10-28-1997

Guest Artist Recital: Ying Quartet

Ying Quartet
Timothy Ying
Janet Ying
Phillip Ying
David Ying

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—William Grant Egbert (1867–1928) Founder, Ithaca Conservatory of Music

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ITHACA
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YING QUARTET
Timothy Ying, violin
Janet Ying, violin
Phillip Ying, viola
David Ying, violoncello

“Autobiography”

Quartet in F major, op. 135

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Allegretto
Vivace
Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo
Der Schwer gefasste Entschluss:
Muss es sein? Es muss sein! Es muss sein!
Grave, ma non troppo tratto; Allegro

Quartet No. 2, “Lettres intimes”

Leos Janacek
(1854-1928)

Andante
Adagio
Moderato
Allegro

INTERMISSION

Quartet in E minor, “From My Life”

Bedrich Smetana
(1824-1884)

Allegro vivo appassionato
Allegro moderato a la Polka
Largo sostenuto
Vivace

Ford Hall Auditorium
Tuesday, October 28, 1997
8:15 p.m.

The YING QUARTET is represented by Melvin Kaplan, Inc.,
115 College Street
Burlington, Vermont 05401
THE ARTISTS

Praised by *The New York Times* for its “exceptional unity” and “blazing commitment,” the Ying Quartet has become one of the best known and most highly regarded young ensembles on the American music scene. The four siblings from Winnetka, Illinois formed the Ying Quartet in 1988 while studying at the Eastman School of Music. The Quartet won the International Cleveland Quartet Competition in 1989, made its New York debut at Lincoln Center’s Alice Tully Hall in 1991, began to tour professionally in 1992, and won the prestigious Naumburg Chamber Music Award in 1993.

The Ying Quartet’s active touring schedule has included appearances in major cities across North America, and concerts abroad in Japan, Germany, England, Sweden, Austria, Estonia and Taiwan. The Yings have spent summers in residence at Tanglewood, Aspen, and Interlochen, and have participated in numerous other festivals, including Norfolk, Kapalua, Colorado and San Miguel. Their 1996-97 season included debut appearances in Mexico and Australia, and a return visit to Taiwan as well as concerts in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, San Francisco, and San Diego.

In the fall of 1996, the Ying Quartet joined the faculty of the Eastman School of Music. In addition to coaching student ensembles and performing, its unique role includes musical education and outreach activities throughout the greater Rochester area. Working with the Yings, Eastman students are learning to build integrated community music programs.

For two years, the Ying Quartet participated in the ground-breaking National Endowment for the Arts Rural Residency Initiative, now administered by Chamber Music America, serving as resident ensemble in Jesup, Iowa (population 2,000). As members of the community, the Yings shared their music with everyone they encountered, ranging from students to senior citizens and from farmers to local business owners. In addition, they have held residencies sponsored by Northwestern University and Kansas City Friends of Chamber Music, and they provide a wide range of outreach services in connection with concert engagements across the country.

The Yings have performed at the White House at the invitation of President and Mrs. Clinton and for members of Congress in a National Endowment for the Arts presentation. They have been the subject of numerous media profiles describing their richly diverse musical life.
Op. 135, the sixteenth and last complete string quartet that Beethoven wrote, represents a sharp departure from the other late quartets. For one thing, the work is quite short, vying with Op. 18, No. 2 as the briefest of them all. One possible explanation of its brevity is supplied by the composer’s friend, Karl Holz, who reported that Beethoven, believing that his publisher had not paid him enough for the work, had said: “If [he] sent circumcised ducats he shall have a circumcised quartet. That’s why it is so short.”

In addition to the modest length of the quartet, the work has less emotional intensity and spirituality than the other late quartets, and a deeper sense of calmness and peaceful resignation. Those who hear in it a serene acceptance of the inevitability of death refer to a letter Beethoven sent with the quartet to his publisher, Moritz Schlesinger: “Here, my dear friend, is my last quartet. It will be the last; and indeed it has given me much trouble. For I could not bring myself to compose the last movement. But as your letters were reminding me of it, in the end I decided to compose it. And that is the reason why I have written the motto: ‘The difficult decision—Must it be?—It must be, it must be!’ ”

For some listeners, Op. 135 represents a return to middle-class taste, “a touch of Biedermier,” the conservative movement in the decorative arts of the early 1800s. Brevity, accessibility, and the use of more traditional compositional techniques were some of the particular qualities that Beethoven associated with music written for the bourgeoisie. The fact that Beethoven dedicated the quartet to Johann Wolfmayer, a cloth merchant, and not an aristocrat, lends some credence to this belief.

