Telegraph Quartet

Eric Chin, violin
Joseph Maile, violin
Pei-Ling Lin, viola
Jeremiah Shaw, cello

String Quartet in F Major, op. 77, no. 2 (1799)  
I. Allegro moderato  
II. Menuet: Presto—Trio  
III. Andante  
IV. Finale: Vivace assai  

String Quartet, op. 3 (1910)  
Alban Berg (1885-1935)

INTERMISSION

String Quartet no. 2 in C Major, op. 36 (1945)  
I. Allegro calmo senza rigore  
II. Vivace  
III. Chacony: Sostenuto  

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

This performance is supported in part by gifts from the Chachra-Klinedinst family and Intimate Voices.
Program Notes

Franz Josef Haydn (1732-1809)
String Quartet in F Major, op. 77, no. 2 (1799)
   I. Allegro Moderato
   II. Menuet: Presto—Trio
   III. Andante
   IV. Finale: Vivace assai

The year of 1799 found our composer Haydn in a late bloom of continued creative vigor. Having survived to the venerable age of 66, Haydn had worked for two generations of Esterhazy princes, outlived his younger contemporary and dear friend Mozart, and was enjoying renewed and surprising popularity on the international stage with tours to London, not to mention having over 100 symphonies and more than 50 string quartets under his belt. One would think that after such a career, he could hang up his coat knowing his legacy would faithfully stand the test of time. But, no, unlike many artists through the ages whose light burned brightly but quickly, the slow and strong burn of Haydn’s creative genius continued its intensity, if not as prolifically, then with an even richer resplendence.

The last period of his life, after his return from London to Vienna in 1796, would see the birth of two oratorios—the lofty religious masterpieces The Creation and The Seasons—a choral version of The Seven Last Words of Christ, multiple masses, a complete set of six string quartets op. 76, and finally two quartets published as op. 77. Sadly, where the creative spirit was willing, the actual flesh was weaker than expected and his intention to write six quartets, dedicated to a Prince Lobkowitz, only resulted in two complete works and two movements for a third quartet, later published as op. 103. While enervation is the most plausible reason for this, it is speculated that another factor may have contributed to Haydn’s incomplete set: the meteoric rise of his erstwhile pupil, Beethoven. Commissioned after Haydn’s set but also in 1799 by the same Prince Lobkowitz, Beethoven’s op. 18 quartets would be that composer’s fierce and first public crack at the string quartet form, which Haydn had all but invented and certainly reinvented over his career. Perhaps Haydn no longer had the energy to compete with his contentious student, who he still highly regarded and supported—at least not in the way he had done so more congenially with Mozart in the past, thinking it better to leave further stones unturned rather than court comparison. Both composers, if grudgingly, still have much to owe one another: Beethoven’s incipient but apparent genius surely stirred Haydn’s creative coals and Haydn’s interest in developing small musical ideas and exploration of distant harmonic relationships clearly launched Beethoven on his journey.

Unfulfilled resolutions notwithstanding, the two op. 77 quartets have a freshness that is in the adventurous spirit of their undertaking, yet tempered by the weight and richness of experience. Haydn is looking forward, not back, with these works, further exploring the possibilities of dialogue among the four not-quite-equal voices of the quartet. The mellower key of F Major and the noble tempo marking Allegro moderato specifically give the op. 77, no. 2 quartet more generosity of spirit than its more jocular counterpart, op. 77, no. 1. This self-assured first movement gives way to a much more energetic Menuet, which very quickly plays around with our expectation of a downbeat (where and when our dance steps should land), even resulting in an argument and ensuing confusion between the upper and lower strings. Sandwiched in the middle is a hushed and wondrous Trio, set in the muted and distant key of D-flat Major. The spiritual center of the work is found in the third movement Andante, which returns to the nobility of the first but manifested in a quiet confidence in the rose-tinted key of D Major. This movement comes the closest to looking nostalgically back on a life well spent writing string quartets and savored through a simple tune in the first violin, with lone cello accompaniment. This tune makes its way through the second violin and then cello, while the first violin daydreams improvisations above, only to be prodded by its companions, at first gently and then with glorious insistence, to return to one final pianissimo memory of that tune. And what Haydn quartet would be complete without a rollicking finale with equal parts cheek and bravura, accompanied by the goodnatured goading of the first violin by its compatriots along the way?

