Faculty Recital Series

Avalon String Quartet

Blaise Magnière, violin
Richard O. Ryan Endowed Chair in Violin
Marie Wang, violin
Anthony Devroye, viola
Cheng-Hou Lee, cello

Assisted by:
Gregory Beyer, percussion

Thursday, October 10, 2019
8 p.m.
Recital Hall
Program

String Quartet No. 23 in F Major, K 590
Allegro moderato Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Allegretto (1756-1791)
Menuetto: Allegretto
Allegro

In Transit, for String Quartet and Percussion Joey Roukens
(b. 1982)
Gregory Beyer, percussion

-INTERMISSION-

String Quartet No. 12 in F Major, Op. 96
“American” Antonin Dvořák
(1841-1904)
Allegro ma non troppo
Lento
Molto vivace
Finale: Vivace ma non troppo

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PROGRAM NOTES:

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: String Quartet in F Major, K. 590 (1790)

Today's program begins with the last of the so-called "Prussian" Quartets written for King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia. Mozart always found writing for string quartet difficult (he much preferred string quintets with their two viola parts); he only completed three of the intended six and sold them for quick money, as he was in financial straits at the time. The quartet shows little sign of the composer's agitated state of mind, flowing with gracefulness and good spirits.

Mozart bases the first movement on the theme heard at the start: an ascending arpeggio followed by a fast scalar descent. Both the transitional and closing themes are based directly on this motive, and the lyrical secondary theme similarly starts off with a two-octave triadic ascent in the cello. The development begins by playing wittily with the descending interval heard at the end of the closing theme; then, Mozart turns the descending scales of the primary theme upside down. He rescres the recapitulation, for example putting the secondary theme in the viola rather than the cello. In the coda, Fs bounce up and down across four octaves as the movement winds to a close.

Mozart bases the Andante on a rhythmic figure played at the outset by the whole quartet. This cell permeates the movement: we often hear the pattern in the background, while one or more instruments embellish it with faster notes. In this movement we hear much gentle interplay among the instruments.

While Mozart bases the first movement on a single motive, and the second on a rhythmic pattern, he centers the third on a gesture, that of the appoggiatura (a non-chord tone that appears on the beat with the chord and promptly slides up or down to the correct chord tone). He also plays with irregular phrase lengths: instead of the conventional four, the minuet moves in seven-measure phrases, though these break down in the second half. The same thing happens in the trio, except that the basic unit is now five-measure phrases.

The concluding Allegro is a frolicking sonata. The primary theme is playful, the transition marked by weird pauses followed by a mock-serious passage with wide leaps for the violin. Chromatic inflections and more pauses make the mood of the secondary theme unclear, while the humorous closing theme is rhythmically off. Mozart bases the development almost entirely on the closing theme, with more athletic jumps for the violin. The recapitulation is fairly straightforward, and the quartet ends on an exuberant note.

—Brian Hart, Professor of Music History, Northern Illinois University
Joey Roukens: In Transit, for String Quartet and Percussion

“In Transit” is a 15-minute piece for string quartet and percussion, in which the music sounds as if it is continually in flux, like a kind of endless search for stability, which is not reached until the last five minutes of the piece. The first ten minutes are highly energetic, vibrant and with a strong rhythmic element, full of syncopations that may evoke the sound of rock and electronic dance music. Because of the music’s persistent forward momentum, the listener feels as if he is in transit on a journey and doesn’t know what his destination will be. Sometimes the music becomes more threatening and dark, other times it sounds more uplifting and groovy. Also, sometimes the music takes a ‘wrong turn’ (such as the short slow intermezzo, after which the energy of before is quickly restored and the old road retaken). After 9 or so minutes the music gets more and more intense and finally explodes into a ferocious, plaintive climax. It is only after the climax has faded away that the piece reaches its destination in its last five minutes, where the restless energy gives way to a slow, expressive chorale-like conclusion.

Antonín Dvořák: String Quartet No. 12 in F Major, Op. 96 "American" (1893)

In 1891, Dvořák accepted an invitation to become the director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City; its founder, Jeannette Thurber, hoped that the great Czech nationalist would inspire and guide American composers to find their own distinctive voices. Tired after his first year at the Conservatory, and homesick for Bohemia, Dvořák and his family spent the summer of 1893 in Spillville, a rural Czech immigrant community in Northeast Iowa; his stay became one of the happiest memories of his life. Energized by his new setting, he started a new quartet three days after arriving and finished it in 11 days. From its premiere in 1894, the joyful "American" Quartet has remained one of Dvořák's most popular scores.

