

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

ARTARIA STRING QUARTET

April 2023

Dorothy Rudd Moore (1940-2022)

Modes for String Quartet

Moderato

Adagio

Allegro

Composed: 1968

Approximate duration: 8 minutes



The Artaria String Quartet opens this program with what may be a first hearing for many audience members of music by American composer and educator Dorothy Rudd Moore. The recently deceased Moore was born in New Castle, Delaware. She graduated from Howard University in 1963 and continued her studies with Nadia Boulanger in Paris in 1963 and with Chou Wen-Chung in New York in 1965. She taught at the Harlem School of the Arts, New York University, and Bronx Community College. In 1969, Moore and her conductor husband, Kermit Moore, were almost prevented from performing at the Damrosch Memorial Concert because of an objection by administrators on having two Black musicians on the program. A recipient of numerous fellowships and grants, Dorothy Rudd Moore became a co-founder of the Society of Black Composers in New York. In 1985, the world premiere of her opera, *Frederick Douglas*, took place in New York City.

To begin, the definition of the term “modes” is a set of musical notes forming a scale from which melodies and harmonies are constructed. That definition, however, hardly fulfills the musical excellence of Moore’s *Modes for String Quartet*. In three closely connected sections, the work has a dark opening from the cello soon joined by other members of the quartet. While the music brightens from time to time, a serious mood, with virtuosic challenges for all members of the quartet, continues throughout this remarkable work.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

String Quartet in C Minor, Op. 51, No. 1

Allegro

Romanze: Poco adagio

Allegretto molto moderato e comodo; Un poco più animato

Allegro

Composed: 1865-1873

Approximate duration: 30 minutes



Op. 51, No. 1 was Brahms’ first string quartet, published in 1873 after twenty years of revision. Structurally it is a model of economy and purity although the total musical effect is grand scale, with all the familiar hallmarks of Brahms: heroic themes, complex rhythmic textures, and rich harmonies. In all of this is the amazing reconciliation between Classicism and Romanticism with which Brahms so struggled. Rich with the imprints of his personal statement, the work is still traditional in form and free of extra-musical associations. While Brahms exemplifies the nineteenth century Romantic, so does he lean heavily on music of the past, a reflection of his belief that the two most important events of his life were the unification of Germany by Bismarck and the first publication of the collected works of Bach. No mere expression of “feeling,” the work is profound, much in the spirit of Beethoven’s Razumovsky Quartets, for Brahms knew that he was musical heir to Beethoven. “You do not know what it is like,” Brahms wrote, “hearing his footsteps constantly behind me.”

While Classical sonata form and counterpoint govern the C Minor String Quartet as indicated in the first movement *Allegro*, these elements are veiled behind Brahms’s Romanticism and behind what Schoenberg would later define as Brahms’s use of the developing variation. In other words, the total effect of the movement is one organic whole rather than the distinct sections we associate with traditional Classical form. Yet the form is there, and, as usual, we run the risk of oxymorons in describing Brahms. An intense opening quickly pulls back as if he wanted to avoid revealing too much too soon. Clearly evident is the use of complex counterpoint, dramatic pauses, and forceful repeated note for which Brahms has no fear in this movement. Notable, too, is a balance among the instruments with the upper and lower strings each having their lyrical moments.

The second movement *Romanze*, as suggested by its tempo marking, is touched with the sadness, longing, and

disappointment that marked Brahms's own life. Here we also have a repeated use of the *appoggiatura* or two-note "sigh" so often heard in Brahms's music. The cello offers a gently strumming to the closing of this movement that carries with it a certain fragility we don't often associate with Brahms.

For Brahms, an *allegretto*, is often closer to an *adagio*—as suggested by the third movement. Jokes have been made about Brahms's failure at merriment, but his exquisite use of counterpoint in this movement, however, is no laughing matter. It is Bach-like in its effectiveness despite its Romantic overlay. Things brighten in the *poco più animato* section and become almost courtly and gay for a moment before a return to the more solemn mood of the opening.

The strong three-note opening of the final *Allegro* leads to the rhythmic, harmonic, and structural complexity of the powerful movement. Complexity seems to win over power as Brahms avoids a traditional rousing conclusion until a brief final *fortissimo* statement. In true Brahmsian string quartet fashion, he remains elusive to the end.

The C Minor String Quartet was composed between 1865 and 1873 and received its first performance in Vienna on December 1, 1873. It was dedicated to Brahms's friend and confidante, Theodor Billroth, a well-known physician and amateur musician.

Pavel Haas (1899-1944)

String Quartet No. 2, "Monkey Mountains"

Landscape

Coach, Coachman and Horse

The Moon and I

Wild Night

Composed: 1925

Approximate duration: 35 minutes



Pavel Haas was one of several Czech composers sent by the Nazis to Theresienstadt in 1941 and later to his death at Auschwitz. A Nazi propaganda film intended to convince the world of positive treatment of prisoners featured Haas conducting one of his works performed by prisoners. He was a gifted student of Leoš Janáček and shared with that composer an influence of Moravian folk music but, like Janáček, was definitely a modernist in his music, even siding with the likes of Stravinsky.

Haas' second string quartet, "Monkey Mountains," was composed in 1925 after his studies with Janáček. The unusual title of the work is a reference to a region in the Moravian Highlands popular with tourists. The work was premiered in Brno in 1926 but was not well received due to its modernity and Haas's adding a percussionist to the performance. Obviously, we look differently on the brilliant work today as it reveals the transition from 19th century Romanticism to 20th century Modernism.

Despite the descriptive names assigned to each of the four movements, they also bear traditional tempo markings. The brilliant opening of the first movement (Landscape), marked *Andante*, increases in intensity without ever losing its certain melodic quality. The second movement (Coach, Coachman, and Horse) is again marked *Andante* (moderately slow) but with a whole new treatment that includes special musical demands on the strings such as plucking and sliding. Within the movement, there are numerous tempo changes despite its single *Andante* marking. A sense of tragedy persists in the third movement *Largo e misterioso* despite its provocative title (The Moon and I). A bit of gaiety intrudes in the final movement (Wild Night) before a return to the deeply serious and tragically melodic quality and a final furious moment.

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