

The University of Chicago Presents | Mandel Hall

October 4, 2013, 7:30 PM

JUPITER STRING QUARTET

Nelson Lee, violin
Meg Freivogel, violin
Liz Freivogel, viola
Daniel McDonough, cello

with guest artist
James Dunham, viola

*Pre-concert lecture with Seth Brodsky, Assistant Professor of Music and the Humanities,
6:30 pm*

BRITTEN String Quartet No. 1 in D Major, Opus 25
Andante sostenuto; Allegro vivo
Allegretto con slancio
Andante calmo
Molto vivace

BRITTEN String Quartet No. 3, Opus 94
Duets
Ostinato
Solo
Burlesque
Recitative and Passacaglia: La Serenissima

Intermission

BRAHMS String Quintet in G Major, Opus 111
Allegro non troppo, ma con brio
Adagio
Un poco allegretto
Vivace ma non troppo presto

String Quartet No. 1 in D Major, Opus 25

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

b. November 22, 1913, Lowestoft

d. December 4, 1976, Aldeburgh

Benjamin Britten, a pacifist, had left England in 1939 at the outbreak of World War II and set out to establish himself as a composer in this country: the New York Philharmonic premiered his *Violin Concerto* in 1940 and his *Sinfonia da Requiem* in 1941. In the spring of 1941, Britten and his companion Peter Pears drove an aging Model A across the United States to Escondido, California, where they spent the summer as guests of the duo-piano team Ethel Bartlett and Rae Robertson. While there, Britten received a visit from the distinguished American patron of the arts Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, who commissioned a string quartet from the 27-year-old composer. Britten would receive \$400 for the quartet, but there was a time constraint—the premiere was scheduled for the end of the summer. To a friend, Britten wrote: “Short notice & a bit of a sweat, but I’ll do it as the cash will be useful!” The Coolidge Quartet gave the premiere of the *String Quartet in D Major* in Los Angeles with Britten in attendance on September 21, 1941.

The *String Quartet in D Major* seems to look both backward and forward at the same time. Its form appears quite traditional. It is in four movements, and these seem to conform to the shape of the classical string quartet: a sonata-form first movement, a scherzo, a slow movement, and a fast finale. But to describe Britten’s *First String Quartet* that way is to miss the originality of this music. This quartet is remarkable for the sound-world Britten creates, for the structure of its movements, for the way themes reappear in different guises, and for its unexpected key relationships.

The unusual sound-world is evident from the first instant of the *Andante sostenuto*, where the two violins and viola—set very high in their range—play a pulsing pattern that Britten specifies must be both triple *piano* and *molto vibrato*; far below, the pizzicato cello has completely different material. These two opening ideas, sounded simultaneously but so unlike each other, will return in different forms later in the quartet. The long opening section gives way to a rhythmic, angular *Allegro vivo* derived from the very beginning, and Britten shifts back and forth between these two themes at quite different tempos before the movement winks out on barely audible pizzicatos.

Briefest of the movements, the *Allegretto con slancio* (“impetuous”) proceeds along its steady 3/4 pulse, but soon this is bristling with energy: sharp attacks, trills, whistling runs. After the violent end of the second movement, the third movement brings a world of calm (it is in fact marked *Andante calmo*). The 5/4 meter of this movement at first masks the fact that its opening is a subtle variation of the beginning of the first movement. The music grows more animated in its central episode, which is in turn derived from the pizzicato cello of the very beginning.

The finale, marked *Molto vivace*, demands virtuoso performers. It begins with what seems an isolated fragment, a quick two-measure phrase for the first violin. But quickly the other instruments pick this up and treat it to some blistering contrapuntal extension. The energy never

lets up in this movement, which races to its resounding close on a firm D-major chord.

String Quartet No. 3, Opus 94

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

In 1973 Benjamin Britten—frail and facing a heart operation—composed his final opera, *Death in Venice*. Based on Thomas Mann’s 1913 novella, the opera summed up many of the themes of Britten’s artistic career: as the aging novelist Aschenbach embarks on a quest for spiritual redemption in a city assaulted by the plague, he is torn between his search for beauty and the corrupting force of his own physical desires. Two years later, in the fall of 1975, Britten composed his *String Quartet No. 3*. It would be (except for a short choral piece for children) his final composition, for Britten died of heart failure the following year. The Amadeus Quartet gave the official premiere of this quartet on December 19, 1976, two weeks after the composer’s death, though Britten had heard this music played through shortly after he completed it.

In the course of composing the quartet, Britten returned to Venice—a city he loved—and in fact he composed the quartet’s final movement there. Inevitably, that visit reawakened memories of his opera, and this quartet makes explicit references to *Death in Venice*: specific themes, key relationships, and mottos that had appeared in the opera return in the quartet. This all raises a question: does one need to know *Death in Venice* to understand the *Quartet No. 3*? The answer to that question must be no—this quartet will stand on its own merits—but it may help to know that this was Britten’s final instrumental work and that it draws on music about a spiritual quest.

