

Telegraph Quartet

Joseph Maile and Eric Chin, violins
Pei-Ling Lin, viola
Jeremiah Shaw, 'cello

Program, Hemet

Antonin Dvorák (1841-1904)
Cypresses, B.152 (Selections)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)
String Quartet in D major, K.575 "Prussian"

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
String Quartet in F major

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The Telegraph Quartet appears by arrangement with Lisa Sapinkopf Artists, www.chambermuse.com

PROGRAM NOTES

DVOŘÁK:

The provenance of Dvořák's charming 12 pieces for string quartet, conventionally titled "Cypresses," is somewhat complicated. In 1865, a 24-year-old Dvořák fell in love with a 16-year-old piano student (whose younger sister he would eventually marry). In an ardent swoon of unrequited love, he composed a cycle of 18 love songs for voice and piano, setting texts by the Moravian poet, Gustav Pflieger-Moravský, from a volume titled *Cypresses: A Collection of Lyric and Epic Poems*. Dvořák spent years fiddling with the songs in various arrangements and repurposing some of their materials in other compositions. 23 years later, Dvořák, now 47, finally sent the songs to his publisher with the title "*Love Songs*." Around the same time, Dvořák selected 12 of the songs and transcribed them for string quartet. He also provided a new title, "*Echo of Songs*." These remained unpublished until 1927, 17 years after Dvořák's death. It was the publisher, not Dvořák, who attached the title "Cypresses," in reference to the original poems. This explains the three dates associated with the 12 love songs for string quartet: the original songs in 1865, the transcription for string quartet around 1888, and their publication in 1927. While universally known as the Cypresses, one is tempted to honor Dvořák's original poetic intention of calling them collectively "Echo of Songs," as indeed they are.

Dvořák transcribed the songs quite faithfully. Each of the Cypresses pursues a lyrical song form typically featuring a solo vocal line (most often in the first violin) beautifully set within the texture of the string quartet. Dvořák brought the experience of a career of composing string quartets to these arrangements. The "accompaniments" feature rich, colorful textures using a range of string techniques, counterpoints and rhythmic nuances. Both the scoring and the endearing melodic invention of these pieces identify their composer almost immediately. While most of the Cypresses express their amorous intent with gentle, lovely tunes at a moderate tempo, a few are agitated and dark, in a manner recalling Schubert. © Kai Christiansen

MOZART:

Mozart's final string quartets comprise a set of three collectively known as the "Prussian" or the "Berlin" quartets. In 1789, friend and student Prince Karl Lichnowsky took Mozart to Berlin to meet Frederick William II, King of Prussia (the second son of Frederick the Great). Frederick was a skillful cellist, and a generous patron of the arts. The meeting proved fruitful for Mozart resulting in a commission for six string quartets as well as some piano sonatas for Frederick's daughter. But these final years were difficult times for Mozart. His letters paint a picture of illness, his wife's difficult fifth pregnancy, debt and urgent pleas for yet more loans from overly taxed friends. Mozart completed the first quartet straight away, spent nearly a year working on *Così fan tutte*, then managed to complete two more quartets in May and June of 1790.

Financial desperation ultimately forced Mozart to monetize his latest work as swiftly as possible: he sold the three quartets to the Viennese publisher Artaria who released them in print shortly after Mozart's death in 1791 without any dedication to the Prussian patron. While art often reflects the context of the artist, great art frequently prevails on its own terms on another plane of existence. Despite such dire real life circumstances, Mozart produced three quite special string quartets particularly known for their graceful beauty, delicate textures and

fresh sonorities, a refinement of the genre with a lyrical, concertante style especially featuring the cello after the king. Among other traits, as a showcase for the cello, the music is often scored for a higher register with the lowest voice raised up into the ideal “singing” range of the cello creating a particularly ethereal character throughout the three quartets.

The String Quartet in D Major, K. 575 is the first of the Prussian quartets. It follows the standard four-movement design although it is shorter than Mozart’s previous quartets. The first movement clearly follows a sonata form with its usual tension, wit and occasionally muscular drive, but, as with all three of the Prussian quartets, the sound is refined, even precious, with a certain Rococo delicacy. This subtle elegance is especially characteristic of the second movement, a moderately paced slow movement with Mozart’s sublime lyricism spun out in transparent and occasionally spare textures. This quintessentially “classical music” strikes some as conservative, others as highly refined, carefully distilled.

