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Concert: Ying Quartet

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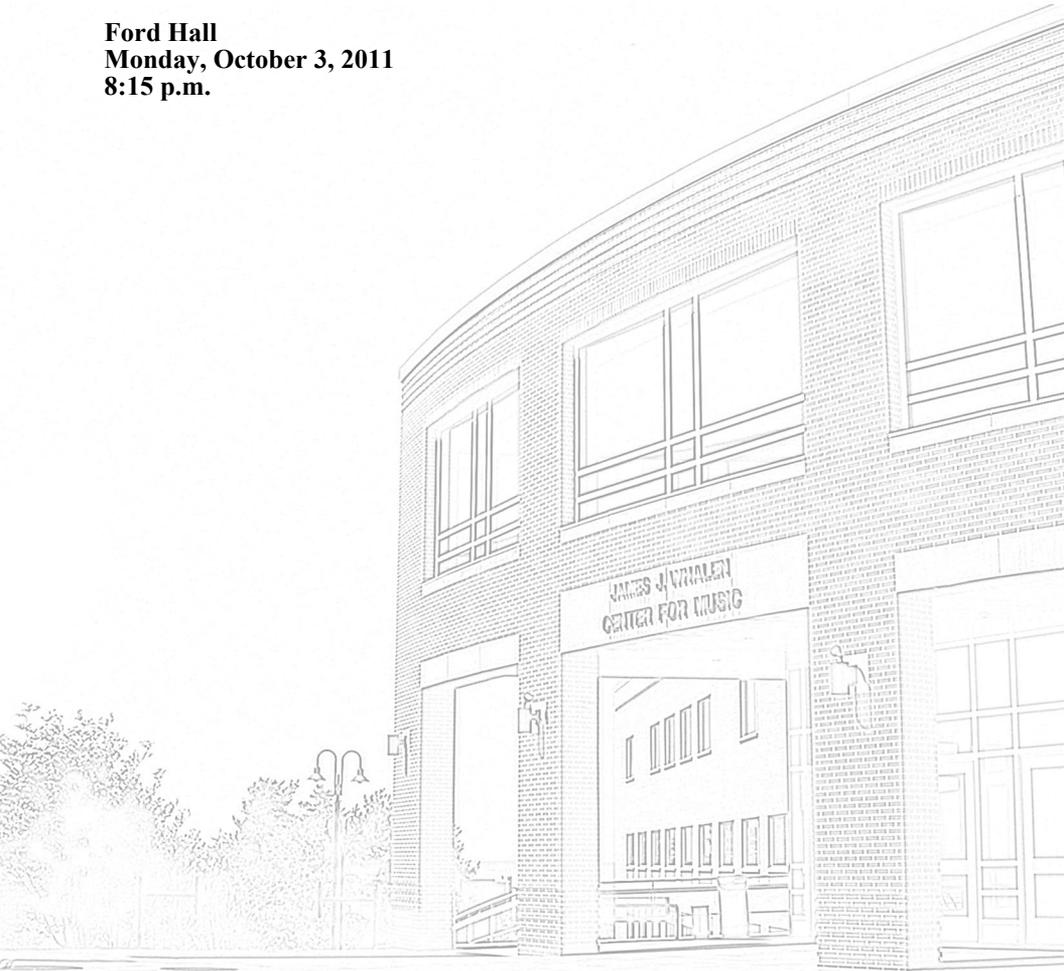
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Ithaca College Concerts 2011-12

Ying Quartet

Ayano Ninomiya, violin
Janet Ying, violin
Phillip Ying, viola
David Ying, cello

Ford Hall
Monday, October 3, 2011
8:15 p.m.



ITHACA COLLEGE

School of Music

Program

Quartet in E-flat Major, K. 428

Allegro non troppo
Andante con moto
Menuetto: Allegro
Allegro Vivace

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756-1791)

Quartet No. 5

Allegro
Adagio molto
Scherzo: Alla bulgarese
Andante
Finale: Allegro vivace

Béla Bartók
(1881-1945)

Intermission

Quartet No. 1 in E minor, "From My Life"

Allegro vivo appassionato
Allegro moderato a la polka
Largo sostenuto
Vivace

Bedrich Smetana
(1824-1884)

The Ying Quartet

The Ying Quartet occupies a position of unique prominence in the classical music world, combining brilliantly communicative performances with a fearlessly imaginative view of chamber music in today's world. Now in its second decade, the Quartet has established itself as an ensemble of the highest musical qualifications in its tours across the United States and abroad. Their performances regularly take place in many of the world's most important concert halls, from Carnegie Hall to the Sydney Opera House. At the same time, the Quartet's belief that concert music can also be a meaningful part of everyday life has also drawn the foursome to perform in settings as diverse as the workplace, schools, juvenile prisons, and the White House. In fact, the Ying Quartet's constant quest to explore the creative possibilities of the string quartet has led it to an unusually diverse array of musical projects and interests.

