



CLEVELAND
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PROGRAM NOTES

Dover Quartet
December 3, 2019 – 7:30 p.m.
Plymouth Church, UCC

String Quartet No. 1 in D major, Op. 25 **Benjamin Britten**

Born: Lowestoft, England 1913

Died: Aldeburgh, 1976

Composed: 1941

The First String Quartet is a product of the years Britten and his partner Peter Pears spent in the United States during World War II. (Its exact birthplace is a small cabin in Escondido, California.) The four-movement quartet was commissioned by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, one of the most prominent patrons of new music in America. Britten—at 28 already a widely recognized composer—made a point of declaring the work to be squarely in D major (“would you believe it?”—he half-jokingly wrote to Mrs. Coolidge). Tonality could no longer be taken for granted in 1941 (to say the least), but the young Britten knew how to make D major sound fresh and original, by means of innovative textures (juxtaposing extremely high registers with extremely low ones), unorthodox patterns of modulation, and an unusual movement sequence in which the first and third movements are much longer than the second and fourth. One may hear

echoes of nostalgia and anxiety in the quartet—nostalgia about the composer’s homeland which he sorely missed, and anxiety about the raging war.

The first movement alternates between two kinds of material. It opens with some slow, eerie sounds with the three upper instruments in the stratosphere and the cello adding some suspenseful low pizzicatos (plucked notes). This introduction gives way to more robust music in a fast tempo, but the other character will return, calling into question the more conventionally classical developments in the Allegro. The scherzo that follows builds upon a brief motif of a few notes over persistent ostinatos (repeated rhythms); the constant pulse continues throughout the brief movements, though its speed changes.

The exquisitely beautiful third-movement “Andante calmo” unfolds over some slow-moving harmonies, out of which

a delicate violin melody emerges; it gradually intensifies until the whole process comes to a halt on a series of powerful C-major chords. The latter immediately dissolve in arpeggios (broken chords) that give rise to much of the second half of the movement, where the harmonies are overlaid with a series of expressive trills. The ending is nothing short of magical.

The dynamic finale, "Molto Vivace,"

The Lick Quartet

David Bruce

Born: Stamford, CT, 1970

Composed: 2019

David Bruce was born in the United States but has spent most of his life in England, where he studied with such luminaries as Harrison Birtwistle and George Benjamin. To date, he has written four operas which have been performed with great success at the Glyndebourne Festival, Covent Garden and other prestigious venues. His catalog of instrumental works has also been acclaimed on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Lick Quartet, jointly commissioned by the Dallas Chamber Music Society and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, received its premiere by the Dover Quartet in Dallas on October 21, 2019. The composer has offered the following notes on the piece:

"The Lick" has been described as 'The most famous jazz cliché ever'—it's a melodic fragment that has been used by countless jazz musicians over the years, and more recently has become something of a joke, an internet 'meme'. As Wikipedia says, "it has become such a cliché, that musicians tend to only see it as an inside joke, so unironic performances are rare." After some fragments in the early sketches for this quartet started to resemble the lick, I decided to take that last statement as a challenge, and

is based on an agile motif introduced by the first violin alone. A polyphonic development ensues, but then the agile material recedes into the background to become the accompaniment of a broad new melody. For a while, the entire musical material seems gradually to disintegrate, but the movement recovers its momentum for the energetic conclusion.

see if I could find ways to incorporate the lick unironically into the piece. Although it's not the 'main theme' of any of the movements, I like to think I've treated it a bit like, say, Shostakovich treats his famous 'signature' motive in his 8th String Quartet—something that forms part of the texture and background material for the whole piece. For those so inclined, spotting the various statements and fragments of the melody that fly around throughout the piece may, I hope, add to the pleasure of listening.

The piece is in four movements, each of which has a subtitle referencing a further influence on the music. In the first, "Tigran's Lick", I experimented with a kind of rhythm I'd discovered in the music of pianist and composer Tigran Hamasyan—for those interested in such things, it's a polyrhythm that doesn't complete its cycle, but instead gets cut off and abruptly restarts, causing a jolt in the rhythmic flow as it does. Similarly, the 3rd movement 'Jacob's Lick' references a trick used by the jazz wunderkind Jacob Collier, where what seems to be a relatively simple 5/4 pattern is actually built from wonky uneven shorter time signatures—again making for a somewhat bumpy ride.

