

ARTARIA STRING QUARTET

with Gloriana Wolf, Piano

Program I: September 2022

String Quartet in G Minor, L. 85, Op. 10

Animé et très décidé

Assez vif et bien rythmé

Andantino, doucement expressif

Très modéré: Très mouvementé

Claude Debussy
(1862-1918)

Composed: 1892-93

Approximate duration: 25 minutes



In the 2018-19 season the musical world honored the 100th anniversary of the death of Claude Debussy, who established a new direction in music which put Impressionism on the musical map. Despite that association with the famous movement in painting, it is important to note that Debussy saw himself more as Symbolist than Impressionist and was as much influenced by the Symbolist poets as Impressionist painters. The significant point remains, however, that Debussy represented a daring departure. “Any sounds in any combination and in any succession are henceforth free to be used in a musical continuity,” he ruled. Yet this statement should not lead us to think that Debussy lacked form in his composition. Quite to the contrary, his music reflects a thorough understanding of Classical form even if its actual sound suggests new concepts. While most of musical Europe was dividing its loyalties between Brahms and Wagner and

focusing attention on the emergence of the Second Viennese School, Debussy, along with Fauré and Ravel, took an entirely new direction in French music that transcended those situations. While we assign the name “Impressionism” to that direction, we should understand that the term is a reference to a new sense of harmony and color in music rather than a total disregard of Classical form. Nor is Impressionism in music one and the same idea as it is in painting. If we are having a hard time defining it in regard to Debussy, it is because the composer himself eluded classification with the exception that he wished to be understood as French. That, of course, introduces the question of national identity in music, another elusive subject.

Debussy’s G Minor Quartet represents a daring departure from standard string quartet writing. Pierre Boulez speaks of Debussy as freeing the string quartet from “rigid structure, frozen rhetoric, and rigid aesthetics.” Melody becomes secondary to tone colors, and constantly shifting harmonies break all the rules. Because of this, the work stood as a model for 20th century quartet composers, namely Webern and Bartók.

Any thoughts of watery Impressionism are dispelled in the first movement with its ferocious opening statement, the motto for the entire quartet. Debussy offers it in many guises resulting in great harmonic and melodic richness. Most noticeable in this movement is the repeated pattern of rising tension and release, each time more dramatic before the climactic end.

In the starkly contrasting second movement, the viola presents an ostinato version of the motto while the other instruments give a brilliant *pizzicato* (plucking) show. The cello then offers accompaniment to the first violin’s further explorations of the motto. All ends quietly.

In the elegiac third movement, one is reminded of Debussy’s statement in an 1894 letter to Chausson: “The color of my soul is iron-gray, and sad bats wheel about the steeple of my dreams.” The only consolations to sadness in this movement are beauty and a passionate tenderness. Both the viola and cello offer exquisite solos but at no cost to the collaborative quality of the movement with its dramatic unison passages. This movement, too, ends quietly after a return to the opening melody.

The ominous last movement brightens momentarily but grows dark again. The motto reappears in fugue form. New themes are developed and then offered as accompaniment for the motto. Once again stark unison playing is contrasted against richly textured passages. An elaborate exploration leads to a breathtaking conclusion.

The work was premiered by the Ysaÿe Quartet in Paris on December 29, 1893.

Cypresses (Echo of Songs) B. 152

Antonín Dvořák

(1841-1904)

Já vim, že vsladké naději (I know that in my love there is hope): Moderato

V tak mnohém srdci mrtvo jest (The dead heart awakes again): Allegro ma non troppo

Ó duše drahá jedinká (My dearest one): Moderato

And krajem vévodi lehký spánek (Maydawn over the landscape): Allegro scherzando

Composed: 1887

Approximate duration: 12 minutes



Dvořák's gift for lyricism is much reflected in his *Cypresses* of 1887, originally a setting of eighteen songs on poems by Moravian poet, playwright, and novelist Gustav Pflieger Moravský (1833-1875). The poems are a twelve-piece ode to unrequited love which, in Dvořák's hands, becomes an exquisite expression of his gift for melody. The later string quartet version of twelve of the songs adds his talents for instrumental writing to his lyrical gifts. The combination is irresistibly beautiful. Apparently, the works were inspired by Dvořák's unreturned love for his

piano student Josephina Čermáková, interestingly, the sister of the woman he would marry. Scholarly debate persists today on whether or not Dvořák ever got over his love for Josephina. At her death many years later, Dvořák added a quotation from the songs to the last movement of his famous B Minor Cello Concerto.

The title of each song is reflected in its musical treatment. Thus we have the lovely lyricism with an edge of sadness and tension that is expressed in "I Know That On My Love There is Hope." The minor key and repeated notes of "The Dead Heart Awakes Again" suggests a dark tension, but here death is ultimately sweet. The moving "My Dearest One" is especially effective in its simplicity and in the way Dvořák translates vocal writing for the string quartet. Each instrument has its chance to sing. The brief "Maydawn Over the Landscape" is the liveliest of this set suggesting a folk dance but still with a strong lyrical sense.

Piano Quintet in A Minor

Allegro non troppo

Andante con moto

Juba: Allegro

Scherzo: Allegro

Florence Price

(1887-1953)

Composed: 1936

Approximate duration: 30 minutes



Florence Price's music suffered an unwarranted neglect until 2001 when the Women's Philharmonic created an album of her music. In 2018, G. Schirmer announced that it had acquired the exclusive worldwide rights to her complete catalogue of compositions, and in 2009, a large collection of her works was found in an abandoned house in St. Anne, Illinois. We are fortunate now to hear her Piano Quintet performed by the Artaria String Quartet joined by Glorianna Wolf.

Price was born in Little Rock, Arkansas into a mixed-race family and later moved to Atlanta, Georgia where, despite the racial issues of that time, the family was well respected within its community. Her father was the only African American dentist in the city, and her mother was an important music teacher who gave Florence her earliest training. She published her first composition at the age of eleven. She later attended the New England Conservatory of Music where she studied with George Chadwick and Frederick Converse. After several racial incidents, she moved with her family to Chicago where she studied at the Chicago Musical College, Chicago Teachers College, University of Chicago, and the American Conservatory of Music. In Chicago, she connected with such notables as writer Langston Hughes and contralto Marian Anderson. In 1933 Price's E Minor Symphony was performed by the Chicago Symphony, the first piece by an African American woman to be played by a major orchestra. Many awards would follow including a recent one in 2021 when Price was the BBC Radio 3 Composer of the Week. Her many works include four symphonies, a piano concerto, two

violin concertos, numerous choral and piano works, and some twelve chamber music pieces including the Piano Quintet in A Minor that we hear on this program.

The glorious first movement, *Allegro non troppo*, offers a strong opening both in terms of classical music and the suggestion of a folk music quality associated with Florence Price. The movement brings particularly sweeping moments for the piano that are also for the other instruments including a wonderful violin solo. The approximately fourteen minutes of this movement make it the longest of the four.

The second movement, *Andante con moto*, opens mournfully but continues with great warmth by a highly romantic part given to the piano but supported in that spirit by the strings. The *con moto* (with motion) as suggested in the movement marking brings animation and energy, again with much feeling and a hint of folk music.

The influence of folk music can once again be noted in the joyful and animated third movement *Juba*. The term “Juba” refers to a dance originating among plantation slaves in the southern US, featuring rhythmic handclapping and slapping of the thighs. One might even hear a bit of ragtime in this movement.

The last movement *Scherzo*, the briefest of the four, gives us a strong and once again joyful conclusion to this remarkable work by Florence Price, whose music has been compared to Dvořák’s but remains very much her own.

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