

tapestries of music

Sundays with Coleman

II6th Season

2019-2020

Presented in cooperation with the Caltech Committee on Institute Programs



ELIAS STRING QUARTET
FEBRUARY 16, 2020

Sunday, February 16, 2020
3:30 pm
Beckman Auditorium, Caltech



Coleman Chamber Music Association presents

Elias String Quartet

Sara Bitlloch,* *violin*
Donald Grant, *violin*

Simone van der Giessen, *viola*
Marie Bitlloch, *cello*

*Benjamin Nabarro has graciously agreed to perform with the Elias Quartet during Sara Bitlloch's maternity leave.

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Quartet in G Major, Op 18, No. 2
Allegro con brio
Adagio cantabile (Allegro)
Scherzo (Allegro)
Allegro molto quasi Presto

Sally Beamish
(b. 1956)

Reed Stanzas

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

Felix Mendelssohn
(1809-1847)

Quartet No. 2 in A minor, Op. 13
Adagio - Allegro vivace
Adagio non lento
Intermezzo. Allegretto con moto
- Allegro di molto
Presto

Program Notes

By Susan Halpern, copyright © 2019

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Quartet No. 2 in G Major; Op. 18, No. 2

Beethoven wrote his first six string quartets between 1798 and 1800, and when they were published, in 1801, the title page bore the legend “composed [for] and dedicated to His Highness, My Lord the Reigning Prince de Lobkowitz etc., etc.” Franz Joseph Lobkowitz, who was born two years after the composer, had ascended the throne of his Czech principality in 1784 at the age of twelve. His father had been an accomplished musician, the employer of Gluck and a good friend of the composer Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Johann Sebastian’s son. Prince Lobkowitz’s seat was a country castle at Radnice, but he also had grand palaces in Prague and Vienna. He played the violin and the cello, and was a talented singer who maintained a complete musical establishment that included a full orchestra and a chorus.

Soon after Beethoven’s arrival in Vienna from Bonn in 1792, the two young men, Archduke Rudolph, the Emperor’s son, and Prince Ferdinand Kinsky, joined to guarantee Beethoven a generous income for life so that he would remain in Vienna and could give up other work that distracted him from composition. Beethoven, in turn, dedicated to Lobkowitz the six Quartets of Op. 18, the Op. 74 Quartet, Symphonies Nos. 3, 5, and 6 (the last two jointly dedicated also to Count André Razumovsky, who commissioned the three Op. 59 Quartets), and some shorter works.

The G Major Quartet may have been the first of the six that Beethoven started and the third that he finished, but when he assembled a first group of three for publication, he made this No. 2. In German-speaking countries it is often called the *Komplimentierungsquartett* (Compliment Quartet), a nickname that English-speakers have resisted. It sprang from some imagined likeness between the graceful opening phrases used as a musical gesture and the physical motion which a gentleman of the time might have made in removing his hat and bowing in greeting, paying his compliments to a lady.

The Quartet’s *Allegro* opening theme, in eight quick and short measures, has three distinct melodic elements that Beethoven works over thoroughly and develops richly. In fact, this bright and happy work overflows with musical ideas: the first movement alone has more material, some of it heard just in passing, than many other composers used for an entire four-movement work. Some of the movement, such as the mysterious and meditative passage in the development and the way the cello exuberantly introduces the recapitulation, is already very accomplished.

The lengthy second movement begins with a warm and serene yet serious theme, *Adagio cantabile*, and has an unusual, contrasting central *Allegro* that interrupts the *Adagio* to rush along quickly and almost always quietly. Some critics have faulted this movement as well as other slow movements in Opus 18 as being the weak links in Beethoven’s quartets; they see in this movement only a bland and solemn theme that inhibits the listener’s satisfaction regardless of how Beethoven manipulates his material. One such critic, William Youngren, has said of the final recapitulation of the theme: “When it returns after the *Allegro*, laboriously ornamented, we feel we are back in school after being caught playing truant.” Others, more charitable, such as Arthur Cohn, see it as a sign of the Beethoven to come in the later works.

The third movement is a *Scherzo, Allegro*, after the classical model of the minuets in the quartets of Haydn and Mozart, but with a forceful and dramatic quality that is entirely characteristic of Beethoven in its change of mood as well as key. In this light movement, a little figure is thrown back and forth between the violins and then picks up power before it leads the instruments in a transitional passage to the recapitulation.

The finale, *Allegro molto quasi presto*, rushes through the classical sonata form in a jolly fashion. Beginning with a neat and self-contained melody that explores new keys, the craft of this movement is in some ways much like that of Haydn. Contrasting themes are developed and then recalled with different key relationships. Yet the later Beethoven is again hinted at in the various ways he treats the descending three-note arpeggios, at times with energy, at times broodingly, and at times formally.

continued from previous page

SALLY BEAMISH (b. 1956)
Quartet No. 3, “Reed Stanzas”

Sally Beamish composed *Reed Stanzas* for the Elias String Quartet as a commission by BBC Radio 3 in early 2011; the Elias String Quartet premiered it on July 25, 2011 at the Cadogan Hall as part of the BBC Proms Chamber Music Series.