Beginning a new chapter in the Ying's career, violinist Ayano Ninomiya joined the Quartet in May 2010. Second-prize winner of the 2003 Walter W. Naumburg International Violin Competition, Ms. Ninomiya's New York debut recital at Carnegie Hall was described as "deeply communicative and engrossing" by The New York Times. Ms. Ninomiya graduated magna cum laude from Harvard College with a joint degree in Music and French in 2001, and holds a Master's degree from The Juilliard School where she studied with Robert Mann. She was first violinist of the winning quartet at the 2007 Banff International String Quartet Competition, and has been deeply involved with chamber music for her entire career. As the new first violinist in the Ying Quartet, Ninomiya fills the chair of Timothy Ying, the original first violinist of the all-sibling quartet. Timothy and his siblings, cellist David, violist Phillip, and violinist Janet, are the ensemble's founding members.

The Ying Quartet's recordings reflect many of the group's wide-ranging musical interests and have generated consistent, enthusiastic acclaim. Their 2007 Telarc release of the three Tchaikovsky Quartets and the *Souvenir de Florence* (with James Dunham and Paul Katz) was nominated for a Grammy Award in the Best Chamber Music Performance category. In addition, their much-heralded collaboration with the Turtle Island Quartet, "Four + 4," explored the common ground between the classic string quartet tradition and jazz and other American vernacular styles, and won a Grammy Award in 2005. "Dim Sum" (Telarc), released in 2008, features music by Chinese-American composers that merges the Western string quartet with the aural world of traditional Chinese music. The Quartet has also documented its noteworthy LifeMusic commissioning project in its recorded work. Released by Quartz, "The Ying Quartet play LifeMusic" was named Editor's Choice by Gramophone magazine. The second LifeMusic was released in 2008, and the third in July 2010. In the summer of 2010 the Quartet signed a multi-year recording deal with a revival of the Dorian label; the first of the recordings, focusing on the compositions of Anton Arensky, will be released in the fall of 2011.

In addition to appearing in conventional concert situations, the Ying Quartet is also known for its diverse and unusual performance projects. For several years the Quartet presented a series called "No Boundaries" at Symphony Space in New York City that sought to re-imagine the concert experience. Collaborations with actors, dancers, electronics, a host of non-classical musicians, a magician and even a Chinese noodle chef gave new and thoughtful context to a wide variety of both traditional and contemporary string quartet music. They have also worked with composer Tod Machover and the MIT Media lab in the use of Hyperscore, an innovative musical composition software. Other musical partners range from pianists Menahem Pressler and Gilbert Kalish and cellist Paul Katz to folk musician Mike Seeger, jazz pianist Billy Childs, and the Turtle Island Quartet.

The Ying Quartet's ongoing LifeMusic commissioning project, created in response to their commitment to expanding the rich string quartet repertoire, has already achieved an impressive history. Supported by the Institute for American Music, the Yings commission both established and emerging composers to create music that reflects contemporary American life. Michael Torke, Kevin Puts, Paquito D'Rivera, Paul Moravec, Lowell Liebermann, Bernard Rands, Pierre Jalbert, Sebastian Currier, and Carter Pann are only some of the renowned composers and musicians who have written for LifeMusic. Their most recent recording of commissions is titled "The United States" and was released in 2007. It features works by Ned Rorem, Jennifer Higdon, Chen Yi, and Augusta Read Thomas. Commissions for the 2008-2009 season included Lowell Liebermann's String Quartet No. 3, "To the Victims of War." The 2009-2010 season featured Sebastian Currier's latest work for string quartet, Next Atlantis, as well as Richard Danielpour's Quartet No. 6, "Addio." The 2010-2011 season saw the debut of John Novacek's Three Rags for String Quartet; 2011-2012 will feature works by Kenji Bunch and Billy Childs.

The Ying Quartet first came to professional prominence in the early 1990s during their years as resident quartet of Jesup, Iowa, a farm town of 2000 people. Playing before audiences of six to six hundred in homes, schools, churches, and banks, the Quartet had its first opportunities to enable music and creative endeavor to become an integral part of community life. The Quartet considers its time in Jesup the foundation of its present musical life and goals. The residency, supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, was widely chronicled in the national media. Toward the end of the residency, the quartet and several of the townspeople were invited to Capitol Hill to testify before Congress on behalf of the NEA.

