

STRINGS IN NATURE

SUNDAY, JULY 9 | 9 AM | NORMAN BIRD SANCTUARY

Lun Li, violin
Ariel Horowitz, violin
Edwin Kaplan, viola
Titilayo Ayangade, cello

HAYDN String Quartet in F Major, Op. 74, No. 2
I. Allegro spiritoso
II. Andante grazioso
III. Minuet - Trio
IV. Finale. Presto
(Approximate duration 23 minutes)

JEAN FRANCAIX Trio à cordes
(Approximate duration 17 minutes)

INTERMISSION

JOHN BLACKWOOD MCEWAN String Quartet No. 8 in A Major
(Approximate duration 17 minutes)

BRITTEN Simple Symphony
(Approximate duration 20 minutes)

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809): String Quartet in F Major, Op. 74, No. 2

Haydn's first experience of international stardom was his sojourn ('residency' we would now call it) in London in 1791-2. Promoted by the impresario JP Salomon, the magnificent season of concerts of Haydn's music was the talk of the town, and he was fêted by admirers. One of the things that must have surprised him was that chamber music in London was not just a private, domestic affair for friends or a wealthy patron as it was in Vienna. The English liked to perform it in public, to large groups of people, and the paying public expected to be thrilled. In this context what really worked was music with a certain flamboyance — it had to make an impact. So, on his return visit in 1794, he brought with him two sets of newly composed quartets: Opp. 71 and 74, paid for with a commission from one of Vienna's leading arts patrons, Count Anton Apponyi. The extrovert brilliance and originality of these six pieces was clearly intended to impress Salomon's discerning and demanding patrons. Salomon, who was a considerable virtuoso on the violin, would lead the performances himself and Haydn was careful to give him plenty of opportunities to show off his excellent technique.

The London critics were constantly astonished by the originality of Haydn's music. One, writing

in the Morning Chronicle about three new symphonies that Haydn had just introduced (though he could as easily have been discussing the quartets), confessed that he had thought Haydn would surely start to repeat himself. On the contrary 'we are every time mistaken. Nothing can be more original than the subject of the first movement; and having found a happy subject, no man knows like Haydn how to produce incessant variety, without once departing from it.' Which is exactly what happens in the first movement of Op. 74, No. 2, though the fanfarelike opening, a unison call to arms designed to make the audience sit up and pay attention, is not much more than a simple arpeggio on an F major chord. Haydn then proceeds to spin the whole movement from it, using sudden key shifts, pregnant pauses, and unexpected harmonies to take the listener on a delightful voyage of discovery. In this, the lightest quartet of the set, a delectable set of variations forms the second movement (the word *grazioso* meaning 'graceful' or 'agreeable'). The playfully rhythmic Minuet shifts from F major to the darker-tinted and quite remote key of D flat major for its trio, but the change of flavor is piquant rather than unsettling. Masterly but unobtrusive contrapuntal delights drive the utterly fresh finale to its conclusion.

Jean Francaix (1912-1997): Trio à cordes

Jean Francaix was one of a large international group of 20th century composers who learned their trade from the French teacher Nadia Boulanger and then won world recognition for the craftsmanship and elegance of their compositions. (The American members included Aaron Copland, Elliott Carter, Roy Harris, Walter Piston, Virgil Thomson, and Marc Blitzstein.) Francaix's music was particularly favored by choreographers, including George Balanchine (for the ballet *A la Francaix*) and Roland Petit (for *Les Desmoiselles de La Nuit*).

Like his French predecessors Erik Satie and Francis Poulenc, there were two sides to Francaix's musical personality. On the one hand, he could be deadly serious, even devoutly religious; for example, his oratorio *L'apocalypse de St. Jean* pictures the ecstasy of heaven and the despondency of hell. On the other hand, his music could be witty, even ironic; the ballet *Les Desmoiselles de la Nuit* is a mischievous fantasy featuring caterwauling alley cats.

The String Trio is on the second side of Francaix's personality. Composed in 1933 for the Pasquier Trio, a leading family ensemble in France, the trio is a concise work – four movements totaling twelve minutes – but still with demanding technical skills. It reflects the neoclassical movement in vogue at the time, that is, it is a deliberate effort to echo the charm and clarity of French Baroque music. The opening movement (*Allegretto vivo*) is an animated yet intimate conversation among the three instruments, all played with mutes. The viola presents a motif spelling the name "Bach" in reverse -- the notes B, C, A, B-flat corresponding to HCAB in German notation.

The second movement, while captioned "Scherzo," is a whirling waltz. It is played without mutes, and is seasoned with syncopations and *spiccato* bowing. The mutes return for the song-like slow movement in a minor mode. It features a tender modal theme with a rocking lullaby-like accompaniment. The mutes again disappear for the finale, a rondo, with a returning refrain and two contrasting episodes. The refrain has an effervescent drive – it has been described as a chamber-music *cancan*. The episodes, while slower in tempo, are still tongue-in-cheek. After the refrain's final return, Francaix surprises us with a brief rollicking march, and the trio ends softly with a pizzicato.