Beamish wrote *Reed Stanzas* while she was on the Isle of Harris in the Outer Hebrides, a landscape with great topographical contrasts from sandy beaches to angular grey mountains and areas of desolate scrub. She was thinking especially of the scrub, as well as a similar landscape in the area of England where she lived previously. “Reed” in the work’s title connotes areas of marsh and fen.

Beamish has lived in Scotland since 1990; in this work, she turns to one the country’s indigenous musical traditions, expressly using the second violinist’s talent as a Scottish fiddle player as well as violinist. Inspired by bird songs as well as the music of her countryman, Benjamin Britten, the work’s title comes from the composer’s memories of wind blowing in the reed beds at Snape Maltings in Suffolk, England. The second violin, sounding like a highland bagpipe, begins and ends the work with variations on a Celtic-inspired theme.

Beamish wrote a program note for the piece, quoted here in full:

Donald Grant, the second violinist in the Elias, is well known as a traditional Scottish fiddle player. I have incorporated this skill into a quartet work, drawing on Donald’s Gaelic roots. The ‘second violin range’ of a quartet is similar to that used by traditional fiddle, inhabiting the throaty, rich soundworld of the lower strings, and the distinctive clarity of the upper strings in their lower positions. This leaves the first violin to explore the heights of the E string, so that the two violins are almost like different instruments.

I wrote part of the quartet in a cottage overlooking the *machar* of the Isle of Harris, in the Outer Hebrides, listening to Britten’s quartets in between working. These works always remind me of my former life as a viola player, and the wind blowing through the reed beds at Snape; a very different, but equally windswept, salt-scented wilderness.

The reed has many different associations. ‘The Reed of God’: a Christian metaphor for Mary: the channel through which the spirit is breathed. The ‘accursed’ reed of Celtic belief: the reed through which Jesus was given vinegar to drink, on the cross. And the reeds used in the making of wind instruments, including the bagpipe and accordion. The Sufi poet Rumi describes the reed flute as a symbol of longing and separation: the reed, separated from its home, utters a heart-breaking lament.

Reed Stanzas takes the form of variations on a Celtic-inspired theme announced by the second violin, which opens and closes the work in the manner of *Pibroch* (the classical music of the Highland bagpipe). I have explored the intricate ornamentation used in *Pibroch*, highlighting its similarities to birdsong, and to Arabic reed flute (*ney*) playing. The piece also refers to the multiple reeds of the accordion (these days made of metal) - an instrument used in traditional music of many cultures. The idea of the loneliness and vastness of landscape underpins the quartet, while each variation, or ‘stanza’, has its own metre and mood.

The word “Stanzas” in the title is significant structurally; Beamish has composed the work as a series of short episodes, many of which are only a minute in length. Beamish’s background as a string player gives the work an idiomatic rigor. The modal solo melody for Donald Grant begins in the distance, as he walks onstage, playing an evocative folk-like melody; shaped by characteristic slides from the Highland bagpipe tradition, it conveys loneliness. Notably, almost the whole piece is pitched in the higher registers of the instruments. Each episode or “stanza” reveals a new approach to the work’s melodic drive, yet it is not always clear whether Beamish is developing material or creating variations.

The music is fluid but with few melodies, and one senses those that are discernible are fragments, adding to the feeling Beamish projects of loneliness. The work conjures not only the significance of landscape, but also our relationship to nature.

continued from previous page

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)
Quartet No. 2, in A minor, Op. 13, “Ist Es Wahr?”

Felix Mendelssohn was a musical prodigy. As a youth, he exhibited prodigious musical imagination and craftsmanship. Before his sixteenth birthday, he had composed sonatas, songs, cantatas, organ works, and even a symphony. A year later, when he was seventeen, he wrote his famous *A Midsummer Night's Dream Overture*.

The young composer's grandfather was Moses Mendelssohn, the Jewish philosopher of the Enlightenment who was immortalized as Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*; his own father was a wealthy banker. His family spared nothing to nurture his artistic maturity. Musicales were held on alternate Sunday mornings in the Mendelssohn house in Berlin; important touring performers who were passing through the Prussian capital often attended. At these musicales, chamber music was always performed; there was sometimes orchestral music too, occasionally even an opera. The guests frequently performed, and for almost each occasion, the young Mendelssohn composed a work to be included.

By the time he was eighteen, in 1827, the year Mendelssohn wrote this quartet, Beethoven had just died, and his music had fallen into relative disfavor, generally thought to be a poor second to the work of Rossini; nevertheless, Mendelssohn admired Beethoven's quartets as spiritual, intellectual, and technical treasures. Writing this quartet, Mendelssohn was definitely aware of Beethoven's Op. 132, also in the key of A minor. Although Mendelssohn's quartet is often listed as being in A Major, there is consensus that its key is actually A minor, even though the first movement is in A Major. The music moves back and forth between the major and minor tonalities so freely that it is not easy to decide which to consider the music's designated key.

