

MUSIC IN THE SHADOW OF WAR

Program I: Music of the Great War

In its 2015-16 season, the Artaria String Quartet treats the lasting effects of war. Both the Bartók String Quartet No. 2 and the Elgar Piano Quintet of the first program, *Music of the Great War*, were written during World War I of 1914-1918 and deeply portray the devastation of the so-called “Great War.” The death of nine million military and seven million civilians can hardly be explained in words, but the music the Artaria members have chosen finds a way of expressing the inexpressible.

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

String Quartet No. 2, Op. 17, Sz. 67, BB 75

Moderato

Allegro molto capriccioso

Lento

ABOUT THE COMPOSER: Béla Bartók’s place in musical history is unique since he represents no one school of music. At a time when the German traditions of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms were giving way to the Second Viennese School led by Arnold Schoenberg, Bartók stood alone. While his early music was fed by the Romantic traditions of Brahms and Wagner, it is his own unique exploration of folk music, dissonance, rhythmic vigor and color, and a sense of the spiritual that most govern his important work. In a 1905 letter to his mother, he said knowingly, “I prophesy, I have foreknowledge that this spiritual loneliness is to be my destiny.” Despite that loneliness, he breathed new life into an old system without joining the Serialists who would themselves ultimately suffer a kind of isolation.

With his friend Zoltán Kodály, he compiled a collection of Hungarian folk songs, a project that absorbed him from 1905 to 1921. This exploration was to influence his music greatly, but a word must be said about that. While he ardently espoused Hungarian nationalism, Bartók was firm that a composer does not simply use peasant melodies but devises an artful reference to them. For Bartók the art lay in complex devising, not simple imitation.

Bartók’s life was not a happy one. Usually outside the mainstream of the European avant-garde of his time, he immigrated to New York in 1940 to become a research fellow at Columbia University working on Serbo-Croatian music. For his last five years, precarious finances, a sense of alienation, and poor health plagued him. Serge Koussevitzky, one of his few champions, went to Bartók’s hospital room to offer a much-needed check for \$500, which represented half the commission for the *Concerto for Orchestra*. Harvard, where he was to deliver a series of lectures but was too ill to do so, and later the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) sponsored medical examinations for Bartók after his weight sank to 87 pounds. He rallied enough to write the *Concerto for Orchestra* but, less than a year later, died of leukemia in New York’s West Side Hospital. Today his string quartets and orchestral works are monuments of the 20th century repertoire.

The string quartet spanned Bartók’s works from the first one in 1908 to the sixth and last written in 1939. The second came in 1917, the third in 1927, the fourth in 1928, and the fifth in 1934. As Beethoven’s quartets mark his so-called “periods,” so do Bartók’s quartets divide his compositional life into three periods, the first ending with the First Quartet, the second with the Fourth Quartet, and the Fifth and Sixth quartets belonging to the third period. While the first period contained few references to folk music, the second was rich in them as well as in harmonic and rhythmic experimentation. The third period is a culmination of what came before but in sparer terms, not unlike the late works of Beethoven.

Like other composers, Bartók made his most intimate statements in the string quartet form as well as his most serious, inventive, and powerful. Bartók’s string quartets are now ranked with no less than those of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. In the 20th century, only those of Schoenberg, Berg, Shostakovich, and Carter approach Bartók’s.

ABOUT THE WORK: Zoltán Kodály called the movements of Bartók’s Second String Quartet “A Quiet Life,” “Joy,” and “Sorrow.” If assigning identifiable qualities helps in understanding the work’s complexities, then presumably there is no harm done.

The title “Quiet Life” of the first movement *Moderato* might come from the fact that the work was written between 1915 and 1917 during a period when Bartók lived with his first wife Márta in virtual seclusion in a village outside of Budapest. The movement opens with the dissonance that would intrigue Bartók for the

rest of compositional life. With Bartók, however, dissonance would not preclude lyricism as evidenced in this movement with its elusive song. Use of the musical motto is another Bartók imprint heard early in the movement. Mounting tension leads to a dramatic silence followed by a strong unison statement that evolves into a canon before the movement fades away. All this happens within a sonata form that one might associate with Mozart.

