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Shanghai Quartet

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About the Artists: *Shanghai Quartet*



Originally formed in Shanghai 25 years ago, this versatile ensemble is known for their passionate musicality, impressive technique and multicultural innovations. The Shanghai Quartet's elegant style of melding the delicacy of Eastern music with the emotional breadth of Western repertoire allows them to traverse the genres from Chinese folk music to cutting edge contemporary classical works. To celebrate their 25th anniversary (2008-09), the Quartet will premiere commissions from the three continents that represent their artistic and cultural worlds: Chen Yi, Krzysztof Penderecki and Dick Hyman.

The Quartet has performed on the world's most prominent concert stages and tours the great music centers of Europe, North and South America and Asia. They have made regular appearances at Carnegie Hall, both in chamber performance and with orchestra. In 2006 they performed the world premiere of a Concerto for Quartet and Orchestra by Takuma Itoh in Carnegie's Isaac Stern Auditorium.

A long tradition of championing new music and juxtaposing Eastern and Western sounds has led the Quartet to premiere works by Lowell Lieberman, Bright Sheng and Zhou Long, among others.

The ensemble's extensive discography now totals more than 20 recordings on multiple labels. Some of the most recent include the Mendelssohn Octet (Camerata) and Zhou Long's *Poems for Tang Quartet and Orchestra* (BIS). In 2003, the Quartet released its most popular disc to date: a 24-track collection of Chinese folk songs *ChinaSong* which features music arranged by Yi-Wen Jiang, recalling his childhood memories of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Current projects include recording the complete Beethoven string quartets (Camerata). The complete cycle is scheduled for release over the next five years.

The Quartet has appeared in a diverse and interesting array of media projects. They performed on the soundtrack recording (Bartok Quartet No. 4), as well as making a cameo appearance on screen, for the Woody Allen film *Melinda and Melinda*. They have appeared on PBS's *Great Performances* television series. Other on-screen film accomplishments include an appearance by violinist Weigang Li in the documentary *From Mao to Mozart: Isaac Stern in China* while cellist Nick Tzavaras' family was the subject of the 1999 film *Music of the Heart* starring Meryl Streep.

Program Notes: Mozart

Mozart's arrival in Vienna in 1781 would signal a period of previously unknown freedom in the composer's life. After the Archbishop Colloredo, who was staying in the capital at the time, rudely dismissed him from the Salzburg court with, as Mozart wrote to his sister, "a kick on my arse," Mozart resolved to remain in the city. Having enjoyed true democratic treatment in other European cities while touring, Mozart rankled at his servant status in Salzburg that placed him below the valets but above the cooks. He would now throw off the provincial, stultifying shackles of Salzburg, effectively distance himself from Leopold, his overly-solicitous – and often meddling – father and ultimately realize a worthwhile court appointment that he had so long coveted. His marriage to Constanze Weber, a year later, proved to be a happy union, characterized by passion, commitment and an enduring love. Constanze has suffered the condemnation of more than a few historians but, for all intents and purposes, she was the perfect mate for a genius of Mozart's temperament. In Vienna, Mozart produced some of his most glorious work, including concerti, string quartets, the *Haffner*, *Linz*, *Prague* and *Jupiter* symphonies and his operas *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Così fan tutte* and *The Magic Flute*.

The Mozart household was a lively one. When Leopold stayed with the couple in 1785, he was alternately impressed and disappointed. Joseph Haydn, viewed throughout Europe as the supreme master in all things musical, paid a visit to Wolfgang's apartment during that time and confided to Leopold: "Before God and as an honest man, I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me either by name or reputation."

Leopold's sojourn lasted more than two months. The hyperactivity of Wolfgang's life, even though it offered Leopold daily opportunities to enjoy concerts, plays and lavish dinners, proved too much for the

old man. Certainly, witnessing his son as independent, free-spirited and roundly respected contributed to Leopold's sour assessment of his situation in the following remarks to his daughter, Nannerl. After all, Wolfgang was no longer the obedient, affection-seeking child he had known. "We never go to bed before one in the morning and never get up before nine. The weather is horrible! Concerts every day and unending teaching, music-making and composing. Where am I supposed to go? If only the concerts were over!"

In 1787, Mozart received the post of Kammermusicus in Emperor Joseph II's court. While the position offered a salary of 800 gulden (the composer Gluck, whose death occasioned this appointment, had received 2000) and required very little other than providing dance music for court festivities, it nevertheless appealed to Mozart both for its steady income and the enhanced status he would receive. He also remained free to compose.

