

Sunday, January 27, 2019
3:30 pm
Beckman Auditorium, Caltech



Coleman Chamber Music Association presents

The Pražák Quartet

Jana Vonášková, *violin*

Vlastimil Holec, *violin*

and

The Zemlinsky Quartet

František Souček, *violin*

Petr Střížek, *violin*

Josef Kluson, *viola*

Michal Kanka, *cello*

Petr Holman, *viola*

Vladimir Fortin, *cello*

Niels Gade

(1817-1890)

String Octet in F Major, Op. 17

I. *Allegro molto e con fuoco*

II. *Andantino, quasi Allegretto*

III. *Scherzo. Allegro moderato e tranquillo*

IV. *Finale. Allegro vivace*

Zemlinsky Quartet, *first chairs*

Pražák Quartet

Dmitri Shostakovich

(1906-1975)

Two Pieces for String Octet, Op. 11

I. *Prelude: Adagio*

II. *Scherzo: Allegro molto*

Pražák Quartet, *first chairs*

Zemlinsky Quartet

I N T E R M I S S I O N

Felix Mendelssohn

(1809-1847)

String Octet in E-flat Major, Op. 20

I. *Allegro moderato ma con fuoco*

II. *Andante*

III. *Scherzo: Allegro leggierissimo*

IV. *Presto*

Pražák Quartet, *first chairs*

Zemlinsky Quartet

Recordings for both the Pražák Quartet and Zemlinsky Quartet available on the Praga Digitals/Harmonia Mundi label. ■ The Pražák Quartet and Zemlinsky Quartet appear by arrangement with Christina Daysog

Program Notes

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NIELS WILHELM GADE (1817-1890)

String Octet in F Major, Op. 17

Niels Wilhelm Gade was the most important figure in 19th century Danish music. A composer, conductor, violinist, organist, and teacher, Gade came from a musical family: his father was a cabinetmaker who also made musical instruments. As his family was not well off, Gade did not have formal musical training until he was fifteen, at which point he studied with a violinist from the Royal Danish Orchestra. Another teacher of his, Peter Berggreen, was a well-known folklorist who developed in Gade an interest in Danish folk music.

Gade's earliest compositions date from his teen years. When one of his early works was not accepted for performance in Denmark, he sent it to Felix Mendelssohn in Leipzig; Mendelssohn performed it for an enthusiastic audience. Soon, because he had received a government grant allowing him to travel, Gade went to Leipzig to meet Mendelssohn, who hired him as an assistant conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra. In 1845, Gade conducted the premiere of Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto in E minor*. As assistant conductor, Gade became friendly with Robert Schumann, who was a principal conductor of the Gewandhaus. Upon Mendelssohn's death in November 1847, Gade succeeded him as director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus, but in April 1848, Gade returned to Denmark, where he became the leading figure in Danish musical life, as chairman and conductor of the Musical Society, as co-founder and teacher of the Royal Conservatory of Music, and as the leader among Danish composers, with a reputation that extended throughout Europe.

Understandably, many of Gade's compositions from the period he spent in Leipzig reflect Mendelssohn's influence on his work, although Gade's music also reveals the influence of Schumann and displays his own personal

style, which was already evident in his earliest surviving works.

Gade's *Octet*, which he composed in 1848, is the composition in which his debt to Mendelssohn and Schumann is probably most obvious; it also shows his own personal style shining through. The instrumentation and structure that the *Octet* shares with Mendelssohn's *Octet* make Gade's work seem to be an homage to Mendelssohn, even though it is the work of a mature composer with a highly individual compositional style. There was no evidence of his intention to have composed the *Octet* in honor of Mendelssohn, who died about six months before its composition.

It was perhaps Mendelssohn's death that furthered Gade's development along the path to a more international musical style. In the *Octet*, Gade completely freed himself from the national romantic ideas that had marked his early works. His *Octet* is stylistically a classical romantic work.

Gade's style is noteworthy for its smooth surfaces, classicist formal patterns, and his straightforward approach to major-minor tonality.

Gade returned to Denmark in April 1848 as a result of the outbreak of war between Prussia and Denmark. In mid-June, 1848, he wrote a letter in which he said, "Since my arrival here there is really - apart from preparations for war and what goes along with them - very little to relate about my humble self. I have lived in great retirement, occupied with art. Just now I have completed an octet for eight string instruments (which I had begun in Leipzig)." He completed the first three movements of the *Octet* in May and dated the finale Copenhagen, June 29, 1848. The premiere was on January 20, 1849 at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig; the score was not published until 1883.

Scored for four violins, two violas, and two cellos, Gade's *Octet* begins *Allegro molto e con fuoco*, with a spirited melody. The movement as a whole displays much complexity. The second thematic grouping includes a motive in A minor, which violates the rules of sonata form. He presents

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a new motive in F minor, reminiscent of the A minor motive in the secondary thematic group, for the beginning of the development section. The coda is relatively long and reintroduces thematic ideas from earlier in the movement; the movement concludes with a return to a major tonality.

