

Artaria

String Quartet

Ray Shows, violin Nancy Oliveros, violin Annalee Wolf, viola Patty Ryan, cello

Now in its third decade of compelling performances and mentoring of young string players, the Artaria String Quartet was lauded by Rob Hubbard of the St. Paul Pioneer Press -- "Artaria Quartet is likely to give eloquent voice to whatever work it tackles." Artaria has served as MPR Artists-in-Residence and was featured on Twin Cities Public Television as part of the MN-Original Television series. The quartet has appeared at major summer festivals including the Banff Centre in Canada, Festival de L'Epau in France, and the Tanglewood Music Center in Lenox, Massachusetts. Artaria is the recipient of a highly coveted McKnight Fellowship for Performing Musicians and has received Teaching Artist grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Chamber Music America, Midori's Partners in Performance, and the Heartland Fund for performance and educational outreach. They have also been awarded numerous State Arts Board grants for creative educational programming across Minnesota. Members of the quartet are founders and directors of the Artaria Chamber Music School, a weekly chamber music program for young Minnesota string players, Stringwood, a two-week summer chamber music festival held in Lanesboro, MN each summer, and the Saint Paul String Quartet Competition, an annual national event that showcases America's finest young high school and college string quartets in the country.

PROGRAM

Florence Price (1897-1953) – Five Folksongs in Counterpoint (1951)

III. Drink to me only with Thine eyes. Andante cantabile
IV. Shortnin' Bread. Allegro

Florence Price, a native of Little Rock, Arkansas, was a pioneer black American composer who distinguished herself early on. Most notably, she is remembered as the first black American woman to garner success as a composer of symphonic music. Her first symphony is perhaps her best-known work. Winner of a national prize, it was given its première in 1933 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—a social and cultural milestone in this country at that time.

At a young age she journeyed north to Boston to study at the New England Conservatory and returned to Arkansas and Georgia to teach at various small black colleges. After marriage she and her husband left a racially troubled Arkansas in 1927 for Chicago and her further study at the American Conservatory of Music. Her career blossomed, and recognition for her art led to the afore-mentioned symphony in 1931, followed by two more symphonies, concertos, and other works for orchestra. She composed in a variety of other genres: chamber works, piano music, and vocal compositions—over three hundred in all! Her songs and arrangements of spirituals were perhaps her most performed compositions. But, sadly, little of her oeuvre has been published; with her increasing popularity today, that very well may change.

She apparently wrote two compositions for string quartet, both dated around 1950, although she may have begun one of them much earlier. They had similar titles—and underwent somewhat confusing title changes, as well—and both featured folksongs. Our concert features the quartet originally entitled “Negro Folksongs in Counterpoint;” after the addition of two broadly American folksongs to the original three, she changed the title to simply “Five Folksongs in Counterpoint.” — William E. Runyan

Josef Haydn (1732-1809) – String Quartet in C op. 54 No. 2 (1788)

Vivace
Adagio
Menuetto – Trio
Finale: Adagio – Presto – Adagio

The three Op 54 quartets are the first of the 12 quartets that Haydn wrote for the Hungarian violinist Johann Tost. From 1783 to 1788 Tost played in the Esterházy orchestra of which Haydn was music director. When Tost left Esterházy in 1788 to freelance in Paris, Haydn entrusted 6 quartets to him with a view to finding a publisher. Tost was successful, and they were published in Paris as Op 54 & 55. This C major quartet is a masterpiece, the best of the bunch, profound and original, producing fire and eloquence from Tost's Hungarian-flavored virtuosity. The opening 6 bars set the scene with a bold statement, but where a lesser composer might have ended the opening phrase on the F at the beginning of bar 5 (*), Haydn adds, piano, an interrogatory two notes: “Really?”. There is a reflective pause, followed by a repeat of the statement and question before Haydn shifts into a remote key and we stride off into the rest of the movement.

This questioning forms the heart of the extraordinary slow movement. It starts with a solemn chorale-like 8-bar phrase in the lower three parts. The motif repeats almost unchanged whilst Tost's Hungarian violin weaves a searching, improvisatory magic. The uncertainty is unresolved, with the violin inserting anguished discords just before the end.

