

Notes on our Program
The Wister Quartet
October 9, 2016, 3:00pm

Luigi Boccherini (1743-1805)
String Quartet in A Major, Op. 8, No. 6

Boccherini was born in Lucca and died in Madrid, his home for thirty-seven years. Here he enjoyed the friendship of the painter, Goya. Boccherini was a cello virtuoso and an extraordinarily prolific composer. Among his massive output (symphonies, concertos, secular pieces, etc.) are no less than one hundred quintets and about ninety string quartets. He is considered, along with Joseph Haydn, to be the originator of the string quartet as its own unique genre.

This quartet was written in 1769 and is one of Boccherini's most sparkling and imaginative efforts. He had just moved from Paris to Madrid and had already begun enjoying private and royal patronage there, including that of Don Luis, the Spanish Infante and younger brother of King Charles III. It was to him that this quartet, one of a set of six, is dedicated.

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)
String Quartet in D Minor, Op. 76, No. 2 ("Quinten")

The miracle of the string quartet as perhaps the most perfect medium for the expression of abstract musical thought owes its early development to the genius of Haydn, coincidentally along with the independent groundbreaking work of Luigi Boccherini, whom he had never met.

No other musical form occupied Haydn so consistently throughout his life as the string quartet: his entire creative development, spanning more than fifty years, is reflected in his eighty-three quartets.

Haydn's two highly successful tours in England had enabled him to begin enjoying life on his own terms, free from the musical servitude under the Esterházy family. He also returned home to a new political and social climate: the tendency towards democracy was sweeping through Europe and changing not only how people saw themselves, but how artists could portray them.

The idea of the "freedom of the human spirit" comes through in Haydn's instrumental works. Now a landed, middle-class celebrity, he was able to lavish all of his powers on his six Op. 76 quartets. He wrote them mostly in the summer of 1797 and dedicated them to Count Joseph Erdödy, one of his chief patrons.

The first movement of the "Quinten", so named because of the fifths heard in the first violin at the opening, is dark and brooding. The Menuetto has been called the "Witches' Minuet" because of its stark canonic imitation between the violins and the lower strings.

Its Trio section is just the opposite — sunny and harmonious. The last movement is a symbol of emotional and spiritual triumph, ending purposefully in Haydn's "joyous" key of D Major.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 51, No. 2

Brahms had struggled for twenty years with the demands of string quartet writing. He once wrote that "the shadow of Beethoven" seemed to intimidate him as he strove to develop his own chamber music voice. The two quartets of Op. 51 resulted from these labors.

The quartets were published in 1873 and dedicated to the Viennese surgeon and musician Dr. Theodore Billroth. The premiere of the A Minor work was given in Berlin by the Joachim Quartet. In the A Minor quartet, Brahms used the violinist Joseph Joachim's personal motto — the notes F-A-E, standing for *Frei, aber einsam* ("free, but lonely"). He made these notes the second, third, and fourth notes of the first movement's main theme. He also wove his own motto into the musical texture: F-A-F, *Frei, aber froh* ("Free, but happy").

The quartet opens earnestly and with questions before relaxing into a more *gemütlich* second theme of great charm. Brahms wouldn't be Brahms, though, if he couldn't raise questions about even the most charming melody, and the movement explores with restless energy both its earnestness and its charm, ending (predictably) quite seriously.

The slow movement is an unhurried love song, but an argument interrupts the serenity. After a couple of go-rounds, a very engaging reconciliation takes place and the original mood returns.

The next movement is marked "Quasi Minuetto." It is too mysterious, and its middle section too playful, to be a formal dance. The two sections also alternate more randomly than a Minuet would allow. It is Brahms at his most fantastic, a peek into the later Romantic realms of Debussy and Ravel.

The Finale is boisterous, beginning contentiously, but becoming more colloquial. Just as we begin to make friends with it, the music interrupts the mood with another contentious burst. This alternation between bluster and friendliness seems to illustrate the social Brahms, too blunt to be the constant friend, but eager to reach out whenever he could manage to do so.