The second movement, *Andantino quasi allegretto*, like the first, has much thematic density. It begins with a theme in the first violin, which is passed to the first viola. The third movement is a *Scherzo, Allegro moderato e tranquillo*; the finale, *Allegro vivace*, is substantial, with a length similar to that of the first movement and also composed in sonata form. It begins with an introduction consisting of rushing scales, after which Gade introduces the primary theme.

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)

Two Pieces for String Octet, Op. 11

Shostakovich was only thirteen years old when he was admitted to the Leningrad Conservatory as a pianist and composer. His graduation piece, which was soon heard everywhere in Europe and America, was his *Symphony No. 1, Op. 10*, of 1925. *Two Pieces for String Octet, Op. 11*, completed in the same year, was probably begun well in advance of the completion of the symphony. Whether it was written as a classroom exercise for his teachers, Steinberg and Glazunov, is unknown. Possibly it was conceived as part of a four-movement piece, put aside temporarily and not completed until after the symphony.

The combined Glière and Stradivarius String Quartets first performed the very unusual *Two Pieces for String Octet* for four violins, two violas and two cellos on January 9, 1927. The *Prelude, Adagio*, dated in the score December 1924, is a richly contrapuntal piece in the Bachian style that Shostakovich had recently learned to write in Conservatory and to which he was devoted until the end of his life. It has two sections; the first is distinctly declamatory and hints at the polyphony of the second movement, and the second part

moves more quickly. As the critic Arthur Cohn points out, the second is “chromatically run on both jumping and scalewise lines and states the first of the many eight-part imitations (short-lived canons) that dot the work.” The first part of the *Prelude* is recapitulated after a first violin cadenza-like section at the end of the second part.

The wild *Scherzo (Allegro molto)* is dated July 1925. Soviet critics always professed great admiration for the *Prelude*, but some of them simply avoided mentioning the exuberant and exhilarating *Scherzo*, which seems to have failed some later ideological test. One complained that in it, the composer’s “gift of pure inventiveness veers toward formalism,” which is to say toward free modern invention rather than toward some preferred politico-aesthetic doctrine. Actually, it has an impertinent character and introduces features that become very much associated with the Shostakovich sound. For example, what became Shostakovich’s distinctive glissandos are heard here for the first time. Shostakovich uses an individual type of canon in the *Scherzo*, which has a distinctive effect on the combinations of tonality that result. This highly individualistic movement merits Cohn’s words: it is “the wildest movement in all the literature for eight string instruments.” The young Shostakovich, following the practice of Mendelssohn in his *Octet*, treats the eight players as a single, large, pseudo-orchestral body in this work and not simply as a pair of string quartets.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)

Octet in E-flat Major, Op. 20

Felix Mendelssohn was a musical prodigy, a little boy who wrote very mature compositions. His early works are very sure in conception and in execution. Understanding his talents, his family spared nothing to nurture his artistic maturity. Musicales held on alternate Sunday mornings in the Mendelssohn house in Berlin were often attended by important touring performers who were passing through the Prussian capital. There was always chamber music, sometimes an

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orchestra, occasionally even an opera. The guests frequently performed, and almost every time, young Felix had composed a work to be included.

He wrote a great deal of music in this early period, a dozen symphonies and several concertos, for example, compositions that he considered juvenilia and never released for publication during his lifetime. The best known work of his youth is the *Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a miraculous score for a seventeen-year-old to have written. Almost a year earlier, Mendelssohn composed this remarkable octet.

On November 6, 1825, Mendelssohn's teacher, Karl Friedrich Zelter, wrote to his friend, Goethe, "My Felix is working hard and is making progress. He has just completed an *Octet* that is very cleverly written." The instruments of the *Octet* are four violins, two violas and two cellos, the equivalent of two conventional string quartets, but the music is written for a single large group of instruments led by the first violin, rather than for a pair of smaller groups.

Few composers have considered the octet as a grouping. Ludwig Spohr (1784-1859), an important figure of the time, wrote four works he called *Double Quartets*, in which the second quartet was generally no more than the accompaniment to the first. In 1925, Shostakovich wrote his *Prelude and Scherzo* (see above) and in 1949, Darius Milhaud made a unique addition to this small repertoire with his *String Quartets* Nos. 14 and 15, two independent works that may also be played simultaneously as an octet. Mendelssohn's score, however, was the first of its kind, and it is richly textured. It "must be played in symphonic [i.e. orchestral] style by all the instruments," he

said, yet it is as clear and transparent as a well written quartet.