And finally, the light and humorous Op. 135 following the profundity of Op. 131 (in order of composition) seems to fit Beethoven’s penchant for turning to a more buoyant work after creating music of great depth and personal involvement. The relaxed geniality of Op. 135 probably also provided Beethoven with a much-needed release from the intensity and emotional involvement with the works that preceded it.

Beethoven composed his final quartet during August and September 1826, finishing it on October 30 at his brother’s country estate in Gneixendorf, Austria. It was published in September 1827, and the Schuppanzigh Quartet
gave the premiere in Vienna on March 23, 1828, almost one year to the day after
the composer’s death.

The opening movement’s warm, conversational tone derives in part from its first
subject group of five separate motifs, each with its own inflection and character,
and tossed from instrument to instrument as though engaged in informal
discourse. An ascending staccato arpeggio and a frolicsome descending run are
pitted against each other in the second subject. With supreme confidence and
assuredness, Beethoven develops the material he has introduced, brilliantly
expanding the various motifs and presenting them in intriguing new guises and
combinations, before bringing them back for the recapitulation. A coda based on
motifs from the first subject ends the movement.

The swift and scintillating Vivace functions as the scherzo movement; it is
propelled forward by its pointed syncopations and cross accents. A rising scale
in the viola and cello and a repeated-note accompaniment introduce the
contrasting middle section, which continues the breakneck tempo and sends the
first violin out into death-defying acrobatic leaps while the others doggedly
repeat an ostinato measure a full forty-seven times! The movement closes with
a shortened reprise of the opening section.

The Lento assai is a sublime example of Beethoven’s most inspired “interior
music.” It was added as an afterthought to the originally conceived three-
movement quartet. Over sketches for the simple main melody, in the key of D-
flat major, which Beethoven associated with the expression of sentiment, he
wrote: Susser Ruhegesang, Friedengesang (“sweet restful, peaceful
song”). Simply and lovingly, Beethoven puts this eight-measure, stepwise-moving
melody through four variations played without pause that never rise above a
piano (“soft”) dynamic level to create a section of rich, satisfying beauty and
repose.

The final movement, Der Schwer gefasste Entschluss (“the difficult resolution”)
asks the questions Muss es sein? (“Must it be?”). The answer is the ringing
affirmation, Es muss sein! Es muss sein! (“It must be! It must be!”).
Although in his letter to Moritz Schlesinger, Beethoven assigns a profound
meaning to the exchange, its origins were simple, even humorous. Presumably,
Beethoven refused to give Ignaz Dembscher, a government official and friend, a
copy of his quartet, Op. 130, because Dembscher had not attended the premiere
performance. Wanting to set matters right, Dembscher asked Karl Holz to
intervene. Holz suggested that Dembscher send Schuppanzigh, whose quartet
gave the first performance, the cost of a subscription, 50 florins. Dembscher
asked, “Muss es sein?” and Holz replied “Es muss sein!” When Holz recounted
the story to the composer, Beethoven burst into laughter and immediately sat
down to compose a canon on the dialogue. Later Beethoven expanded the musical material of the canon into the quartet’s last movement. In slow, solemn tones the two lower strings pose the question, a setting of the words, Muss es sein? and in forceful, joyful musical phrases, the two violins deliver the exultant response with which Beethoven may indeed avow his triumph over death.

Notes from: *Guide to Chamber Music* by Melvin Berger, ©

**Leos Janacek. String Quartet No. 2, “Lettres intimes”**

The three forces which most strongly shaped Leos Janacek’s work were: a fascination with the patterns of spoken language, a mystical atmosphere steeped in the natural world, and a deep identification with the Czech musical spirit. Considered by many to be one of the great composers of Eastern Europe, Janacek is often grouped with Smetana and Dvorak as one of the three pillars of Czech music.

A vivid dynamic is at the heart of all of Janacek’s compositions, and this dynamic often originates in the spoken word. Janacek based many of his compositions on literary themes, with emphasis on the rhythms found in patterns of speech. His two quartets, which both bear reference to written works, are often mentioned as his greatest chamber pieces.

The first quartet, written in 1923, was based on themes found in the story *The Kreutzer Sonata*; Janacek was inspired by the passion in Tolstoy’s tale of a woman’s tragic disillusionment in marriage and betrayal by her lover.