Program note by Joseph Maile
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Alban Berg (1885-1935)
String Quartet, op. 3 (1910)

His String Quartet, op. 3, written in the spring of 1910, was the last work that Berg produced as a student; its brilliant construction and remarkable expressive power make it one of the most striking works of that period. Though the quartet nominally consists of two movements, which can be loosely regarded as stemming from sonata and rondo forms, it actually seems more like an extended single movement whose second section continues the argument begun in the first. In the absence of the old tonal functions of sonata form, Berg employs small motives, or melodic and rhythmic patterns, that pervade the work and provide points of reference; the two movements share many such thematic connections. The slow, or Langsam, first movement opens with a jagged, impetuous six-note motive launched in the second violin and viola; the first violin enters with a more lyrical, introspective theme. These ideas will generate the rigorous writing that follows, though a new march-like figure appears in the recapitulation and coda. Dynamic extremes and a heightened degree of expression characterize the movement, which ends on an attenuated pianississimo with a reminiscence of the opening. The second-movement rondo presents a bold gesture over pizzicato punctuations; this will return in recognizable reprises, but always vividly transformed. In a gesture of unity and reconciliation, the opening theme of the quartet returns at its end. Berg’s writing for the quartet medium proves to be imaginatively idiomatic, and the quartet’s emotional language is both passionate and full of drama.

Kathryn L. Libin © 2020
Benjamin Britten, widely regarded as the most important and versatile British composer of the 20th century, is probably best known for his outstanding gifts as a composer for voices; his operas, his magnificent choral works, his sensitive text-setting, all underline his attachment to English poetry and to the voices that bring it to life. But Britten also wrote a substantial body of instrumental music, including many distinguished chamber works. As a fine player of viola and piano himself, Britten frequently took part in performances of chamber music and understood its intimacy and its sense of interaction, of conversation. Britten grew up in the middle class seaside community of Lowestoft, where his father was a dentist and his mother a singer and pianist who supervised the early training of her precocious son. Britten was already a prolific composer in his teens, and lessons with Frank Bridge brought structure and technical skill to his efforts before he entered the Royal Academy of Music. After his graduation in 1932 he got a job writing music for film and theatre that would eventually lead to a long and productive association with the BBC. In 1939 he went to America, but returned after three years and spent the war-time period offering concerts and other projects to support public life and help build morale.

His String Quartet no. 2, in C Major, dates from 1945. Britten had achieved a striking success in June of that year with the debut of his new opera, Peter Grimes, and turned to the less grueling task of composing music to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Henry Purcell's death. These Purcell-inspired works included the Holy Sonnets of John Donne and The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra, as well as the string quartet, which was commissioned by philanthropist and arts patron Mary Behrend. It received its premiere at the Wigmore Hall in London on November 21, 1945 (the exact date of Purcell's death in 1695), by the Zorian Quartet. The first movement recalls the quartets of Haydn in its use of a single motive to generate three closely related themes, all of which open with a rising 10th interval; these are thoroughly explored in a lengthy exposition, and in the terse recapitulation all three phrases are played simultaneously. Critic Hans Keller believed this opening movement to be Britten’s “most deliberate masterpiece.” That Britten himself regarded it highly may be read in a letter he wrote to Behrend, stating “to my mind it is the greatest advance I have yet made.” The central scherzo, described by a contemporary critic as “uncanny,” is played entirely with muted strings and provides a sinister C-minor contrast to the outer movements. The final Chacony, Purcell’s name for the chaconne form, pays explicit homage to the master of English ground-bass composition. A chaconne typically unfolds continuing variations over a repeating bass, thus building a repetitive chordal structure. A traditional chaconne could turn out to be quite lengthy, depending on a composer’s inventiveness, and Britten’s is no exception; it is longer than the two other movements combined. Britten’s nine-bar theme, with broad sustained tones that are initially presented in unison, generates a series of 21 variations, which he separates into four main sections. He pointed out that “the sections may be said to review the theme from a) harmonic, b) rhythmic, c) melodic, and d) formal aspects.” The first three sections, each containing six variations, are articulated by solo cadenzas for cello, viola, and first violin. After the violin cadenza, the last three variations build toward a powerful, deeply affirming climax.

Kathryn L. Libin © 2020
Biography

The Telegraph Quartet (Eric Chin and Joseph Maile, violins; Pei-Ling Lin, viola; and Jeremiah Shaw, cello) formed in 2013 with an equal passion for the standard chamber music repertoire and contemporary, non-standard works alike. Described by the San Francisco Chronicle as “…an incredibly valuable addition to the cultural landscape” and “powerfully adept... with a combination of brilliance and subtlety,” the Telegraph Quartet was awarded the prestigious 2016 Walter W. Naumburg Chamber Music Award and the Grand Prize at the 2014 Fischoff Chamber Music Competition. The quartet has performed in concert halls, music festivals, and academic institutions across the United States and abroad, including New York City’s Carnegie Hall, San Francisco’s Herbst Theatre, the San Francisco Conservatory of Music’s Chamber Masters Series, and at festivals including the Chautauqua Institute, Kneisel Hall Chamber Music Festival, and the Emilia Romagna Festival. The quartet is currently on the chamber music faculty at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music as the Quartet-in-Residence.