The mood lightens in the directly following Menuetto, which just before its end echoes the “Really?” motif, this time in rising chromatic quavers. The doubts are roundly dismissed but immediately reappear more forcefully in the minor key Trio, again with jabbing anguished discords. The Finale is one of Haydn's most original: a long Adagio, interrupted by a short, skittish Presto, and ending with more of the Adagio. The rising question opens the movement, but after a few bars consideration, Haydn gives us one of his most sublime passages: the cello plays simple, long, slow, rising arpeggios while the violin weaves a very different magic from that of the slow movement, resolving all doubts. The brilliant Presto acts as a comic foil, but the returning Adagio restores calm content. — Chris Darwin

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) – String Quartet No.5, BB110 Sz.102 (1934)

Allegro

Adagio Molto

Scherzo – Alla bulgarese

Andante

Finale – Allegro vivace

Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge inherited substantial wealth from her Chicago-based wholesale-dealer father. She used it most generously and effectively to encourage the writing and performing of chamber music: auditoriums in Washington and New Haven, the Coolidge medal for services to chamber music and the Tanglewood Festival all sprang from her support, along with directly commissioned new works. Bridge, Britten, Poulenc, Prokofiev, Ravel, Schoenberg, Stravinsky all received commissions, as indeed did Bartók. He had been recommended to her by the Pro Arte Quartet, themselves supported by Coolidge. Bartók's Fifth String Quartet was the result, composed in just one month in 1934 and premiered in the Coolidge Auditorium in April 1935. Bartók had toured the States on a two-month concert tour in the winter of 1928-29, and finally emigrated there with his wife in 1940.

1934 saw the start of a new phase of Bartók's life. Dohnányi's appointment to be head of the Budapest Academy of Music in the summer of 1934 allowed Bartók to realize a long held ambition to transfer to a position in ethnomusicology in the Academy of Sciences. The post allowed him to devote himself to a 'complete, rigorously critical and exact publication' of Hungarian folk music, in collaboration with Kodály, with whom he had collected about 14,000 items. Release from his everyday music teaching led to a golden period of composition. Four major chamber works were written between 1934-39: the last two string quartets (nos 5 & 6), the Sonata for two pianos and percussion, and Contrasts for clarinet, violin and piano. His folk-music collecting provides rhythmic and melodic material for the fifth quartet. For example, the third movement has one Bulgarian time signature - 9/8 grouped as (4+2+3) - for the Scherzo, and another - 10/8 grouped as (3+2+2+3) - for the Trio.

The fifth quartet, though chromatic, has a melodic and tonal flavor that comes from Bartók's 'melodic new chromaticism'. With this, as reported by Yehudi Menuhin, Bartók 'wanted to show Schoenberg that one can use all 12 tones and still remain tonal'. By interleaving the notes from two different modes (the whole tone Lydian mode and the Phrygian) he could use all 12 tones but preserve a common base.

Bartók was also fascinated by different structural symmetries. At the largest scale the Fifth Quartet is an arch shape, centered around a Scherzo & Trio. But within this arch is a wealth of different structures. For instance, the first movement is itself an arch: the different sections of the exposition are played in the recapitulation in reverse order, and also inverted in pitch. The last movement is also arch-like: ABCB'A' plus a final coda. Between these movements are two slow movements in Bartók's 'night-music' style. In addition, the keys of the different sections progress through a whole-tone scale: the exposition is in B, C and D; the development is in E; and the recapitulation is in F#, \flat A and B. The whole tone scale contains the tritone, which is a particularly important $\flat \flat$ interval in this quartet: it divides the octave symmetrically into two equal halves.

Despite all these erudite constructions, the work is a captivating emotional roller-coaster. You never know what is coming next. For example (spoiler alert!), just before the end of the last movement there is a bizarre episode: marked Allegretto, con indifferenza (with indifference). The second violin plays a simple rising tune (illustrated) whose banality is emphasized by the barrel organ style accompaniment. No one quite knows who is the target of its unexpected irony. The very definite ending (illustrated) gives a final symmetric twist, with the contrary-motion scales inverting one another. And all this in just a month!

— Chris Darwin