The second quartet, “Intimate Letters,” is even more infused with romantic yearning. It describes the sixty-four year old composer’s soaring passion (apparently unrequited) for a young married woman, Kamila Stosslova.

The *Andante* first movement begins almost tentatively, then dances toward a burst of joy. A more lyrical *Adagio*, filled with almost unbearable tenderness, is followed by a bittersweet lover’s waltz (*Moderato*). Slavonic tonalities are most obvious in the fourth, *Allegro*, movement. Here the mystical nature of Janacek’s work finds full expression as he struggles to express emotions beyond the limits of the musical form.

Janacek himself wrote of the piece, “The feeling is often so powerful that it even overwhelms the music. Love is vast and mighty, but composition is weak. Thus I wish that my work could be as strong as my love.”

Notes by C. Graves
Bedrich Smetana. String Quartet in E minor, “From My Life”

Smetana is one of those unfortunate composers whose major works are obscured by the celebrity of their first performances. In the shadow of *The Bartered Bride*, and some fine piano pieces, Bedrich Smetana, in the last years of his life (between 1876 and 1883) composed two masterpieces: two string quartets which are as unclassifiable as Beethoven’s last quartets. But this is the only similarity, because whereas for Beethoven the gradual onset of his deafness meant that he was no longer encumbered by sound and could turn his deafness to his advantage in writing music in total freedom, “the music of the 21st century,” as Antoine Golea called it, caused Smetana, who was brutally struck by deafness during the night of 19 to 20 October, 1874, to turn back on himself. From then on and more relentlessly than ever before, he went in quest of his own roots.

The first quartet, “From my Life,” in E minor, tells a story. But it is far from being descriptive music. The writing is of extraordinary richness and vivacity. The first chord is certainly one of the most pathos-laden moments in music since the first seven bars of Schumann’s *Scenes from Faust*. Smetana, a great admirer of Chopin, was inspired by folk music without ever copying it. The quartet is a discreet summary of his life in four movements. The first (Allegro vivō appassionato) is the longest; it represents youth, with its enthusiasms, its adventures and its hopes but with a premonition of tragic events. The second (Allegro moderato a la polka) is freedom from care and the dance, the deep heart of Bohemia. The third movement is a song of love to his adored wife. And the final movement is all happiness, then, in a single chord, deafness strikes like an axe into a tree trunk. Smetana is one of those novelists in music who can make one cry without ever having uttered a groan.

The bonds uniting the first and second quartets are obvious. Smetana himself wrote that he was taking up his own story “after the disaster.” The key, D minor, leaves no doubt as to the composer’s intentions. In Mozart D minor is veiled suffering, the gates of life interminably closing. But Smetana was Czech. That is to say that he contrived to alternate truculence and tragedy right till the last chord. In Bohemia there is no barrier separating language and harmony, literature and music. That is why we think not so much of late Beethoven or of Humann at the end, but of certain letters Kafka wrote to Milena, or of the books of Karel Capek, that far too little known prophet of our time.

The first movement (Allegro) brings about a clash of a mood of rage at the loss of hearing and the transparence of bucolic recollections. It is an extremely tightly woven movement in the second part of which felicity and despair end up
by becoming interlocked with one another. The second movement is closely related to its counterpart in the E minor quartet. It begins with a polka which is overlaid with a sort of nostalgic remorse, and the polka returns, slightly slower, at the end. The third movement makes us hear, in the viola and the cello, Smetana’s deafness as if in a conch shell. Smetana knocks at his cell with sharp blows of the bow. \textit{Andante} and \textit{Allegro} alternate at increasingly briefer intervals. Never was an appeal for help more discreetly composed. The fourth movement, very short and concise, concludes the work like a list of the contents of the quartet and of Smetana’s life. In the sublime last twelve bars the four instruments give way to the mirth of a man who is cornered in which some have seen, not entirely without reason, the very essence of humour.

Bedrich Smetana was a remarkable pianist, and a great admirer of Chopin, Liszt and Schumann. His whole life is marked by piano works where virtuosity lends itself to folk rhythms and themes. His output for the piano was great: Variations, Bagatelles, Impromptus, Studies, Albumleaves, Sketches, Dreampieces, Czech danses and numerous Polkas of which we present the most characteristic. Worth noting is the fact that half a century before the piano works of Janacek, Smetana also frees himself from metrical constraint to give a marvellous sensation of improvisation, brought to us here by a pianist of great stature in his country, with a force, a concreteness and an indescribable and moving sincerity: a purity of language seldom to be heard.