The 2nd and 4th movements reference two classical composers who have had some influence on this piece. The 2nd movement 'Antonín's Lick' references Antonín Dvořák. I have long loved the sunny simplicity of Dvořák's American Quartet, far more than some of his more earnest works, and I think some of that same happy outlook can be felt throughout my piece and in this movement in particular. Finally, the 4th movement 'Leoš's Lick' references one of my favourite composers—Leoš Janáček. Janáček shares

with Dvořák the influence of folk music, but he is also prone to far more quirky extremes of register and texture, sometimes generating excitement from the feeling that the music is on the edge of falling apart. I particularly feel the connection to this part of Janáček's music in the closing pages of my quartet, where the music flies by at a breakneck speed, and everyone—players and audience alike—must hold on to their seats and hope they make it out in one piece.

String Quartet No. 3 in B-flat major, Op. 67

Johannes Brahms

Born: Hamburg, 1833

Died: Vienna, 1897

Composed: 1875

Much ink has been spilled over whether Brahms was a “conservative” or a “progressive” composer—that is, whether he must be faulted for not going along with the radical ideas of his older contemporaries Liszt and Wagner, or whether he should be given more credit for his novel structural and harmonic solutions. One way out of this academic quandary would be to realize that the two adjectives in quotation marks are really two sides of the same coin: Brahms’s genius lay in the way he was able to innovate *within* an existing framework, and to reconcile his originality with the tradition that was sacred to him.

Few works show this duality better than the last string quartet, so daring in a lot of ways and still so comfortable in observing the classical rules of the genre. After two turbulent and dramatic minor-key quartets (Op. 51), Brahms composed one that is mostly bright and happy, though by no means simple, in tone—and Brahms once said that it was his favorite quartet of the three. The composer dedicated the work to

his friend Theodor Engelmann whose wife, Emma, was an accomplished pianist. In a letter dated August 9, 1876, Brahms wrote to Engelmann: “This quartet resembles your wife a bit—very pretty—but ingenious!”

The opening theme of the first movement is a direct descendant of Mozart’s “Hunt” Quartet (they have similar motivic materials, and share the same meter and the same key). Yet within a few measures, rhythmic complication arise the likes of which were never seen in Mozart. Most unusually, the meter changes in the folksy second theme and for a short while, two different meters are even heard simultaneously. The development section covers an enormous range of keys and characters. And yet, the end of the movement manages to settle happily back into the classical world as if nothing had happened.

The second-movement Andante contains one of Brahms’s most glorious melodies: it has an unusually wide range and draws an extremely long musical arc. It

is followed by a typical Brahmsian moment with powerful angular rhythms, played together by all four instruments. A beguilingly beautiful and rather adventurous development section leads back to a restatement of the opening melody, followed by an idyllic coda.

In the third movement, the viola plays “first fiddle”; the other three instruments accompany with their mutes on. An expressive melody in Brahms’s *Liebeslieder-Walzer* (“love-song waltz”) mode opens the movement which is in ABA form, but the central “B” presents little contrast: it is another sensuous waltz melody led, once again, by the viola.

The last movement is a classical theme-and-variations with many subtle surprises. First of all, the melodious theme has a slight but very noticeable irregularity in that its second half is two measures shorter than the first. This asymmetry is maintained in all the variations, which at

first follow the classical pattern of introducing faster figurations and giving each instrument a turn in playing the melody. The later variations go farther and farther afield until we reach a point, in a fairly distant key, where the melody seems entirely to dissolve in a series of chords accompanied by a *pizzicato*—plucked—bass line, itself alternating between the cello and the viola. It is a variation where *timbre*, or sound color, seems to take over as the most prominent musical parameter, more important than melody and rhythm!

After this magical moment, the opening melody of the *first* movement unexpectedly returns, and we realize that its melodic outline is related to that of the variation theme. The two themes are brilliantly combined in the final section but once again, after so many complicated compositional maneuvers, the work ends in a simple and straightforward manner.

-Peter Laki

Mr. Laki is a musicologist and Visiting Associate Professor of Music at Bard College. He has been the annotator for the Society’s program booklet since 2012, having previously served as annotator for the Cleveland Orchestra from 1990 to 2007. He is a native of Budapest and holds a Ph.D. in music from the University of Pennsylvania.