An evaluation of Mozart's money situation at this time reveals that his income from such sources as the emperor's patronage (which extended beyond the court appointment), public performances, teaching and music publishers should have made it possible for the composer to lead a relatively comfortable existence. However, he found himself in chronic financial straits and was forced to borrow from his fellow Freemasons and most often – Johann Puchberg – to maintain his standard of living. Furthermore, Constanze's constant pregnancies (only two children were to survive) required confinement and a frequent schedule of taking the waters at Baden.

On January 26, 1790, *Così fan tutti* premiered to an enthusiastic audience at the Burgtheater. But the following month was to bring an event that would cast a shadow on Mozart's prospects. Emperor Joseph died on February 20th, having presided over increasing political strife: the war with

Program Notes: Mozart and Ligeti

Turkey was to continue for another year and a half, Hungary had dismantled many of his reforms and the Austrian Lowlands had declared independence. Joseph's successor, Leopold II, had inherited a quagmire on several fronts and, as a result, paid little attention to Mozart. Later in the year, Leopold neglected to include the composer in performances when his sons married and the expected invitation to his coronation never materialized.

In 1790, the letters to Puchberg begging for loans increased. Mozart complained to Puchberg that he had been "forced to give away" the three Prussian quartets – the third of which the Shanghai Quartet performs tonight – for a "ridiculous sum."

In May of 1789, King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia, who played the cello, had commissioned Mozart to write a series of quartets. Composition proceeded slowly as Mozart felt obliged to assign a prominent role to the cello in the quartets. This concern was soon tossed aside, however. Perhaps Mozart had abandoned hope that the King of Prussia was still interested in the project. In K. 590, Mozart's powers of creativity are at their height. As musicologist Alec Hyatt King writes, "Despite almost frenetic exuberance of invention, the power of the music remains under perfect control. Here then is the final paradox – private music apparently expressing violent feeling."

The "Prussian" quartets, published soon after Mozart's death, unfortunately contained no dedication. We can only speculate, hopefully, that copies somehow made their way to Friedrich Wilhelm, giving him the opportunity to derive the same enjoyment from these masterpieces that we continue to experience today.

György Ligeti (1923-2006) was born in what is now known as Tîrnâveni, a small town in Transylvania. At the end of World War I, Transylvania had been ceded to Romania; however, Tîrnâveni had previously been under the jurisdiction of

Hungary and Hungarian was to be Ligeti's native tongue. He would credit the rhythms and meter of the language for the musical impulse that inspired his work.

Ligeti's parents came from a middle-class, Jewish background. His mother, Ilona, was a doctor. His father, Sandor – a banker whose vocation failed to interfere with his socialism – was later to (paradoxically) produce a utopian novel about a society in which money was unnecessary.

In 1929, the Ligetis moved to Cluj, the largest city in Transylvania and a welcome contrast to the rustic provinciality of György's birthplace. The family now began to frequent symphony and opera performances. Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* impressed György with the "sound of bells and the golden splendor of all these kings and priests and courtiers" while *La Traviata* sent him "into a sort of trance, into [a] dreamlike state." The move to Cluj also brought disturbing changes for György: the school curriculum was taught in Romanian and he was picked on by playground bullies. Sadly, complaints about György's treatment rang on deaf ears as many of the school administrators and faculty were anti-Semitic.

Unlike most composers, Ligeti began his study of music at a relatively late age. He was 14 when his parents finally yielded to his request to take lessons. The exposure to music inspired him to compose. As Ligeti told BBC interviewer John Tusa: "I very gradually developed a kind of possibility to not only imagine music, but to compose it on paper, on page . . . And then I just went in a shop, bought music paper, had a pencil and eraser and began to write a piece when I could play a little bit piano. And it was in Grieg's style, because I played some simple *Valse of Lyrische Stucke* of Grieg, so this was my first attempt to compose."

World War II approached. Ligeti managed to study at the Cluj Conservatory despite quotas restricting the enrollment of Jewish

Program Notes: Ligeti

students. It was during this time that he fell under the influence of Béla Bartók, whose work he was fortunate enough to hear performed in concert. Richard Toop, Ligeti biographer, writes "[T]he Second String Quartet of 1917 so impressed Ligeti that Bartók, and his string quartets in particular, came to represent a standard of perfection that became a yardstick for his own work."

The war brought tragedy: Ligeti's younger brother, Gábor was sent to Mauthausen, Sandor to Bergen-Belsen and Ilona was imprisoned at Auschwitz. Ligeti was assigned to a labor camp within the Hungarian army. When the war ended, only Ligeti and his mother – who had used her skills as a doctor to assist in the clinic – had survived.