During the summers, the Ying Quartet's activity is primarily centered at music festivals. They are the ensemble-in-residence at the Bowdoin International Music Festival; other festival appearances have been at Tanglewood, Ravinia, Caramoor, San Miguel de Allende, Kneisel Hall, Norfolk, Skaneateles, Amelia Island, and Interlochen.

As quartet-in-residence at the Eastman School of Music, the Ying Quartet teaches in the string department and leads a rigorous, sequentially designed

chamber music program. One cornerstone of chamber music activity at Eastman is the noted Music for All program, in which all students have the opportunity to perform in community settings beyond the concert hall. From 2001-2008, the members of the Ying Quartet were the Blodgett Artists-in-Residence at Harvard University.

Notes

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Quartet in E-flat Major, K. 428

Composed within weeks of his previous quartet, K. 421, Mozart probably completed K. 428 by the end of July 1783. Although concise and compact, it very successfully projects a reflective, pensive personality.

Instead of a straightforward first theme, the four instruments play an unharmonized melody in octaves replete with many notes alien to the home key of E-flat. A warmer, harmonized passage with an insistent little rhythmic figure in the second violin establishes the E-flat tonality. Mozart then loudly repeats the opening phrase, this time harmonized with lush, romantic-sounding chords. After expanding this idea, Mozart thins out the texture and has the first violin and then the viola state the second theme. A spate of scampering scales ends the exposition. The brief development, mostly concerned with the start of the second theme, leads to the recapitulation, which includes a few measures of development of the principal subject. The movement ends without a coda.

The melodies of the Andante con moto are not particularly distinctive or memorable. Far more musical interest is attracted by the advanced, chromatic harmonies that Mozart employs throughout the movement. Particularly striking to modern audiences is the passage in the development section that bears an uncanny resemblance to the famous motif from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, which was written seventy-six years later! The music has a dreamlike, yearning quality, as well as a slight sense of urgency that comes from the frequent use of suspensions – one instrument holding on to a note while the others change to a new harmony.

The vigorous opening of the Menuetto provides the quartet's first forceful rhythmic impulse. While not especially dancelike, the Menuetto does have a good, strong swing to it. The smoother, rather melancholy strains of the trio, though, bring back the work's somber character before the music is reinvigorated by the Menuetto's return.

The impish opening of the finale, however, completely changes the quartet's mood to one of cheerful good humor. The attractive tunes, the unexpected silences, the alternation of forte and piano passages, the witty treatment, and the overall sturdiness show Haydn's influence very clearly. In form the

movement is a rondo. The principal subject is stated three times with slight variations, the first violin countermelody in the final statement providing a most felicitous touch. Between the repetitions there are two appearances of slightly more lyrical contrasting episodes that differ more in key than in character.

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Béla Bartók: String Quartet No. 5

Having devoted much of his life to the collection and study of the folk music of his native Hungary and other lands, Bartók believed that composers could use this material in any one of three ways. They could incorporate folk melodies in their music, compose original melodies in folk style, or absorb the essence of the folk idiom and integrate it into their own compositions. For the three years before writing the Fifth Quartet, Bartók was actively involved with the first approach, spending a good deal of time collecting, transcribing, and arranging folk songs and dances. The Fifth Quartet, though, belongs solidly in the third category. No peasant melodies, original or imitation, are to be heard. Instead Bartók uses the vitality and expressiveness of folk music as the inspiration for a highly sophisticated, completely original composition.

The quartet consist of five movements arranged in an arch or bridge form; that is, the first and fifth sections are fast and share thematic material, the second and fourth are slow and similar in mood, and the third forms the central keystone of the entire work. The opening theme is a series of repeated hammered notes that reminds Bartók biographer, Lajos Lesznai, of the laments sung by the Szekely people from the southern part of what is now Romania. After being so firmly rooted on one note, the angry, dissonant second theme is distinguished by gigantic upward leaps in all the instruments. The tempo gradually slows for the second violin's presentation of the third theme, a lyrical line that gently rises and falls in contour. The three themes are developed before Bartók brings them back for the recapitulation. But in keeping with the overall mirror image of the quartet, they are heard in reverse order. Also, they are inverted, so that the third theme falls and rises, and the second theme dives downward.

