

The Placitas Artists Series
presents
Megan & James Holland and Friends
in a
Premiere Live-Streamed Concert
“String Quartets”

Sunday, March 14, 2021, at 3:00 p.m. MST

Megan Holland, Violin
David Felberg, Violin
Kim Fredenburgh, Viola
James Holland, Cello

Concert Generously Sponsored by
BJ and Alan Firestone

Program

Caroline Shaw (b. 1982)
Valencia

Bedrich Smetana (1824-1884)
String Quartet No. 1 in e minor, “From My Life,” Op. 116
I. *Allegro vivo appassionato*
II. *Allegro moderato à la Polka*
III. *Largo sostenuto*
IV. *Vivace*

*****Intermission*****

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)
I Crisantemi (The Crysanthemums)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
String Quartet No. 7 in F Major, Op. 59, No. 1, “Razumovsky”
I. *Allegro*
II. *Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando*
III. *Adagio molto e mesto*
IV. *“Thème Russe” – Allegro*

Program Notes

Caroline Shaw, *Valencia*

In 2013, New-York-based composer, violinist, singer, and producer Caroline Shaw became the youngest recipient of the Pulitzer Prize in music for her composition *Partita for 8 Voices*, composed for the vocal group Roomful of Teeth, of which she is also a member. Her subsequent career has been dizzyingly varied, including commissions and collaborations with a wide range of artists from Renée Fleming and Yo-Yo Ma to Kanye West.

Today's work, *Valencia*, was featured in the 2019 Grammy-winning album *Orange*, featuring six of Shaw's works written for and performed by the Attacca Quartet. It was the first full-length album to feature her works exclusively. *Valencia* was inspired by Shaw's collaboration with the performance artist Glasser on a song about "the simple beauty of fruit." In her own words, "*Valencia* became an untethered embrace of the architecture of the common Valencia orange, through billowing harmonics and somewhat viscous chords and melodies. It is also a kind of celebration of awareness of the natural, unadorned food that is still available to us."

Sources: carolineshaw.com, roomfulofteeth.org, caroline shaw editions

Bedrich Smetana, *String Quartet No. 1 in e minor, "From My Life," Op. 116*

While Beethoven was certainly the most famous example of a composer grappling with impending deafness, perhaps no composer expressed his own encroaching deafness more literally than Smetana in this quartet, composed in 1876. The last section of the finale of this quartet is dominated by a single high E-string droning persistently over the music of the other three instruments. Also noteworthy is the prominence of the viola part, especially in the very opening of the quartet, and the second, trumpet-like theme of the second movement. An early private performance in 1878 featured none other than Antonín Dvořák tackling the formidable viola part.

Most of Smetana's music was programmatic; that is, music with a specific story to tell with elements of that story sometimes depicted as literally as possible. Therefore, it is not surprising that he chose to tell his life story in

music, though his choice of a medium as intimate as a string quartet is interesting. He also described the program of this quartet in his own words.

“My intention was to paint a tone picture of my life. The first movement depicts my youthful leanings towards art, a Romantic atmosphere, the inexpressible yearning for something I could neither express nor define, and also a kind of warning of my future misfortune. The long persistent note in the finale owes its origin to this. It is the fateful ringing of the high-pitched tones in my ears, which, in 1874, announced the beginning of my deafness. I allow myself this small joke, though [my loss of hearing] was ultimately disastrous.

“The second movement, a quasi-polka, recalls the joyful days of my youth when I composed dance tunes and was widely known as a passionate lover of dancing.

“The third movement (the one which, in the opinion of the gentlemen who play this quartet, is unperformable) reminds me of the happiness of my first love, the girl who later became my first wife [and whom Smetana sadly lost to tuberculosis, caught in the harsh Gothenburg climate].

“The fourth movement describes my discovery that I could incorporate national elements in my music, and my joy in following this path until it was terminated by the onset of my deafness, the outlook into a sad future, the tiny rays of hope of recovery; but remembering the promise of my early career, a feeling of painful regret.”

Sources: Wikipedia, laphil.org, hyperion records,

Giacomo Puccini, *I Crisantemi (The Chrysanthemums)*

Although best known by far as a composer of opera, Puccini was also rather fond of string quartets, having composed a few minuets and a scherzo for the ensemble as a student. Today’s work, however, is the only quartet work of his that is still performed – Puccini understood from an early age that his talent lay in the theater. It was, he said, written in a single night in 1890 to commemorate the death at age 44 of a friend, Amadeo di Savoia, Duke of Aosta. Two mournful themes in c-sharp minor comprise this short work, and Puccini thought well enough of them to reuse them in Act IV of his opera *Manon Lescaut*.

Sources: Allmusic, Elizabeth Dalton,

Ludwig van Beethoven, *String Quartet No. 7 in F Major, Op. 59, No. 1, "Razumovsky"*

In 1805, Prince Andrey Razumovsky, Russian ambassador to the Viennese Imperial Court, earned a measure of immortality by commissioning three string quartets from the prominent composer and pianist Ludwig van Beethoven. These epochal works, known collectively as the "Razumovsky" quartets, would become a cornerstone of the chamber music literature and take the genre of the string quartet to unprecedented heights. Written just six years after his acclaimed Op. 18 quartets, the first reactions to the much greater length, complexity, and technical difficulty of these new pieces were not complimentary. When the violinist Radicati told him, "Surely you do not consider this music," Beethoven replied prophetically, "Not for you, but for a later age."

Beethoven's work in these years, what scholars like to call his "middle period," are symbolic of his coming to terms with his encroaching deafness, resisting despair and embracing the belief that it could be transcended through unrelenting artistic effort. In his sketchbook for these pieces, he wrote, "Can anything in the world prevent you from expressing your soul in music?"

The first movement immediately demonstrates the new thematic richness and epic scale of these quartets. It opens with a tune in the lower register of the cello that is eventually transmitted to the upper reaches of the violin. The massive, fugue-centered central development section also begins with this cello tune, which here serves as a false re-cap.

After the melodic richness and variety of the first movement, the second movement opens with a single B-flat played in a drum-like rhythm by the cello, giving way to a simple, light tune in the violin. The melodies that follow are by turns playful and lyrical, giving the movement a genial, if sometimes uneasy, feeling.

In the sketches for the deeply moving lament of the third movement, Beethoven wrote cryptically, "a weeping willow or acacia tree upon my brother's grave." Beethoven had two brothers, one alive at the time, and one who died in infancy a year before Ludwig's birth. Whether connected to

real-life circumstances or not, the emotional intensity comes from the two plaintive themes that comprise its core.

In a nod to his patron, Beethoven transforms a Russian folk tune to create the foundation of the final movement – the theme in the movement is twice as fast as the original and in major instead of the original minor.

Sources: Wikipedia; Britannica.com; Melvin Berger, *Guide to Chamber Music*