After the war ended, Ligeti continued to pay homage to the genius of Bartók while allowing his own genius to shine forth simultaneously. It was during this time (1954) that Ligeti composed *Metamorphoses Nocturnes*.

The years immediately following the Second World War were marked by isolation – exposure to new musical trends in Europe, the United Kingdom and America was minimal. Many of Bartók's works had been banned under the Stalinist/Soviet regime. Scores had to be smuggled into the country. Radio broadcasts of new music were inaccessible.

In 1956, Ligeti and his wife fled Hungary for the West. The couple ended up in Cologne where Ligeti met Stockhausen and

Boulez. As he told John Tusa, "I learned that there is a total different music. This was the music of Messiaen, Boulez, Stockhausen and a couple of other composers. But I think that Boulez and Stockhausen were most important for me – that there is a way which is so different and I was influenced. However, not totally influenced, because I rejected this idea to write Serial music. I am a constructivist, but not a dogmatic person." Ligeti eventually tired of the clash of egos, the in-fighting and the competition and gently broke to pursue his own path.

Ligeti dismissed the assessment of modern music as being "too intellectual," emphasizing when the musicians display facility in performance, the work succeeds and the audience responds. The Shanghai Quartet, no doubt, would have made Ligeti proud.

Metamorphoses Nocturnes represents both a tribute to Bartok – in its nocturnal elements, also evocative of the clandestine nature of the work's composition – and a departure from the admired composer, as it eschewed the sonata structures and arch forms for which Bartok is known.

Alex Ross, of *The New Yorker*, wrote that Ligeti was "one of the few major composers who are notable for a sense of humor." This assessment is born out by Shanghai Quartet violist, Honggang Li, who describes *Metamorphoses* as "twenty minutes of one long movement with so many different characters. It ranges from funny to violent to happy – you name it."

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Program Notes: Dvořák

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904) was born in the village of Nelahozeves in Bohemia. Frantisek Dvořák, an innkeeper and butcher, had originally hoped that his son would carry on the family business. In fact, young Antonin obliged his father by leaving school at the age of 11 to serve as an apprentice in his father's shop. But it soon became apparent to Frantisek, a musician who boasted a reputation as a capable fiddler, that his son's true passion lay elsewhere. He sent Antonin off to live with an uncle who financed the boy's musical education.

In 1857, Antonin enrolled in the Prague Organ School. Following graduation, his life was devoted to taking in students, composing and performing as a violist in an ensemble that eventually comprised the nucleus of the Provisional Theater Orchestra.

Because composing was his first love, Dvořák left the orchestra in 1871 with the intention of dedicating himself to creative pursuits. However, within several years, marriage and the quotidian demands of life required that he make a living by tutoring and performing as organist for the church of St. Adalbert. His works, which bore a decidedly nationalist stripe, began to receive an ever-growing public appreciation.

In 1877, he applied for and received the Austrian State Stipendium, established with the sole purpose of assisting poor, young and talented artists. Johannes Brahms, who served on the selection committee, was to become Dvořák's champion. On December 12, 1877, Brahms dashed off a letter to his own music publisher, Simrock, urging action: "On the recent occasion of allocating a state grant . . . I took much pleasure in the works of Dvořák of Prague. I have recommended him to send you his *Moravian Duets*. If you play them through, you will enjoy them as much as I have done . . . Decidedly, he is a very talented man. Besides, he is poor. Please take this into consideration."

Simrock took Brahms up on his request, publishing the duets and commissioning the *Slavonic Dances* in 1878. Thus, Dvořák's career as a composer was launched as was his friendship with Brahms to whom he remained forever grateful.

Recognition seemed to provide the composer with a surge in creative momentum. Furthermore, as his music became more widely available, the world duly took note and foreign performances of his work were scheduled in rapid succession.

In October of 1892, Dvořák arrived in New York to serve as director of the National Conservatory of Music. Mrs. Jeannette Thurber, the wife of a grocery store magnate, had extended the invitation and offered the then-lavish sum of \$15,000 a year for the position, hoping that the composer might inspire a national movement in American music. Of the repertoire contributed by African-Americans, Dvořák wrote, "America can have her own music, a fine music growing up from her own soil and having its own special character – the natural voice of a free and great nation." While in the United States, Dvořák produced a body of work that is known as "American" and includes the *Ninth Symphony, From the New World* – a symphony whose motifs are reputedly influenced by both native American and African-American melodies. He returned to Prague in 1895.

The composer began work on the Quartet in A-flat Major while still in New York and completed it after he arrived home. Critics have suggested that the work represents a musical statement of gratitude for his safe return to his homeland. Throughout, the homage to Bohemia is strikingly apparent.

— Rebecca Yarowsky