The Menuetto third movement with its strong triple meter accents and bold unisons displaces the prevailing aerated soufflé textures with a bit of sturm und drang. The contrasting trio, true to its name, reduces the textures for an extremely delicate effect like a little music box or the rich, creamy center of dark chocolate. The cello enjoys the starring role. By contrast, again, the finale is a spirited rondo, dashing with extraordinary drive, dazzling counterpoint, captivating dissonances and yet more of the winning lyricism that is especially characteristic of Mozart’s three Prussian quartets. A simple, almost “stock” theme propels this accessible, “easy” music along its surface profile, but the constant variety of inextricably intertwined figuration and accompaniment offers rich complexity operating on a “deeper” level recalling Mozart’s famous remark regarding some of his piano concertos that “lie somewhere between too easy and too difficult; they are brilliant, pleasing to the ear, and natural without being shallow. There are passages here and there that only a connoisseur can truly appreciate, but that a layperson also can enjoy without even knowing why.” © Kai Christiansen

RAVEL:

Maurice Ravel is best known as a brilliant composer in two media, orchestra and piano (for one, two, four and even five hands). He was amazingly adept at transcribing music from one medium to the other yielding two versions of the same music, one with immense space and color, the other with a finely etched clarity and intimacy, both with the same essential musical character. It seems only natural that he would combine his fine sensibilities for color and texture in a small ensemble. Indeed, Ravel wrote a small number of exceptional, if lesser known, chamber works: a string quartet, a piano trio, a violin sonata, a duo for violin and cello and the Introduction and Allegro for harp, flute, clarinet and string quartet. A slow and meticulous composer, Ravel maintained a consistency of style, craftsmanship and inspiration throughout all of his music while still producing a delicious variety. Key aspects of his style make his music uniquely accessible and enduring for a 20th century composer: a classical sense of form, a vocabulary of melody and harmony that is modern yet tonal, and a rhythmic motion full of vitality and subtlety.

Ravel wrote his only string quartet in 1903 at the age of twenty-eight. During this period, he was greatly enamored of Debussy’s music and it is clear that he was influenced by Debussy’s only string quartet published just ten years earlier. There are numerous similarities between the two quartets. Both feature modal scales and novel harmonies, a whole new range of string

quartet textures and colors, a second-movement scherzo dominated by pizzicato, a slow third movement with an impressionistic cast, and a cyclic design where themes recur throughout the entire quartet. For each composer, the string quartet came early in his career and would eventually be regarded as his first masterpiece. The two quartets have been closely associated ever since, much as Debussy and Ravel themselves are associated as the chief exponents of French Impressionism. Just as the Parisians of the time passionately chose sides in a lively debate about the two composers, listeners ever since have continued to delight in the comparison and contrast of these two exquisite quartets.

Both quartets begin their musical exploration with a fairly traditional sonata-form first movement that establishes the principle themes heard throughout the quartet. While both quartets are based on a cyclic design, they employ their recurring themes in different ways. Debussy uses a single theme that constantly transforms across all four movements. In this sense, he is primarily fascinated with continuous variation, an evolution of ever-changing sensations. Ravel employs multiple themes, the two main themes of the first movement and one from the second. The themes recur with less variation, their essential natures intact, functioning much like themes in a single sonata to give his quartet a strong sense of order as a large-scale process of integration and balance. In at least this way, the quartets differ. Ravel's tendency for neo-classical craftsmanship contrasts with Debussy's more impressionistic freedom.

The two inner movements of Ravel's quartet are particularly rich and fascinating. The second movement is a lively scherzo in a triple meter with a contrasting trio section. The dominant use of pizzicato perfectly punctuates a delightful rhythmic complexity based on the syncopated cross-rhythms of playing 6/8 and 3/4 in alternating measures as well as simultaneously in different instruments. Further subdivisions of the beat overlay this Iberian dance rhythm with triplets (three to a beat) in the main theme and thirty-second notes (four to a beat) in the middle parts. Combining displaced accents, trills, the shivering rasp of rapid tremolo and swiftly changing dynamics, the scherzo dazzles with the precise choreography of its interlocking parts. The trio slows into languid repose with an elegant melody in the lower strings tinged with still more Spanish perfume. But unlike most trios, this one is essentially a reconfiguration of the scherzo, made of the same musical materials: one of the two scherzo themes can be heard in nearly every measure of the trio, transformed by the slow tempo, fragmented, and shifted into the background. Most trios finish with a definite closure; in a single clear gesture, they return to the beginning of scherzo thereby emphasizing a strongly sectional form. Ravel has his scherzo gently creep back in, overlapping with the trio to create a smooth continuity that is subtle and expertly crafted. Unique in the literature, it is characteristic of Ravel's mature style.

