



Dover Quartet with Joseph Conyers, bass

April 1, 2023

PROGRAM NOTES

Support for the program notes is generously provided by Roberta Viviano.

JOSEPH HAYDN

(ROHRAU, AUSTRIA, 1732–VIENNA, 1809)

String Quartet in E-flat Major, Hob. III:38 (Op. 33, No. 2), “The Joke” (1781)

Joseph Haydn was born in a village outside of Vienna and encouraged to partake in musical activities at a very young age. His father, Mathias, a master wheelwright, had no formal musical training, but loved singing and improvising on the harp. All three of Mathias’s sons became professional musicians, thanks to sacred music training sponsored by the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empress, Maria Theresa. Haydn became a choirboy at St. Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna in 1739 or 1740 (at the age of seven or eight). After struggling to find permanent employment in Vienna in the 1750s, Haydn was hired by the Esterházy family in 1761 and spent the majority of his career in a courtly setting serving as the composer in residence and musical director to the Hungarian nobles. A contract revision in 1779 enabled Haydn to sell his compositions to the public, and his stature as a celebrity was cemented when he composed twelve symphonies for appearances in London in the 1790s.

The set of six string quartets (Op. 33) that Haydn composed in 1781 was intended for sale to the public. “The Joke” is the second work in that set and illustrates Haydn’s witty musical humor, here he fixates on “false endings.” The first movement, a fairly conventional sonata form led by the first violin, features a “false recapitulation” in which the opening melody is restated in C major instead of E-flat major. The “right notes”

appear four measures later as a kind of musical prank. In correspondence Haydn revealed that this set of string quartets was special because he replaced the minuet movements with scherzos (Italian for “joke” or “trick”). The joke in this scherzo is in Haydn’s approach to meter, as he creates groupings of two within a triple meter. Unexpected silences also add to the fun. The jesting stops for a moment in the lovely slow movement as all four instruments take a turn playing the melodies. The final movement, a cheerful rondo form, progresses as expected, alternating a catchy refrain with episodes, until the shift to a slow Adagio tempo in the coda. In short, Haydn tricks listeners into thinking that the piece is over before it truly is.

GEORGE WALKER

(WASHINGTON, D.C., 1922–MONTCLAIR, N.J., 2018)

String Quartet No. 1 (1946)

In 1996 George Walker became the first African American composer to win the Pulitzer Prize for Music for *Lilacs*, a setting of Walt Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” for soprano and orchestra. Walker was born in Washington, D.C. and graduated from the Curtis Institute of Music in 1945. He studied piano with Rudolf Serkin and composition with Rosario Scalero at Curtis and Nadia Boulanger in France. After returning to the United States, he earned his doctoral degree in composition from the Eastman School of Music. His neo-romantic style is often compared to Samuel Barber’s, who also studied with Scalero.

A year after his graduation from Curtis, Walker composed his first string quartet, which begins in a modernistic style with emphasis on the layered polyphonic textures that are perfectly suited to the string quartet genre. The contrasting slow movement, which is the original version of Walker’s *Lyric for Strings*, his most-performed orchestral work, is an emotional lament dedicated to the memory of his grandmother, Malvina King. The opening section centers on the instruments’ middle and low registers, creating a rich and enveloping sound that expresses both the love and sorrow inherent in grieving. A series of numb, hesitant chords bookend the culmination of this movement: a shift to a polyphonic texture during which each instrument’s range expands and a heart-wrenching melody is passed through the ensemble, crying out to listeners. The pain slowly subsides as the journey through life continues,

and the haunting chords are altered as they reappear at the conclusion, extended with a sweet cadential gesture that provides solace. Walker's wide voicing of dissonant harmonies in the first measures of the finale establishes an intensity and sense of urgency that is not resolved until the first violin part breaks free in a brief, but vibrant, cadenza at the very end of the work.

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

(NELAHOZEVES, 1841–PRAGUE, 1904)

String Quintet No. 2 in G Major, Op. 77 (1875)

A viola player, Czech composer Antonín Dvořák composed fourteen string quartets from 1862 to 1895, as well as a large output of chamber music. The composer's scoring for his first string quintet was violin, two violas, and cello, but he modified the instrumentation for his second quintet, adding double bass to a string quartet. Dvořák composed the work to enter in a competition in Prague sponsored by the Artistic Circle, which he won. Around 1875, Dvořák's reputation as a composer was increasingly recognized through his success at competitions, and he received praise from the jury for the Austrian State Prize Stipendium, which often included Johannes Brahms. A couple of years later, Brahms was so excited about Dvořák's 1877 portfolio for the Prize that he wrote to his Berlin-based music publisher, Fritz Simrock, to encourage him to publish Dvořák's compositions. The positive reception of Dvořák's music in Berlin led to a flurry of international performances. Dvořák's career was forever changed as he went from being a provincial composer to a cosmopolitan figure in late nineteenth-century music, even moving to New York in 1892 to serve as the director of the National Conservatory of Music of America.

Dvořák presents several melodic themes in quick succession in the opening sonata-allegro movement of his second string quintet, ultimately contrasting a melody that begins with a soaring ascent—and is generally played by one instrument—with a collective theme, typically scored homorhythmically for at least three instruments. Hemiola—in this case, alternation between accented quarter notes and triplets—is one of Dvořák's signature stylistic features, adapted from Czech folk music. This quality becomes even more rhythmically captivating in the recapitulation section as consistent sixteenth-notes in the accompaniment create cross-rhythms with the triplets. The scherzo continues in the vein of stylized folk music with repetitive melodies, featuring narrower

contours and accent patterns that mirror those heard in a vigorous folk dance. The first melody in the slow movement appears in both major and minor mode, giving it an unpredictable character before it is replaced by a more virtuosic melody in the first violin. Dvořák takes listeners on an amazing harmonic journey in this movement before closing with a sweet return of the opening section. Dvořák follows Joseph Haydn's model as he composes the closing finale in rondo form, even ornamenting the recurring melodic theme with grace notes reminiscent of Classical-era decoration. However, unlike Haydn, Dvořák creates a symphonic sound for his conclusion, saving the most spectacular textural effects for the end of the piece.

Program Notes © Dr. Jessica Payette, Associate Professor of Music, Oakland University.

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