Notable collaborations include projects with pianists Leon Fleisher and Simone Dinnerstein; cellists Norman Fischer and Bonnie Hampton; violinist Ian Swensen; and the Henschel Quartett. A fervent champion of 20th- and 21st-century repertoire, the Telegraph Quartet co-commissioned John Harbison’s String Quartet, no. 6, and gave its West Coast premiere in the fall of 2017 on San Francisco State University’s Morrison Artists Series. The Telegraph Quartet premiered Richard Festinger’s third string quartet, Icarus in Flight, a musical representation of climate change data from the year 1880 to projected simulations of 2080. The quartet gave the world premiere of Robert Sirota’s String Quartet, no. 3, Wave upon Wave, at Weill Recital Hall for its Carnegie Hall debut in 2018, sponsored by the Naumburg Foundation. In spring 2020 the quartet will premiere a new work with soprano Abigail Fischer by composer Robert Sirota and librettist Stevan Cavalier, commissioned by Sierra Chamber Music Society.

In 2018 the quartet released its debut album, Into the Light, featuring works by Anton Webern, Benjamin Britten, and Leon Kirchner, on the Centaur label. The San Francisco Chronicle praised the album, saying, “Just five years after forming, the Bay Area’s Telegraph Quartet has established itself as an ensemble of serious depth and versatility, and the group’s terrific debut recording only serves to reinforce that judgment.” AllMusic acclaimed, “An impressive beginning for an adventurous group, this 2018 release puts the Telegraph Quartet on the map.”

Beyond the concert stage, the Telegraph Quartet seeks to spread its music through education and audience engagement. In the fall of 2017 the quartet traveled to communities and schools in Maine with Yellow Barn’s Music Haul, a mobile performance stage that brings music outside of the concert hall to communities across the U.S. The quartet has given master classes at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music Collegiate and Pre-College Divisions, through the Morrison Artist Series at San Francisco State University, and abroad at the Taipei National University of the Arts, National Taiwan Normal University, and in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

Highlights of Telegraph Quartet’s 2019-2020 season include the group’s debut on the Lincoln Center Great Performers series, a concert with acclaimed composer-vocalist Theo Bleckmann at San Francisco Performances, and performances at Gretta Music, Friends of Chamber Music, Morris Museum, Mill Valley Chamber Music Society, Chamber Music Houston, Chamber Music Society of Utica, Rossmoor Chamber Music Society, Music at Oakmont, Moss Arts Center at Virginia Tech, and Chamber Music San Francisco.

While the Telegraph Quartet is indebted to numerous mentors and teachers, the group’s primary musical guidance and support has come from Mark Sokol, Bonnie Hampton, and Ian Swensen at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. The Telegraph Quartet is based in the San Francisco Bay Area.

For more information, please visit telegraphquartet.com.
Go Deeper

Benjamin Britten composed String Quartet no. 2 in C Major, op. 36 (1945)—which concludes tonight’s program—to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the death of English composer Henry Purcell. What similarities do you hear between Purcell’s works and this piece? How does Britten extend or radically re-imagine elements of Purcell’s compositions?
In the Galleries

Now on View

FIERCE WOMEN
Chakaia Booker, Guerrilla Girls, Jenny Holzer, Marilyn Minter, and Rozeal
Through Saturday, April 25, 2020
All galleries

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT: Rozeal

Best known for paintings and prints heavily influenced by the Japanese ukiyo-e printmaking style, Washington, D.C.-native Rozeal incorporates visual elements of Japanese and African-American subcultures into lush and powerful scenes that explore intersections and ambiguities of identity, origins, time, and place.

Like the scenes themselves, which have often been referred to as “mashups” or “remixes,” the artist is a product of rich and divergent influences, beginning with her home life and extending to her education and world travels. These key elements, in addition to her everyday experiences living among the diversity of D.C. and New York City, contributed to the creation of some of the works on view in Fierce Women.

MsREPRESENTATION EVENT

Bijin-ga: Women in Japanese Prints
Thursday, April 9, 2020, 6 PM
Michelle Moseley-Christian, Ph.D., associate professor and Art History program chair; co-director, Material Culture and Public Humanities M.A. Program; School of Visual Arts
Sherwood Payne Quillen ’71 Reception Gallery
Free; approximately 30 minutes

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