

The German Society of Pennsylvania  
611 Spring Garden Street, Philadelphia  
215-627-2332  
[www.germansociety.org](http://www.germansociety.org)

Dear Members and Friends,

We are delighted to remind you that the opening concert of our 2011/12 “Wister and More!” Series will be on Sunday, October 9 at 3:00 p.m.:

## The Wister Quartet

Nancy Bean, violin      Pamela Fay, viola  
Davyd Booth, violin      Lloyd Smith, cello

**Sunday, October 9 at 3:00 p.m.**

### The Program

MADALENA LOMBARDINI-SYRMEN	String Quartet No. 2 in B $\flat$ Major
W. A. MOZART	String Quartet in C Major, K. 465
ANTONIN DVORAK	String Quartet in F Major, Op. 96 (“American”)

### A Brief Overview of our Concert

*A rarely-heard treasure by one of Western culture’s all-too-few women composers opens our program. Madalena Lombardini-Syrmén was not only an intensely talented violinist and composer, she enjoyed fame throughout her career.*

*Mozart’s works are, to our ears, thoroughly agreeable. How this quartet became nicknamed “Dissonance” is an indicator of how little tolerance for any sounds outside the accepted harmonically pleasant norm existed in the 18th century.*

*One of the best-known and best-loved string quartets ever is Dvorák’s “American.” Written while enjoying a summer vacation in Spillville, Iowa, Dvorák loved listening to the*

*unfamiliar bird calls, music of Native Americans, and other sources of folk and casual music. He incorporated them (along with his rich Czech personality) into this wonderful quartet.*

## Notes on Our Program

### Madalena Lombardini-Syrmén (1735-1818) String Quartet No. 2 in B $\flat$ Major

The eighteenth century was not a propitious time for female in the arts. There was prejudice all around: women were expected to obey the (largely unspoken) rules about women speaking or performing in public places. It took determination and will to overcome this societal taboo, and only a few women were able to rise above it and make music for their own and other people's pleasure. Madalena Lombardini was one such determined woman.

She was born in Venice almost at the same time as Joseph Haydn and became a student at the Conservatorio dei Mendicanti in her home town. The Conservatorio, along with three other Venetian music schools, was an orphanage looking for prospective pupils. Her parents were impoverished aristocrats who found it advantageous to give her up.

Her teachers at the orphanage were Antonio Vivaldi, Baldassare Galuppi and Nicola Porpora, all great masters. Madalena studied later with Giuseppe Tartini in Padua. Tartini also wrote letters to her with suggestions about fingering and bowing, and one of these letters is often cited in treatises on violin playing. She was his favorite student.

Madalena eventually married Ludovico Sirmen, a violinist from Bergamo, and began to perform publicly with him. At one of the *Concerts Spirituels* in Paris in 1761, they appeared together playing a double concerto which, it is believed, was their own composition. The concerto and the players were greeted with extravagant praise in the 'Mercure de France.'

After this triumph, Madalena often presented her own compositions at these concerts. Not satisfied with playing the violin, she appeared as soloist in a harpsichord concerto at a benefit concert directed by Johann Christoph Bach and Karl Friedrich Abel. She also tried her hand as a singer and was appointed concert singer to the Court of Saxony in 1782 but was quite unsuccessful in this pursuit.

This once-renowned violinist, who had been compared to the great violinist Pietro Nardini, apparently died in obscurity.

This string quartet shows the distinctive Classical training she received at the Conservatorio. Musical style throughout Europe had become nearly identical during the Baroque era and it was only gradually that individual personalities and nationalistic characteristics began to re-emerge towards the end of the 18th century thanks to the tendencies towards national identity and political changes inspired in part by the American Revolution.

What is immediately apparent is the strength of character of the two movements. The Andantino begins lyrically but is soon punctuated by stronger, very Italianate statements. The Allegro movement is feisty and fun, a romp showing off the powerful abilities of this newly-emancipated personality.

**W. A. Mozart (1756-1791)**  
**String Quartet in C Major, K. 465**

Leopold Mozart visited his son in Vienna in February, 1785. To entertain his father during the visit, Mozart arranged an evening of chamber music in which two of his recently composed string quartets were played from the manuscripts.

The players included Wolfgang himself (on viola), and three of the most revered composers of the time. Joseph Haydn played first violin, Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf played second violin, and Jan Baptist Vanhal played cello.

One of the two quartets was the “Dissonant”, the other his G Major quartet, K. 387. It was on this occasion that Haydn said to Leopold (who wrote his daughter, Nannerl, with the news), “I tell you before God and as an honest man, your son is the greatest composer known to me . . . . He has taste, and what is more, the most profound knowledge of composition.”

A deep friendship based on mutual respect had developed over the years between Mozart and Haydn. When Mozart dedicated six quartets to Haydn, he acknowledged that “it was from Haydn that I first learned how to compose a quartet.”