This richly textured music in which all four instruments are constantly in play seems to be a young Classicist's excursion into profoundly Romantic territory. It begins and ends with references to a song entitled “*Frage*” (Question), which Mendelssohn had written in the spring of that year and labeled Op. 9, No. 1. “*Ist est Wahr?*” asks the poem by Johann Heinrich Voss (1751-1826), “Is it true that you are still waiting there in the vineyard

bower, asking the moon and the stars about me? Is it true? Tell me! My feelings can be understood only by someone who shares them and is faithful to me forever.” The song, said to reflect the young composer's beloved of the moment, provides thematic material for the quartet in both musical and literary senses. The song was printed as a kind of preface to the first edition of the music; Eduard Devrient sang it before the first public performance of the quartet, in Berlin, on February 12, 1832.

One assumes Mendelssohn knew Beethoven's last work, Op. 135, which was published in Berlin in September 1827, in which the composer set what he called “a difficult question,” asking, in the music, “Must it be?” Regardless, Mendelssohn certainly did learn from Beethoven the technique of how to use a motive, here the opening three notes, which go on to inform the whole quartet and integrate the various movements. The critic Paul Griffiths calls the *Adagio* section with which this movement begins not so much an introduction as a “preparation for the work,” functioning much as a “cover” does for a book. He carries that analogy through to the similar section at the end of the quartet, which he calls a “back cover,” because the two enclose the music as if the “real quartet” were what happens between these two framing sections. The movement proper, an impassioned central section, moves at a faster pace, *Allegro vivace*.

Beethoven's influence is apparent again in the second movement, *Adagio non lento*, most obviously in the way Mendelssohn used the textures of the fugue. Next is an intermezzo, *Allegretto con moto*, in which a charming and relaxed march-like melody with pizzicato accompaniment is set off by a brilliant trio, *Allegro di molto*, in Mendelssohn's best elfin style, recalling *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the course of the dramatic and impassioned finale, *Presto*, Mendelssohn introduces new rhetorical devices while also recalling those used earlier: fugal textures for importance, rushing octaves for powerful motion driving into new situations, and recitative for pseudo-speech. The movement begins with a dramatic first violin solo (which returns after the development section) that makes one think of the last movement of Beethoven's Op. 132. At the end, the listener can detect principal materials of the preceding three movements and then the repeated question of the opening *Adagio*, “Is it true?”

coleman's history

Previous Coleman performances of today's repertoire:

Beethoven Quartet in G Major, Op. 18, No. 2

April 1925	Philharmonic String Quartet
February 1930	London String Quartet
April 1938	Budapest String Quartet
March 1947	Los Angeles String Quartet
June 1956	Trojan Quartet
April 1964	Budapest String Quartet
May 1977	Talich Quartet

Mendelssohn Quartet in A minor, Op. 13

October 1978	Tokyo String Quartet
May 1998	Juilliard String Quartet

Premiere performance at Coleman Chamber Music Association Concerts:

Beamish Quartet No. 3, "Reed Stanzas"

× × × × ×

Elias String Quartet

The Elias String Quartet take their name from Mendelssohn's oratorio, *Elijah*, of which Elias is its German form, and have quickly established themselves as one of the most intense and vibrant quartets of their generation. The Quartet was formed in 1998 at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester where they worked closely with the late Dr. Christopher Rowland. They also spent a year studying at the Hochschule in Cologne with the Alban Berg quartet. Between 2005 and 2009 they were resident String Quartet at Sheffield's "Music in the Round" as part of Ensemble 360, taking over from the Lindsay Quartet. They are now ensemble in residence at the RNCM and regularly go back there to teach and perform.

In 2009 the Elias was chosen to participate in BBC Radio 3's New Generation Artists' scheme and was also a recipient of a Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award. With the support of the Trust, the Elias Quartet mounted "The Beethoven Project": studying and performing all of Beethoven's string quartets as cycles whilst sharing their experience through a special website (www.thebeethovenproject.com) and social media. The project culminated with a cycle at Wigmore Hall, all six concerts recorded live for the Wigmore Hall Live label.

The Quartet is steadily building a recording catalogue that has been met with widespread critical acclaim. They have recorded the Schumann and Dvořák piano quintets with Jonathan Biss, a Britten Quartets disc for Sonimage, a Mendelssohn disc for ASV Gold and most recently Schumann string quartets for Outhere. Their two mixed programme recordings for Wigmore Hall Live were praised unanimously, the first winning a BBC Music Magazine Newcomers award. The final volume of their complete Beethoven Quartet Cycle was released in 2018.

Violinist Benjamin Nabarro is performing first violin for the Elias Quartet during Sara Bitlloch's maternity leave. Mr. Nabarro is first violinist of the internationally renowned Ensemble 360, and he is also a regular guest first violin of the Nash Ensemble, where he has appeared in concerts worldwide. He has made numerous recordings for Hyperion and Dutton. Recent concerto engagements include performances of works by Glazounov, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Brahms, Watkins, Piazzola, Vivaldi, and Bach, and he has regularly been invited to the festivals of Cheltenham, BBC Proms, Aldeburgh, Bath, Schleswig Holstein, Mecklenberg-Vorpommern and Nuremberg, where he also made his conducting debut in 2012.