The *Octet* begins with a magnificent movement, *Allegro moderato ma con fuoco*, based principally on the long, soaring opening theme for first violin, a marvelous organic melody that is an astonishing conception for a mere boy. Next comes a melancholy *Andante* which is followed by a *Scherzo, Allegro leggierrissimo*, that is one of the greatest of all Mendelssohn's compositions.

The entire *Scherzo*, but for a single phrase before its closing coda, is played *pianissimo*, as softly as possible. The music seems to come from the same elfin country as the *Scherzo* for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which Mendelssohn wrote in 1843, eighteen years later. The composer's sister, Fanny, said: "he told what he had in mind only to me." His inspiration, she said, was the scene in Goethe's *Faust* that depicts the dancing on Walpurgis Night, a witches' festival on May 1st that takes its name from the 8th century British nun, St. Walpurga, who helped introduce Christianity to Germany and was honored as the protector against the black arts. Goethe's four lines of verse are: "Trails of cloud and mist brighten up on high; a breeze in the leaves and wind in the chimney - and everything is scattered." Mendelssohn valued this *Scherzo* so highly that in 1829 he orchestrated it for performance in place of the original Minuet in his *First* (actually if his juvenilia is taken into account, his fourteenth) *Symphony*.

The last movement is a fugal *Presto*, modeled after those of Mozart's *Jupiter Symphony* and perhaps Beethoven's *Quartet in C Major, Op. 59, No. 3*. Into it, Mendelssohn inserted a quotation from the *Scherzo*.

Pražák Quartet

The Pražák Quartet, established in 1972 while members were still students at the Prague Conservatory, is one of today's leading international chamber music ensembles. Since winning First Prize at the 1978 Evian String Quartet Competition, the quartet has gained international attention for its place in the unique Czech quartet tradition, and for its musical virtuosity for more than forty years.

The Pražák Quartet performs regularly at the major European musical capitals – Prague, Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels, Milan, Madrid, London, Berlin, Munich, etc. – and has participated at numerous international festivals, collaborating with such artists as Menahem Pressler, Jon Nakamatsu, Cynthia Phelps, Roberto Diaz, and Josef Suk.

The quartet has toured extensively in North America, having performed in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Dallas, Houston, Washington, Philadelphia, Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, amongst other cities. In August 2018 the Pražák Quartet gave the U.S. premiere of a recently re-discovered string quartet by František Xaver Dušek, a contemporary and friend of Mozart, at the Mostly Mozart Festival at New York's Lincoln Center.

Jana Vonášková joined the group as first violinist in 2015 succeeding Pavel Hula. Second violinist Vlastimil Holec has been with the Pražák Quartet for nearly four decades. Violist Josef Kluson is a founding member of the quartet. Cellist Michal Kanka joined the group in 1986. Messrs Holec, Kluson, and Kanka are graduates of the Prague Conservatory and the Academy of Fine Arts.

The Pražák Quartet records exclusively for Praga/Harmonia Mundi and has released more than 30 award-winning CDs.

Zemlinsky Quartet

Founded in 1994 while the members were still students, the Zemlinsky Quartet has become a much-lauded example of the Czech string quartet tradition. Amongst the many top prizes earned, the Zemlinsky Quartet won the First Grand Prize at the Bordeaux International String Quartet Competition in 2010. The Zemlinsky Quartet was appointed resident ensemble of the Czech Chamber Music Society for the 2016-17 season.

While students, the ensemble was coached by members of renowned Czech string quartets including the Talich, Prague, Kocian and Pražák Quartets. From 2005 to 2008, the quartet studied with Walter Levin, the first violinist of LaSalle Quartet. Their recent mentor has been Josef Kluson, the violist of the Pražák Quartet.

Zemlinsky Quartet is named after the Austrian composer, conductor, and teacher Alexander Zemlinsky (1871-1942), whose enormous contribution to Czech, German, and Jewish culture during his 16-year residence in Prague had been underrated until recently. Since 2005, the quartet has maintained a special relationship with the Alexander Zemlinsky Foundation in Vienna and was recipient of the Alexander Zemlinsky Advancement Award in 2008.

The Zemlinsky Quartet performs regularly in the Czech Republic and abroad (Germany, Switzerland, Austria, France, Monaco, Luxembourg, Spain, Italy, Belgium, Great Britain, Ireland, Hungary, Canada, USA, Brazil, Japan, and South Korea, amongst others). Recent major appearances of the Zemlinsky Quartet include London's Wigmore Hall, Cité de la Musique in Paris, Library of Congress, Place des Arts in Montreal, Prague Spring Festival, and their New York debut on Schneider/New School Concerts Series.

Between 2006-2011, the Zemlinsky Quartet was Assistant Quartet-in-Residence at Musikakademie Basel in Switzerland. Recently, František Souček and Petr Holman have been appointed Professors at the Prague Conservatory.