Dvořák stated that his goal in this quartet was "to write something very melodious and simple." Its tonic, F Major, has long associations with the peaceful countryside. Dvořák admired the music of Native and African Americans, and analysts have long assumed that their folk traditions account for the pentatonic themes, lowered sevenths, and lively rhythms in the quartet (and in the "New World" Symphony, written a few months earlier). Yet these features are also present in traditional Czech music, so it is difficult to gauge the degree to which American music affected Dvořák's style. Either way, the music remains uniquely his in sound.
Perhaps to indicate his happy feelings, Dvořák gives the opening pentatonic melody to the viola—his own instrument—while the murmuring accompaniment recalls Bedřich Smetana's 1876 Quartet in E Minor (subtitled, significantly, "From My Life"). The secondary theme, also pentatonic, is played by the violin in A Major. The development begins with the primary theme and continues with a fugato on the second. Dvořák perhaps summarized the mood of this movement best when he commented after finishing it, "How beautiful the sun shines!"

The second movement, a lament in D Minor, proves a highly expressive foil. The principal melody, traded between first violin and cello, arguably imitates music of the Plains Indians, while the syncopated inner voices and percussive cello pizzicato provide a "primitive" (i.e., folk-style) backdrop. The section ends in expressive counterpoint between the violin and cello, with drum-like gestures in the viola. The next section, dominated by the violins, builds to an impassioned climax which Dvořák states twice. The movement ends with a brief recall of the opening melody, in the cello, supported by alternating bowed and plucked chords in the violins.

The scherzo returns to a light-hearted spirit. It incorporates the song of a scarlet tanager, a bird Dvořák heard while walking in the woods around Spillville. The two trios take the scherzo melody at a slower tempo. The rondo-like finale is full of exuberant dancing melodies, supported by syncopated rhythms suggesting Indian drumming. These melodies are marked by effortless slides of harmony—moving by thirds, sudden contrasts between major and minor, etc.—that are typical of Schubert, whose music deeply impacted Dvořák (though these features are also part of native Bohemian melodies). The center of the movement is a slower chorale: the devout composer regularly played the organ for services at St. Wenceslaus, the Spillville church, and perhaps he sought to pay homage to that aspect of his Iowa idyll at the close of his quartet.

—Brian Hart, Professor of Music History, Northern Illinois University
AVALON STRING QUARTET

Hailed as “one of the most exciting young string quartets in America” (The Washington Post), the Avalon String Quartet has established itself as one of the country’s leading chamber ensembles and has earned international acclaim for the bold musicality and passionate intensity of its performances.

Formed in 1995 at the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, the Quartet came to the fore after participating in Isaac Stern’s Chamber Music Workshop at Carnegie Hall in 1997. As a result, Mr. Stern invited the Avalon Quartet to perform in the Isaac Stern Chamber Music Encounters in Jerusalem and in March 2000 presented the ensemble’s Carnegie Hall debut at Weill Recital Hall. The Quartet made its New York debut on the Alexander Schneider Series at the New School in 1998. The Quartet won First Prize, the Channel Classics Prize, and the Rockport Chamber Music Festival Prize at the 1999 Concert Artists Guild Competition, which led to the critically acclaimed recording “Dawn To Dusk.” In 2000 the Quartet won top prize at the ARD Competition in Munich, Germany.

The Quartet is in residence at Northern Illinois University, a position formerly occupied by the distinguished Vermeer Quartet. As a part of their residency, they perform four programs annually in DeKalb and Chicago, and the members teach individual studios and coach chamber music at the school. This follows previous residencies at the Juilliard School and at Indiana University–South Bend.

The Quartet has performed in many of the major halls, including Alice Tully Hall in New York, 92nd St Y, Carnegie Hall, the Library of Congress in Washington DC, Wigmore Hall and Herculesaal in Munich. Other performances include appearances at the Caramoor Music Festival in NY, La Jolla Chamber Music Society, NPR’s St. Paul Sunday Radio, Mostly Mozart Festival at Lincoln Center, Isabella Gardner Museum, Barge Music, Dame Myra Hess and the Ravinia Festival.

Dedicated educators, the Quartet has taught at the Interlochen Quartet Institute, the Icicle Creek Chamber Music Festival, Hot Springs Music Festival, Madeline Island Music Camp, Britten-Pears School in England and the Juilliard School. The Quartet is also dedicated to outreach in various communities, including working with the Center for Abused Children in Hartford and also with the Music for Youth Organization that works with the Bridgeport and Trumbull School Systems.

The Quartet’s live performances and conversations have been featured on Chicago’s WFMT-FM, New York’s WQXR-FM and WNYC-FM, National Public Radio’s Performance Today, Canada’s CBC, Australia’s ABC, the ARD in Germany and France Musique.

To find out more about Avalon, please visit their website at www.avalonquartet.com

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