The third movement is a beautiful nocturne, an exotic dream of longing that, once again, brings Debussy's quartet to mind. Usually described as "rhapsodic" or "improvisatory", its musical wanderings are more theatrically calculated than they might first appear. A gentle, sensuous melody grows slowly out of the lower strings, interrupted throughout its gestation by short, isolated recurrences of themes from both the first and second movements like fleeting, displaced memories of the day that ultimately succumb to the heaviness of nightfall. A dark, insistent cello portends the further depths of night and, twice, the soft upper strings stir the quiet with a barely perceptible breath of wind in what might be the five most remarkable measures of the entire quartet. Out of the stillness, the thwarted theme finally swells into a passionate, sustained cry, a fever of swirling night visions that eventually subsides, spent,

back into the folds of recurrence, the final sounds of the first movement theme soothing with a tender embrace of unfathomable peace. © Kai Christensen

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

The **Telegraph Quartet** was formed in 2013 with an equal passion for the standard chamber music repertoire and for 20th and 21st century music. Described by the San Francisco Chronicle in 2017 as “an incredibly valuable addition to the cultural landscape” and “powerfully adept . . . with a combination of brilliance and subtlety,” the Telegraph Quartet won the 2016 Naumburg Chamber Music Competition. The quartet has gone on to perform in concert halls, music festivals and academic institutions from Los Angeles and New York to Italy and Taiwan, including Carnegie Hall, San Francisco’s Herbst Recital Hall and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music Chamber Masters Series, and at festivals including the Chautauqua Institute, Kneisel Hall, and the Emilia Romagna Festival in Italy. In 2016, the Quartet was one of a handful of emerging professional quartets invited from around the world to the *Biennale de quatuors à cordes* to showcase at the Philharmonie de Paris for major concert presenters of Europe and Asia. Past prizes include the Grand Prize at the 2014 Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition.

The Telegraph Quartet gave its first Carnegie Hall appearance in Weill Recital Hall in 2015 with violinist Ian Swensen and pianist Jeff LaDeur, and returned to Carnegie Hall in February 2018 for its Naumburg Award Concert featuring the world premiere of Robert Sirota’s third string quartet, *Wave Upon Wave*, which was written for the Quartet. Reviewing the sold-out concert, the New York Music Daily praised the quartet’s “intuitive camaraderie,” writing, “they had come to conquer . . . The crowd rewarded them with three standing ovations.”

The quartet’s notable collaborators have include cellist Norman Fischer, pianist Simone Dinnerstein and Germany’s Henschel Quartett. A fervent champion of contemporary and 20th century repertoire, Telegraph co-commissioned John Harbison’s String Quartet No. 6, and gave its West Coast premiere in the fall of 2017 at San Francisco State University’s Morrison Artists Series. In 2018 the quartet will release its début album, with works by Anton Webern, Benjamin Britten, and Leon Kirchner.

Beyond the concert stage, the Telegraph Quartet seeks to spread its music through education and audience engagement. In 2017/18, the quartet will be traveling to communities and schools in Maine with Yellow Barn’s Music Haul, a mobile performance stage that brings music outside the concert hall to communities across the U.S. The quartet has given master classes at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music Collegiate and Pre-College Divisions, through the Morrison Artist Series at San Francisco State University and abroad at the Taipei National University of the Arts and National Taiwan Normal University. Members of the quartet hold teaching positions in chamber music and private instruction at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. The quartet has also worked in collaboration with the American luthier Douglas Cox, who created a set of instruments specifically to be performed together as a balanced quartet, featuring a performance and open-forum presentation of these instruments at the San Francisco Conservatory.

The Telegraph Quartet has been appointed Faculty Quartet-in-Residence at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music for three years, beginning in September 2017. While indebted to

numerous mentors and teachers, their primary musical guidance and support has come from Mark Sokol, Bonnie Hampton and Ian Swensen of the San Francisco Conservatory.