Despite its Kodály subtitle, “Joy,” the second movement *Allegro molto capriccioso* is imposing in its ferociousness. The sense of perpetual motion caused by the unremitting use of repeated notes gives way to dramatic silences and even the suggestion of a strange waltz. The Hungarian folk music that Bartók so championed is imaginatively restated in a barbaric folk dance. Even a certain playfulness intervenes in this whirling movement that races to a conclusion, joyful or not.

“Sorrow” seems valid for the third movement *Lento*, but surely it is a universal sorrow motivated by the horrors of World War I that so affected Bartók. Once again, the three-note motto of the first movement is employed in a dirge-like funeral march. Despite the sparseness of the movement, rising tension and lyricism remain until the bleak plucking of the final notes.

The work was premiered on March 3, 1918 in Budapest by the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet.

Edward Elgar (1857-1934) Piano Quintet in A Minor, Op. 84

Moderato; Allegro

Adagio

Moderato; Allegro

ABOUT THE COMPOSER: Pundits have a heyday with Elgar. Yet the best of them, George Bernard Shaw in his 1920 *Music and Letters*, admits confusion about him: “Edward Elgar, the figure head of music in England, is a composer whose rank it is neither prudent nor indeed possible to determine. Either it is one so high that only time and posterity can confer it, or else he is one of the Seven Humbugs of Christendom.” Even about his Englishness, the jury is out. In *The Observer* in 1983, Anthony Burgess wrote: “I know that Elgar is not manic enough to be Russian, not witty or *pointilliste* enough to be French, not harmonically simple enough to be Italian, and not stodgy enough to be German. We arrive at his Englishry by pure elimination.”

Sources such as *Cobbett’s Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music* and the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* also differ on Elgar the man, with Cobbett presenting Elgar as the quintessential modest, orderly country gentleman and Grove painting a more elusive picture of a sensitive and sometimes volatile artist. Even on the subject of Elgar’s beloved wife, Caroline Alice Roberts, the two sources vary, Cobbett describing Elgar as destitute at her death in 1920 and Groves questioning the changing bond of their relationship. Nevertheless, both sources agree on the significance of her influence on him.

Scholars and composers of his time do agree, however, on the innovativeness of his music. In 1927, Elgar scholar and contemporary W. H. Reed wrote in *Cobbett’s Cyclopedic Survey* that “...Elgar has supplied the yeast needed to set up the fermentation now taking place in modern music, the final outcome of which it is impossible to foretell.” In a 1931 edition of the *Musical Times*, Richard Strauss, a master of innovation, called Elgar “the first Progressivist in English music.” Without a doubt he set off a tradition in English string music that would be followed by Vaughan Williams and Michael Tippett, surely a Modernist.

All of this, of course, seems moot in light of the beauty of his music. He was knighted on July 5, 1904 after the king and queen attended the first two of a three-day festival of his music the previous March.

ABOUT THE WORK: Like views on his life, commentary on Elgar’s Piano Quintet can vary greatly according to time and source. What most sources do agree on is the beauty of Elgar’s music, and in particular, his Piano Quintet, especially the *Adagio* movement. There is agreement, too, on Elgar’s Brahmsian influences. About the Quintet, Shaw made no wise cracks. He simply called it, in a letter to Elgar, “the finest thing of its kind.”

The first movement, rather mysterious in feeling, opens with a piano theme that is simple but significant throughout the work. In the inspired *Adagio* movement where the melody is handed to the viola, we hit upon the most endearing qualities of Elgar’s music: its sincerity, lack of affectation, and natural nobility. The last movement, after a questioning beginning, pulls all threads together to a stunning climax.

The Piano Quintet was written in 1917-18, a late work since, after his wife’s death in 1920, Elgar composed little.

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