel Howell and Linda Samuelson

Supporters of this afternoon's performance by the Elias String Quartet.

MAY WE ALSO RECOMMEND...

- 4/8 Artemis Quartet
- 4/15 Apollo's Fire: Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*
- 4/22 Murray Perahia

Tickets available at www.ums.org.

ON THE EDUCATION HORIZON...

- 3/19 FRAME: A Salon Series on Visual Art, Performance, and Identity
(202 S. Thayer Street Building, Atrium, 7:00 pm)
- 3/20 Imagining in the Archive: Artist Interview with Jillian Walker and
Anita Gonzalez
(202 S. Thayer Street Building, 4:00 pm)
*Part of the 2017–18 UMS Education and Community Engagement
Research Residency*
- 3/23 *Tignon*: Work-in-Progress Reading
(Newman Studio, Walgreen Drama Center, 1226 Murfin Avenue,
4:00 pm)
*Part of the 2017–18 UMS Education and Community Engagement
Research Residency*

Educational events are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted.