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Shanghai Quartet with Bartok Quartet

Department of Music, University of Richmond

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Shanghai Quartet

Modlin Center Distinguished Artists

Weigang Li, violin
Yi-Wen Jiang, violin
Honggang Li, viola
Nicholas Tzavaras, cello

with

Bartok Quartet

Peter Komlos, first violin
Geza Hargitai, second violin
Geza Nemeth, viola
Laszlo Mezo, violoncello

Sponsored in part by the Robins Foundation

The Modlin Center thanks Style Weekly for media sponsorship of the 2004-2005 season.
Tonight's Program

String Quartet in C Major, K 465
\begin{itemize}
  \item Adagio–Allegro
  \item Andante cantabile
  \item Menuetto (Allegretto)–Trio
\end{itemize}
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756-1791)
Shanghai Quartet

String Quartet, No. 4 in C Major
\begin{itemize}
  \item Allegro
  \item Prestissimo, con sordino
  \item Non troppo lento
  \item Allegretto pizzicato
  \item Allegro molto
\end{itemize}
Béla Bartók
(1881-1945)
Bartok Quartet

—Intermission—

Octet in E-Flat Major, Op. 20
\begin{itemize}
  \item Allegro moderato—\textit{ma con fuoco}
  \item Andante
  \item Scherzo (Allegro leggierissimo)
  \item Presto
\end{itemize}
Felix Mendelssohn
(1809-1847)
Shanghai Quartet and Bartok Quartet

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About the Artists

Shanghai Quartet

Hailed by The Strad as “a foursome of uncommon refinement and musical distinction,” the Shanghai Quartet stands apart for its powerful music-making and its deft interweaving of Eastern and Western musical traditions. The Quartet was formed at the Shanghai Conservatory and celebrated its 20th anniversary season last year with the Beethoven Project: East Meets West. The project culminated in the unprecedented performance of the complete Beethoven string quartets in China, and also featured free concerts at the City University of New York, a new recording of two Beethoven string quartets, and collaborations with various colleges throughout the country.

The Quartet took the project to Japan last fall with performances in Tokyo and Osaka; Seoul, Korea; and then to Shanghai and Beijing, China, marking the first time these monumental works had been performed for Chinese audiences.

Also part of the Quartet’s 20th anniversary season was the release of a Delos Beethoven recording featuring two of the middle string quartets; No. 8, op. 59 no. 2 in E minor, and No. 9, op. 59 No. 3 in C Major. Additional performances in this project included a residency at the Tilles Center at C.W. Post College in Long Island, N.Y., and special collaborations in Richmond and Detroit.

Over the past two decades, the Shanghai Quartet has built an extensive discography with Delos International. The most recent one is Silent Temple, a recording of music by composer Bright Sheng on the Bis label. In November 2002, the Quartet released ChinaSong, a 24-track collection of Chinese folk songs arranged by Shanghai Quartet violinist Yi-Wen Jiang.

Other recent recordings include Ravel’s Quartet paired with Frank Bridge’s Quartet in E Minor; Noveletten; The Flowering Stream, Chinese folk songs and
tone poems by Zhou Long, with pipa player Min Xiao-Fen; and a Brahms album featuring Quartet No. 3 in B-Flat Major, Op. 67 and the String Quintet No. 1 in F Major, Op. 88 with guest violinist Arnold Steinhardt.

The Shanghai Quartet regularly tours the major music capitals of Europe and North America, frequently appearing at the Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C. In addition, the quartet often tours China, Japan and Korea, and has performed extensively in Australia and New Zealand. Recent international engagements include The Casals Festival in Puerto Rico and The West Cork Chamber Music Festival in Ireland. The Quartet has made several appearances at Lincoln Center's Great Performers series and Mostly Mozart Festival.

The Shanghai Quartet is currently the quartet-in-residence at Montclair State University. The quartet has also served as ensemble-in-residence at the Tanglewood and Ravinia festivals and as the graduate ensemble-in-residence at the Juilliard School. In addition, after 14 years as faculty, the Quartet is now recognized as distinguished visiting artists at the University of Richmond.

Endorsing new music has been a mainstay of the Shanghai Quartet over the course of the last 20 years. Recent projects include a commission with Chamber Music America, a premiere of Lowell Lieberman’s Quartet in honor of the National Federation of Music Clubs’ 100th anniversary, and a work by Bright Sheng commissioned by the University of Richmond and the Freer Gallery in 2000.

The prestigious achievements of the Quartet include winning the Chicago Discovery Competition in 1987, taking second place at the Portsmouth International String Quartet competition in 1985 (now the London International Competition) and being nominated for the Asahi Broadcasting Company's International Music Award after their first Far East tour in 1996.

A native of Shanghai, Weigang Li (violin) has been a featured soloist with the Asian Youth Orchestra, the Shanghai Symphony, the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the BBC Scottish Symphony. Mr. Li began studying the violin with his parents at the age of five and went on to attend the Shanghai Conservatory at age 14. He came to the United States in 1981 to study at the San Francisco Conservatory through an exchange program between the sister cities of San Francisco and Shanghai. Upon graduating from the Shanghai Conservatory in 1985, Mr. Li was appointed assistant professor of violin at the school. Shortly thereafter, he left China to continue his education at the Northern Illinois University. From 1987-1989, Mr. Li studied and taught at the Juilliard School as teaching assistant to the Juilliard Quartet. His other teachers have included Shmuel Ashkenasi, Pierre Menard, Shu-Chen Tan and Isadore Tinkleman. Mr. Li was featured in the film From Mao to Mozart: Isaac Stern in China.

Born in Beijing, Yi-Wen Jiang (violin) has appeared as a soloist with the Victoria Symphony and the Montreal Symphony. He has also performed for NBC and PBS television specials, National Public Radio, CPB in Beijing, WQXR in New York and KFUO in St. Louis. Beginning his violin studies with his father at age
six, he made his concerto debut with the Central Opera House Orchestra in Beijing when he was 17. In 1981, after winning a top prize at the First China Youth Violin Competition, Mr. Jiang was accepted into the class of professor Han Li at the Central Conservatory of Music. In 1985 he came to the United States on a full scholarship to the St. Louis Conservatory, where his teachers included Taras Gabora, Jaime Laredo and Michael Tree. He also spent two summers in Dallas, participating in master classes with Pinchas Zukerman. In 1990, with the support of the Ken Boxley Foundation, he went to Rutgers University to work with Arnold Steinhardt of the Guarneri Quartet. A prizewinner at the Mae M. Whitaker and Montreal competitions, Mr. Jiang has appeared at many international music festivals, collaborating with such prominent artists as Alexander Schneider, Michael Tree, Jaime Laredo and Lynn Harrell. He has recorded for the Record Corporation of China.

Honggang Li (viola) began his musical training studying the violin with his parents at the same time as his brother, Weigang. When the Beijing Conservatory reopened in 1977 after the Cultural Revolution, Mr. Li was selected to attend from a group of over 500 applicants. He continued his training at the Shanghai Conservatory and was appointed a faculty member there in 1984. Mr. Li has also served as a teaching assistant at the Juilliard School and has appeared as soloist with the Shanghai Philharmonic and the Shanghai Conservatory Orchestra. In 1987 he won a violin as a special prize given by Elisa Pegreffi of Quartetto Italiano at the Paolo Borciani competition in Italy.

Nicholas Tzavaras (cello) has been an active soloist and chamber musician throughout the United States. He has made solo appearances with the Tanglewood Festival Orchestra, the National Repertory Orchestra, the SUNY Stonybrook Symphony and the East Iowa Symphony, as well as at Fiddlefest at Carnegie Hall and at the Tonhalle in Zurich. Mr. Tzavaras has previously appeared at the Isaac Stern International Chamber Music Encounters in Jerusalem, and also at the Marlboro, Tanglewood, Taos, Sarasota and Musicorda music festivals. Mr. Tzavaras holds a Bachelor of Music degree from the New England Conservatory, and a Master of Music degree from the State University of New York at Stony Brook and has studied with Laurence Lesser and Timothy Eddy. In addition to his performing schedule, he is active in music outreach and education. Mr. Tzavaras has taught at many different music schools including the Opus 118 Music Center in East Harlem, where his mother, Roberta Guasparsi, is the artistic director. Mr. Tzavaras' family was portrayed in the movie Music of the Heart, which starred Meryl Streep.
Bartok Quartet

The Barok Quartet's tonal beauty, clarity, directness and exceptional ensemble playing has caused critics and audiences alike to acclaim it as one of the most distinguished chamber groups on the international scene. "It is clearly one of the great quartets of the world" (The New York Times). In 1997-98 the quartet celebrated its 40th anniversary season.

Formed in 1957, the Bartok Quartet rose to worldwide fame as winner of the 1959 International Haydn Competition in Budapest, and International Schumann Competition in Berlin the following year. In 1963, the group captured first place at the Budapest competition and the prestigious International String Quartet Competition in Liege, Belgium. The Kossuth Prize—Hungary's highest award—was conferred upon the quartet in 1970 and again in 1997, the first time the prize had been given twice to any ensemble. Further awards include Unesco Prize in 1981 and the Bartok Prize in 1986.

The quartet members first came together at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest, where they began playing chamber music under the tutelage of the renowned teacher and composer Leo Weiner. Inspired and encouraged by Weiner, they formed a professional ensemble, calling themselves the Komlos Quartet, from 1963 to be renamed the Bartok Quartet in honor of their great countryman, Béla Bartók. The musicians perform on four of the finest instruments of the eighteenth century (Peter Komlos plays the famed "Hamma" Stradivarius, built in 1731).

The Bartok Quartet has performed over 3,500 concerts throughout the world, and its frequent tours of North America have taken them to virtually every major music center, including New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, Cincinnati, Dallas, Denver, St. Louis, Baltimore, New Orleans, Quebec, Toronto and Montreal. Its recent schedules have taken it to such major festival as Tanglewood, Spoleto, Salzburg, Edinburgh, Aix-en-Provence and Lucerne.

The Bartok Quartet is equally at home with repertory from the classical throughout the contemporary eras, but may be best known for performances of works by its illustrious denominator. The quartet has presented the complete Bartok quartet cycle on many occasions, and its recordings of these masterpieces have earned exceptional critical acclaim. In addition to the music of Haydn, Mozart, Schubert and Brahms, the quartet is noted for its recordings of contemporary composers. The ensemble's recording of the Beethoven quartets was cited by High Fidelity as one of the greatest recordings of the last quarter century.
Peter Komlos (*first violin*) was born in Budapest in 1935 and studied the violin from the age of 5. From 1950-56 he studied at the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest and graduated from there in 1958. He is the winner of several prizes at international competitions both for solo playing and for performance with the quartet. A founder of the Bartok Quartet, since 1962 he has traveled throughout the world with the ensemble, which has performed over 3800 concerts. Since 1980 he has been violin and chamber music professor at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest.

Geza Hargitai (*second violin*) was born in 1958 in Budapest. He started violin studies at the age of six and won several competitions before he graduated with a degree in violin from the Liszt Academy in 1977 at the age of 19. He was concertmaster of the Matav Symphony Orchestra and the State Opera in Budapest before joining the Bartok Quartet in 1985.

Geza Nemeth (*viola*) was born in 1936 and started his music studies at the age of six. He received his degree in viola from the Liszt Academy in 1961 and won the Geneva International Competition in 1962. He is one of the founders of the Bartok Quartet, formed more than 45 years ago, and has traveled all over the world with the ensemble, including in the U.S. since 1967. He has taught at the Franz Liszt Academy since 1980.

Laszlo Mezo (*violincello*) was born in 1939 in Szeghalom, Hungary and attended music school in Tarhos from 1947-54. He then moved to Budapest where he graduated from the Liszt Academy of Music in 1962 as a cellist. Winner of several international prizes at competitions in Europe, he studied in the United States with Pablo Casals and Grigor Piatigorsky in 1965/66 on a Ford Scholarship. He has been a teacher and professor of cello at the Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest since 1966. Mr. Mezo has traveled all over the world with the Bartok Quartet for over 30 years.
Notes on the Program

Quartet for Strings in C Major, K 465
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

On June 9, 1781, while the Archbishop of Salzburg and his court were in Vienna during celebrations for the accession of the Emperor Joseph II, Mozart was finally released from the Archbishop's service at the age of 25. Mozart simply stayed on in Vienna, where he lived for the remaining ten and a half years of his life.

Mozart likely met Haydn in Vienna in 1781, and the six "Haydn" Quartets were composed by Mozart between December 1782 and January 1785. When the quartets were published in September 1785, the title page and the dedication—both in Italian—specified that the quartets were dedicated to Haydn, "my dear friend." They are unusual in Mozart's output, since he normally composed works for specific commissions. In contrast, he wrote these quartets simply because he wanted to. In fact, string quartets did not really attract much public attention at the time. The genre was not intended for public concerts, but rather for gatherings of small groups of musical connoisseurs (which in many cases consisted of only the performers).

The Quartet in C Major, K 465, is the last of the set, and certainly the most infamous at the time. Nicknamed "The Dissonant," the 22-measure slow introduction includes all 12 pitches of the octave in its first 15 measures (measures five to eight are a repeat of measures one to four—one whole step down). They are filled with chromaticism, unstable harmonic movement and cross relations. His contemporaries who were familiar with the quartet were not enthusiastic. Some went so far as to return their subscription copies to the publisher, assuming that it contained printing errors. However, scholars today agree that Mozart himself supervised the preparation of the engraved plates.

This set exhibits Mozart's increased use of counterpoint and balance between the four voices. The last three quartets were first performed on January 15, 1875, at a "quartet party" held by Mozart and attended by Haydn. During that evening Haydn said to Mozart's father, Leopold: "Before God, and as an honest man, I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me in person or by name. He has taste, and, what is more, the greatest knowledge of composition."

All movements of "The Dissonant" include significant dynamic contrasts for the period, ranging from "pp" to "sf." Following the slow introduction of movement one, we have the usual sonata-allegro form. The second movement, in F major, is not in one of the standard forms of the classical era. It's opening motive yields to a four-note motive, which appears frequently in sequential imitation, and to a second major motive that appears twice.

Following the Minuet and Trio, which is the only movement without a coda, the final movement is again in sonata form. However there is interesting treatment in the recapitulation, where the third motive moves from C major,
though A-flat major and D-flat major (the Neapolitan key) before returning to C major.

— Homer Rudolf

String Quartet, No. 4 in C Major

Béla Bartók

While contemporary audiences hold Béla Bartók (1881-1945) in high esteem as a composer, he was also an internationally recognized ethnomusicologist who recorded, catalogued and thereby preserved an extensive Eastern European musical folk tradition that might otherwise have been lost to the world forever. His work represents a musical synthesis of an undiluted nationalism reflecting his native traditions with a visionary aesthetic.

Not content to draw upon the tame Westernized, café gypsy versions that inspired his predecessors such as Liszt and Brahms, Bartók delved deeply, unflinchingly into the Hungarian folk tradition, determined to pay homage to the true music of his homeland. His research yielded a strangely dissonant and complex repertoire—nothing resembling those simple harmonies and rhythms that we so often associate with folk music.

Bartók once observed that he had been born not once, but twice—his second birth taking place in 1904 and occasioned by his overhearing a young girl singing a lullaby to the baby she was tending. This girl, Lidi Dósa, recalled the moment in an interview: “I was staying at a summer hotel [as a nanny]. Our rooms were next to each other. I heard Bartók practicing all the time... and then, on one occasion, he heard me singing... I was singing to the child... The song pleased Bartók, and he asked me to sing it again because he wanted to note it down. When he had taken it down, he went to the piano and played it. He then called me and asked if he was playing it properly. Well, it was exactly as I had sung it.”

Beginning in 1906, Bartók, often accompanied by his friend and colleague, the composer Zoltan Kodaly, began his first treks into the countryside with the express purpose of recording folksongs. Armed with Edison’s recent invention, the gramophone, the two men with their passion for ordinary folk tunes must have struck local residents as slightly unhinged. And in regions where life was conducted with little intrusion from the modern world, the sound machine they brought with them no doubt intensified the mystery. When first approached, many villagers were reluctant to sing into the recording apparatus but once a volunteer had bravely tested the unfamiliar waters, many eagerly contributed. Susan Cirt, a young girl living in Troa, Rumania, recalls her meeting with Bartok who was traveling with the Italian conductor, Egisto Tango, at the time. “They asked my mother to receive them and to agree to my singing into the gramophone for them... I sang one nice verse, and then another one. It came back sounding so beautiful. The whole village gathered around us. The whole village. Everyone was wanting to sing.” Bartók later recalled those years, roaming through the countryside, as “the happiest
of my life.”

Bartok’s Fourth Quartet, composed in 1928, makes demands of both performer and listener. The work features the “Bartok snap,” a pizzicato technique in which the player pulls a string with enough force that it rebounds off the fingerboard. While the technique may seem an avant-garde invention, Bartok was, in fact, merely employing a technique commonly used by the folk musicians of his native Hungary.

Halsey Stevens writes that the quartet “comes close to being, if it does not actually represent, Bartok’s greatest and most profound achievement. It is by no means easy to understand; it requires the most active sort of listening...But once its arcana are discovered, there are few works so meaningful or so rewarding.”

— Rebecca Yarowsky

Octet in E-Flat Major, Op. 20

Felix Mendelssohn

Wealthy, handsome, athletic and possessing a genius intellect, Felix Mendelssohn was truly one of the Golden Boys of history. As a child, he learned several languages including Greek, was proficient at many instruments (piano, organ, voice, violin and viola), had a great talent for drawing
and painting and was friends with many famous composers and intellectuals of his time, among them Weber, Cherubini, Paganini, Spohr and Goethe. By the time he had written the Octet for double string quartet, he had not only mastered music theory, counterpoint and composition, he had written many pieces including two string quartets. The following year he would write one of the most famous orchestral pieces ever, the Overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

More remarkable is the fact that Mendelssohn was only 16 years old when he wrote the Octet. Clearly this is not a spontaneous accident of composition, but a work of amazing maturity and craft. Although there had been a tradition of writing works for double quartet using the two groups like soloists and orchestra, the idea of writing a piece for eight strings who play all at once is unique to Mendelssohn. This innovative style can be heard right from the beginning of the piece where the first violin plays an ascending theme accompanied by syncopated and quavering chords. The eight voices are used in a brilliant variety of textures resulting in the synthesis of beauty, elegance and boundless energy.

As a contrast, the second movement starts out as a Sicilienne-like dance in C minor, but quickly becomes more ambiguous: tonality shifts, the music becomes dreamy and we are again in innovative territory.

Felix sister, Fanny, writes about the memorable Third movement: “To me alone he told his idea...The whole piece is to be played staccato and pianissimo...everything’s new and strange and at the same time most insinuating and pleasing. One feels so near to the world of spirits, carried away in the air, half inclined to snatch up a broomstick and follow the aerial procession. At the end, the first violin takes a flight with a feather-like lightness—and all has vanished.”

In the fourth movement, Mendelssohn treats the eight strings as a small orchestra. It is a grand fugue starting in the second cello and ascending through the group until it reaches the first violin. This is a brilliant and exciting movement, propelled by almost constant eighth notes. In a characteristic touch, the spirit world of the third movement makes an appearance in the development section.

While Mendelssohn himself had said later in his life that the Octet always had the ability to conjure up his youth, composer Max Brush compared it with the Overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and found that “both works have earned great immortality, but the Octet will always remain the greater miracle.”

— Jim Wilson