The *String Quartet No. 3* is in five unrelated movements, and Britten at first thought of titling this music *Divertimento* rather than *Quartet*; he finally became convinced that it had sufficient unity and seriousness to merit the latter name. Though Britten’s *Third String Quartet* does not sound like Bartók, it has some of the same arch-structure favored by the Hungarian master: the three odd-numbered movements are at slower tempos, while the two even-numbered movements are fast. Each of the five movements has a descriptive title. The opening *Duets* is built on a series of pairings of instruments in different combinations, beginning with the rocking, pulsing duet of second violin and viola. The movement, in ternary form, offers a more animated central episode. *Ostinato*, marked “very fast,” drives along a ground built on a sequence of leaping sevenths; lyric interludes intrude into this violence, and the movement eventually comes to a poised close. The title of the third movement, *Solo*, refers to the central role of the first violin, which has the melodic interest here, often above minimal accompaniment from the other three voices far below. Britten marks the opening “smooth and expressive,” but the central sequence is cadenza-like in its virtuosity; the movement comes to a calm close on a widely-spaced C-major chord. In sharp contrast, the *Burlesque* is all violent activity, and this movement has reminded more than one observer of the music of Britten’s good friend Shostakovich. Longest of the movements, the finale also has the most unusual structure. It begins with a *Recitative* that recalls a number of themes from *Death in Venice*, and after these intense reminders, the music settles into radiant E major (a key identified with the figure of Aschenbach in the opera), and the first violin launches the gentle *Passacaglia* theme of the final section. Britten marks this *cantabile* and names this section *La Serenissima*. That sounds like a conscious invocation of Beethoven, who gave the finale of his *String Quartet in B-flat Major, Opus 18, No. 6* the title *La*

Malinconia, but here it refers to the musical motto associated with the city of Venice in Britten's opera. The *Passacaglia* proceeds calmly to its close, where the ambiguous concluding chord dissolves as the upper three voices fade away, leaving the cello's deep D to continue alone and then drift softly into silence. Britten's comment on this ending was succinct: "I wanted the work to end with a question."

String Quintet in G Major, Opus 111

JOHANNES BRAHMS

b. May 7, 1833, Hamburg

d. April 3, 1897, Vienna

On a vacation trip to his much-loved Italy in the spring of 1890, the 57-year-old Brahms decided to retire. He had made preliminary sketches of his *Fifth* and *Sixth Symphonies*, but now he abandoned those plans and destroyed a good deal of manuscript. But before he quit, Brahms wanted to complete one last work. That summer at Ischl, high in the Austrian Alps, he wrote a string quintet, and when he sent a final correction of it to his publisher in December Brahms proclaimed: "With this note you can take leave of my music because it is high time to stop."

Brahms, of course, would come out of retirement the following year when he was inspired by the playing of clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld, but at this point he wanted to go out on a cheerful note—his *Quintet in G Major*, written by a man just back from a relaxing trip to Italy, is one of his sunniest and most relaxed scores. Brahms' longtime friend Elizabeth von Herzogenberg, now seriously in decline with heart disease, saw the score and gauged this music perfectly: "Reading it was like feeling spring breezes," she wrote the composer, "He who can invent all this must be in a happy frame of mind. It is the work of a man of thirty."

Despite its youthful surface, the *Quintet in G Major* is very much the work of an experienced composer, particularly in Brahms' subtle extension of his themes and in the music's harmonic freedom. Curiously, this quintet has also struck many as Brahms' most cosmopolitan work, and various critics have heard Italian, Hungarian, Viennese, and Slavic influences here. There are those, too, who think it sounds like Brahms in every measure.

Brahms' friend and biographer Max Kalbeck claimed that the very beginning, with its sweeping cello melody, was originally going to be the opening of Brahms' *Fifth Symphony*. Certainly this impassioned opening sounds orchestral, and it has presented problems of balance ever since, for the cellist must cut through the busy accompaniment of the upper voices. The second theme-group—this is the one invariably thought "Viennese"—waltzes agreeably, and Brahms extends it with a lovely violin melody marked *dolce*. The development begins in a dreamy haze of sound, but Brahms quickly brings back the energy of the opening and drives the movement to an exciting close.

The *Adagio* takes much of its character from the dark sound of the movement's dominant instrument, the first viola, which introduces the opening melody (with its characteristic turn), leads the way much of the time, and has a cadenza-like outburst just before the quiet close. The third movement, *Un poco allegretto*, is a wistful little waltz, enlivened by a syncopated

accompaniment. One of the glories of the quintet is the G-major trio, where the *dolce* melody slides smoothly between duets for the violins and violas. The cadences of this movement are especially interesting: the trio simply trails off into nothing before the opening section resumes, and at the very end Brahms brings back a bit of the trio to close out the movement. The finale, inevitably considered the “Hungarian” movement, rips along on a main theme that has been compared to the csardas. The movement is in sonata-rondo form, with a second theme-group built on flowing triplets, and the dazzling coda is full of gypsy fire.

The first performance was given in Vienna on November 11, 1890, by the Rosé Quartet, which would later give the premiere of Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht*. At the rehearsal Max Kalbeck, noting the music’s genial atmosphere and thinking of Brahms’ love for Vienna’s main park, nudged the composer and suggested: “Brahms in the Prater?” And the composer replied: “You’ve hit it! And all the pretty girls there, eh?”

—*Program notes by Eric Bromberger*