John Blackwood McEwan (1868-1948): String Quartet No. 6 in A Major, "Biscay"

Scottish Late Romantic composer Sir John Blackwood McEwan's music achieved little public recognition, partly because he rarely sought it, biographer Jeremy Dibble remarks that he was "seemingly unconcerned about the dissemination of his own works". Despite that, McEwan nevertheless did much to further the cause of other British composers, particularly as a prominent member of the Royal Philharmonic Society in the years between the First and Second World Wars. Despite his inability to publicly promote his work he wrote an impressive seventeen string quartets. There is a definite stylistic progression in these works as the composer moves from an early Romantic approach through to a more complex style that embraced Modernism in his later years. This style change is reflected by an increasing tendency to abstraction, which in no way detracts from the inherent beauty of these works. The Sixth Quartet, titled *Biscay*, is apparently inspired by oyster collectors on the French coastline of the Bay of Biscay. Written in 1913, it consists of three named movements.

Le Phare (lighthouse) begins in a delightful mood with a joyous violin wispily drifting over sustained arco harmonies. A cello passage grounds the music, before it rises again, although not to the heights of the introduction. The cello is again strong and leads into a swirling, dramatic passage with a strong violin melodic line that prances over a strong harmonic accompaniment, before moving back into the sustained chordal effect. Now a return to a more placid, but mesmeric soundscape ensues. Nearing the end, the violins fashion an attractive, sparse duet, again with sustained chords, moving on to a fade.

Les Dunes (sand or dunes) opens with a delicate, somber mood, out of which rises a series of plaintive violin lines – the feeling is very precious. Eventually the music becomes more expansive but still retains a serious nature. A lamenting violin moves this movement forward, accompanied by an ensemble drone. A period of light, romantic melodies drift casually as a violin duet unfolds. These melodies tend to be modal, and very simple, as the end is another fade.

La Racieuse (scraper or skimmer) is simply prancing, seemingly in a French manner. A brisk underlying backing supports a violin conversation with an almost burlesque rhythm. Now the mood changes and a further violin duet unfolds, this time with sparse ensemble interjections. A slight increase in intensity initiates a tempo, before a recapitulation of the opening statement is heard. The resultant energized passage has a charm all on its own and concludes with three soft tones.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976): Simple Symphony, Op. 4

Edward Benjamin Britten was an English composer, conductor, and pianist and a central figure of 20th-century British music, with a range of works including opera, other vocal music, orchestral and chamber pieces. His best-known works include the opera *Peter Grimes* (1945), the *War Requiem* (1962) and the orchestral showpiece *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1945). Born in Lowestoft, Suffolk, the son of a dentist, Britten showed talent from an early age. He studied at the Royal College of Music in London and privately with the composer Frank Bridge.

He often composed with certain performers in mind. His most frequent and important muse was his personal and professional partner, the tenor Peter Pears; others included Kathleen Ferrier, Jennifer Vyvyan, Janet Baker, Dennis Brain, Julian Bream, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Osian Ellis

and Mstislav Rostropovich. Together with Pears and the librettist and producer Eric Crozier, Britten founded the annual Aldeburgh Festival in 1948, and he was responsible for the creation of Snape Maltings concert hall in 1967. In his last year, he was the first composer to be given a life peerage.

Britten kept track of pieces he wrote as a child and after his studies at the Royal College of Music and often revisited them in later works. Written at the age of 20, the Simple Symphony is such an example. Seeking more work as a composer, Britten considers music for schools, and, drawing from eight of his young teenage pieces, he conceives his Simple Symphony. It will be a work that can be played by either string orchestras at bigger schools or string quartets at smaller institutions. But it is also a work of deep thanks, since Britten dedicates the piece to his viola teacher and first musical mentor, Audrey Alston, who is responsible for introducing him to his second mentor, composition teacher Frank Bridge.

Simple Symphony avoids the typical classical movement “tempo” titles in favor of more delightful, imaginative descriptions. In shape the movements are typical with the first and last in sonata form, surrounding a scherzo and a slow movement. *Boisterous Bourree* is based on Britten’s piano Suite No. 1-Bourree and a vocal song, Country Dance; it opens the symphony with spirit and baroque counterpoint. *Playful Pizzicato* is centered on a piano Scherzo and a vocal song, The Road Song of the “Bandar-Log.” Plucked throughout both its good-humored scherzo and trio sections, the second movement is to be played as fast as possible (presto possibile pizzicato sempre) and alternates between a baroque jig and stomping accents in the slower trio. *Sentimental Saraband* draws from piano Suite No. 3 and a Waltz. With the feel of a modal British folk song, this movement alternates between an achingly tender first section, a graceful second part, and then returns to the haunting mood of the opening material. Finally, *Frolicsome Finale* includes bits from Piano Sonata No. 9 and an unidentified Song. In this final movement there’s a kind of athleticism, combined with a syncopated accompaniment and jolts of harmony and meter, all coalescing in a triumphal tone.

Britten premiered Simple Symphony in 1934, conducting an amateur orchestra. He would be amused to know that the piece is featured in the 2012 Wes Anderson film, Moonrise Kingdom, which prominently highlights other Britten pieces as its soundtrack.

Festival Artist Biographies can be found on page 124.