The Adagio molto is a wonderful example of Bartók's so-called night music, his unique evocation of the distant sounds of nature on a still, dark evening. Out of the birdcall trills and half-heard murmurings, little wisps of melody call to mind dimly remembered folk songs. As the air clears, a pained, anguished melody emerges, but it too soon disappears into the shadows. Bartók's familiarity with Bulgarian folk songs probably inspired the Scherzo's rhythmic asymmetry, which he achieves by dividing the nine notes of each measure into groups of four, two and three. The fluid melody, however, flows easily over the irregular accents of the accompaniment. A slightly faster trio functions as

the fulcrum of the movement and of the entire quartet. The viola states its slightly out-of-balance, folklike melody over the first violin's muted rustling. The movement ends with a much modified repeat of the Scherzo.

The fourth movement recreates the night-music mood of the second movement, perhaps now with an added edge of coldness and aloofness. An agitated and passionate middle section is heard before the opening mood returns.

In the Finale, Bartók brings back the peasantlike vitality of the first movement. Certain thematic connections appear, but they are more obvious to the eye than to the ear. Near the end of the movement, Bartók interrupts the breakneck forward motion with a puzzling brief section that he marked *Allegretto, con indifferenza*, a banal little tune that grows increasingly out of tune as it progresses. The original vigor then resumes to end the movement.

Bartók composed the quartet in the uncharacteristically short time of one month, from 6 August to 6 September, 1934, on commission from the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation. The dedication is to Mrs. Coolidge, who was such a remarkable and perceptive patron of chamber music. Its first performance was given in Washington, D.C., by the Kolisch Quartet on 8 April, 1935.

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Bedrich Smetana: String Quartet in e minor, "From My Life"

The first Czech nationalist composer, Bedrich Smetana was born in Bohemia in 1824. By age he 19 had determined to devote himself to music, despite the wishes of his father, and his early compositions captured the spirit of the region's folk songs and dances. During the Revolution of 1848, Smetana composed patriotic marches and a Czech-language Song of Freedom as a member of Concordia, a group of politically active artists. After the uprising was crushed, Smetana's career languished as Austria asserted its control over Prague's cultural life. In 1856, Smetana accepted a teaching position in Goteborg, Sweden, writing to his parents, "Prague did not wish to acknowledge me, so I left it." Though less cosmopolitan than Prague, Smetana found Goteborg much more rewarding financially. By 1862, however, the political climate in Bohemia had greatly improved, and Goteborg's pettiness had become unbearable. Receiving news of a plan to form the first permanent Czech professional theater in Prague, Smetana returned home.

He set about making a new artistic life for himself in Prague, where he was quickly rewarded with an appointment as the first music chairman of a new Artistic Society formed to promote Czech culture. In 1866, he won the coveted post of principal conductor of the new Czech Provincial Theater, eventually becoming its artistic director as well. During this period he wrote *The Bartered*

Bride and other operas in the Czech language. As composer, conductor, and teacher, Smetana had become the leading musical figure in Prague.

In 1874, at age fifty, tragedy struck; Smetana became totally deaf. What started in the early summer as extraneous noises increased by September to a permanent buzzing that blocked out other sounds. Treatment did not help, and he was forced to give up his position at the Provincial Theater. Smetana gradually recovered his spirits, and in the following years he took advantage of his increased time to compose much of the music for which he is remembered, including his great symphonic cycle, *Ma vlast* (My Fatherland), *Song of the Sea* for men's chorus, and his two string quartets.

Written in 1876, Smetana's first string quartet was conceived as representation in sound of his life to that point. He wrote to a friend, "I wanted to depict in music the course of my life...written for four instruments which, as in a small circle of friends, talk among themselves about what has oppressed me so significantly." The first movement opens with "a warning of my future misery," represented by the harsh downward motif in the viola, but continues more brightly to depict "love of art in my youth, my romantic mood, the unspoken longing for something which I could not name or imagine clearly." The second movement, "a quasi-polka, brings to my mind the happy times of youth, when I composed dances for the young world...and the aristocratic circles in which I lived." The third movement "recalls the happiness of my first love for the girl who later became my faithful wife."

The fourth movement celebrates Smetana's pride in having established a Czech national tradition in music and joy at the result "until it was checked by the catastrophe..." Late in the movement the music stops its vigorous folk dance, and over a low tremolo the first violin plays a high, sustained note, "the fateful ringing in my ears of the high-pitched tones." The movement goes on to summarize the entire work by quoting earlier themes, including the opening viola "warning." The quartet was first performed privately in Prague with the young Dvorák playing the viola.

- *Program Note by Robert Strong*