The “Dissonant” quartet is so nicknamed because of the remarkably convoluted writing in the first movement’s slow introduction. The false harmonic relations became the point of intense critical debate over many years, since 18th century ears were not by any means accustomed to such complexity.

The introduction nowadays does not disturb us, thanks to the onslaught of extreme dissonance of so much of the 20th century’s writing which came on the heels of the emergence of nihilistic philosophy, an acknowledgment of the subconscious, the premise that humanity is “essentially irrational,” and the horrors of two world wars. Indeed, nowadays we generally sense the writing as cautious and exceedingly polite in its inquiries into dissonance.

The main body of the opening movement, marked Allegro, is radiantly happy and has been described as “the sun bursting through the clouds.”

The second movement is a tender romance, gracious and unhurried. The main theme is beautifully and tastefully embroidered as the movement progresses, giving a quiet exaltation to the music. Especially touching is the very quiet ending, serenity itself.

The Menuetto is playful and brusque, a bit on the fast side (especially if you were to think of the dance). It teases us with little hints of the dissonances of the introduction. The Trio section is

more dramatic and intense, an antidote to the humor in the Menuetto, though we welcome its good-natured return.

The Finale is playful and full of joy and exuberant energy, a real portrait of the composer as a young man. Its ingenious counterpoint never becomes labored, and its proportions are perfectly expressed. Indeed, this quartet is one of the truly great pieces of music in existence. It has endeared itself to all generations of music lovers and players alike.

**Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)**  
**String Quartet in F Major, Op. 96 (“American”)**

The most popular of Dvořák’s fourteen string quartets, the “American” was written during the first two weeks of June, 1893, in the tiny Czech community of Spillville, Iowa. Here the composer had come to relax from his duties as director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York.

Here he loved hearing the music of his new neighbors speaking his native tongue, he loved the huge red brick church with its pipe organ, and he was equally pleased with the quality of the beer produced at the local brewery, Spillville’s dominant industry.

He enjoyed hugely the many games of Skat he played with his new friends over a beer, and he enjoyed many forays into the wilderness to seek out birds whose songs he’d never heard before and finding unfamiliar animals. Famous was his escape from an irritable skunk who had been flushed out of a haystack by a local boy eager to show the great composer this excitingly “dangerous” animal. The report was gleefully circulated that he “moved quite well for a large man.”

Here also he was treated to the sounds of visiting Native American musicians, folk music both American and Czech, and revival meetings with their spirited hymn singing. All of these influences found their way into this wonderful piece of music which, thanks to his rare gift, has found its way into our hearts.

The “American” Quartet was written just after the “New World” Symphony. To the accepted idea that Dvořák made literal use of African American and Native American folk songs, he responded, “I have only composed in the spirit of such American national melodies.”

Well educated in the European classics, later strongly influenced by Liszt and Wagner, Dvořák was never able to forget his native Bohemia. In all his vast output, in every medium, Slavic folk song and folk dance remain basic to the core of his expression.

To many the deeply emotional *Lento* is the high point of this quartet. To some it is the third movement, with its song of the scarlet tanager which Dvořák heard and notated on his walks around Spillville. In every movement, Dvořák’s love of the New World and his nostalgia for his homeland inform this remarkable piece of music.

“America”, observed one musicologist, “can never thank him enough for being among the first to help her to recognize the tremendous possibilities which were as yet latent within herself.”

The first movement opens with a gentle murmuring but a vigorous theme played by the viola quickly sets the tone for the piece — energy of the American variety, boundless though perhaps a bit inelegant. There is a rich mix of temperament as the movement continues, none of it too polite but all of it good-hearted.

The second movement was undoubtedly inspired by a Native American lament he had heard. The cello is the mournful drum and the first violin sings the dirge to the murmuring of the inner strings. It is a most poignantly haunting movement, filled with pathos and suggesting irretrievable loss. Behind the sadness is an ineffable sweetness, heartbreakingly beautiful music.

The third movement opens with Dvorák’s quotation of his newly-found scarlet tanager and moves with quick easy steps through dance ideas and rhythms inspired by the Native Americans he had heard. The middle section reverts to a more reflective tone, leading to a real stomp before relenting, under Dvorák’s compassionately attentive ear, and returning to the original sprightly dance ideas.

The Finale is boisterous and rhythmic, more middle American than the other movements — and more Czech as well. Here is the strongest expression of Dvorák “discovering” America and Dvorák feeling intense nostalgia for his homeland. It is a miraculous melding of the two cultures that only a true master of his musical language could manage.

**Tickets can be purchased by calling 215-627-2332, online at <http://german-society-of-pennsylvania.ticketleap.com/>, or at the door one half hour before the performance.**

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