Prazak Quartet

Sunday, November 17, 2002, 3 pm
Hertz Hall

Vaclav Remes, violin
Vlastimil Holek, violin
Josef Kluson, viola
Michal Kanka, cello

PROGRAM

Franz Schubert — Quartet in A minor, Op. 29, No. 1 (D. 804)
Allegro ma non troppo
Andante
Menuetto (Allegretto)
Allegro moderato

Leo?s Janá?cek — Quartet No. 2, "Intimate Letters" (1928)
Andante
Adagio
Moderato
Allegro

INTERMISSION

Alexander Borodin — Quartet No. 2 in D major
Allegro moderato
Scherzo (Allegro)
Notturno (Andante)
Finale (Andante – Vivace)

The Prazak Quartet appears by arrangement with David Rowe Artists.
Praga/Harmonia Mundi recordings

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Quartet in A minor, Op. 29, No. 1 (D. 804)
Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

When Wilhelmine von Chezy's play Rosamunde, with extensive incidental music by Franz Schubert, was hooted off the stage at its premiere in Vienna on December 20, 1823, the 27-year-old composer decided to turn his efforts away from the theater, where he had found only frustration, and devote more attention to his purely instrumental music. The major works of 1823—the operas Fierrabras and Der häusliche Krieg, the song cycle Die schöne Müllerin, and Rosamunde—gave

way to the string quartets in D minor ("Death and the Maiden") and A minor, the Cello Sonata in A minor ("Arpeggione"), several sets of variations and German dances, and the Octet. At that time in Schubert's life, composition seems to have been almost an escape from the difficulties of his personal situation. He was suffering from anemia and a nervous disorder as the result of syphilis and its treatment (mercury in the early 19th century!), and was constantly broke, living largely on the generosity of his devoted friends, with only an occasional pittance from some performance or publication. In March 1824, he poured out his troubles in a letter to Leopold Kupelweiser, a close friend recently moved to Rome: "In a word, I feel myself to be the most unhappy and wretched creature in the world. Imagine a man whose health will never be right again, and whose sheer despair over this makes things constantly worse instead of better; imagine a man whose most brilliant hopes have perished, to whom the felicity of love and friendship have nothing to offer but pain" Schubert then quoted some forlorn lines from Goethe's poem "Gretchen am Spinnrade" ("Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel"), which he had set in 1814: "'My peace is gone, my heart is sore, I shall find it never, nevermore' [are words which] I may well sing every day now, for each night on retiring to bed, I hope I may not wake again." Such anguish, however, did not seem to thwart Schubert's creative muse, and the year 1824, when his physician was able to restore somewhat his health through regular mineral baths, a strict diet, and confinement to his room, was one of the most productive periods of his life. Moritz von Schwind, the artist who captured so well the decorous atmosphere of the Biedermeier period and whose woodcuts for children were to inspire the third movement ("Frère Jacques") of Mahler's First Symphony 60 years later, reported on Schubert's absorption with his creative activity at the time: "Schubert has now long been at work with the greatest zeal. If you go to see him during the day he says, 'Hello, how are you?—Good!' and simply goes on working, whereupon you depart."

The Quartet in A minor dates from February and March 1824. It had been more than three years since Schubert had written in the genre, and that earlier example, the so-called Quartetsatz ("Quartet Movement") in C minor (D. 703), was abandoned after just a single movement had been completed. Schubert's 11 previous specimens of the form had all been written as Hausmusik for the family quartet (his two brothers on violin, his father playing cello, and Franz as violist), so the Quartet in A minor therefore stands as the gateway to the incomparable chamber music of his maturity. The piece was inspired by the enthusiastic and meticulously prepared performances of the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, the greatest early interpreter of the quartets of Beethoven. After returning to Vienna from seven years of performing in Russia, Schuppanzigh had established a highly regarded subscription series of chamber programs with his distinguished quartet (violinist Karl Holz, violist Franz Weiss, and cellist Josef Linke) in the hall that the Philharmonic Society reserved in "The Red Hedgehog," a popular local inn of the day that was later also a favorite haunt of Brahms. The Quartet in A minor was premiered at the concert of March 14th with gratifying success; Schwind reported that Schuppanzigh played it "rather slowly, but with great purity and tenderness." The work was issued as Opus 29, No. 1, by the firm of Sauer and Leidesdorf in September, the only one of Schubert's quartets published during his lifetime. (The Quartet in D minor, originally intended as the second number of the set, was not published until 1831 as Opus 161; the projected third piece was never written.)

Though Schubert spoke of the D-minor and A-minor Quartets and the Octet of 1824 as preparatory exercises for a "grand symphony," there is nothing tentative or unpolished in the structure, style, or expression of any of these splendid creations. Indeed, these compositions rank with the greatest instrumental works that Schubert ever wrote—the Quartet in A minor was described by Joseph Wechsberg as "the distilled essence of Schubert's genius . . . the true expression of his musicianship." The work is music of sweet sadness, of the precise, touching melancholy sometimes rising to tragedy of which Schubert and Mozart are the unrivaled masters. The pensive opening, the emotional platform upon which the entire work is built, recalls Schubert's 1814 song "Gretchen am Spinnrade," from which he quoted lines to describe his mood at the time of the quartet's composition: "My peace is gone, my heart is sore, I shall find it never, nevermore." The complementary theme, graced with a demure trill upon its introduction by the second violin, provides an episode of brighter outlook, but it is the main theme and its troubled prospect that provide the

principal material for the development section. As was Schubert's wont, the recapitulation returns the earlier themes in full, with a recall of the main subject serving as the sorrowful coda.
The lovely melody of the Andante was taken from the familiar Entr'acte No. 3 in B-flat for the music to Rosamunde, Schubert's stage flop of the preceding December. The composer must have been particularly fond of this ingratiating theme, since he used it once again as the subject for the set of variations that makes up the Impromptu No. 3 in B-flat (D. 935), composed in 1827. The Menuetto is one of Schubert's most haunting creations, the bittersweet memory of a happy dance rather than the dance itself. Schubert borrowed the theme from his 1819 song to Schiller's poem "Die Götter Griechenlands" ("The Greek Gods"), whose text expresses a yearning for days gone by: "Fair world, where art thou, Come again glorious age of Nature." The Trio, in the warmer clime of A major, provides a brief respite before the repeat of the sullen Menuetto rounds out the movement. The finale, a hybrid of rondo and sonata forms, is predominantly cheerful in demeanor, a determined turning-away from the dark feelings of the preceding movements. Sir J.A. Westrup said that it was "rather like one of those peasant dances that one finds in the operas of Weber or Marschner—a townsman's view of the way in which country folks enjoy themselves." (Gustav Mahler, the greatest of all musical poets of Weltschmerz, created some of his most powerful and moving compositions by juxtaposing the innocence of folk music with the jaded sophistication of high culture.) Moritz von Schwind captured something of the lyrical and emotional essence of the great Quartet in A minor with his simple description sent to a friend following the premiere: "It is very smooth and gentle, but has the kind of melody one associates with songs—full of feeling and quite distinctive."

Quartet No. 2, "Intimate Letters" (1928)
Leo?s Janá?cek (1854–1928)
In the summer of 1917, when he was 63, Leo?s Janá?cek fell in love with Kamila Stösslová, the 25-year-old wife of a Jewish antiques dealer from Písek. They first met in a town in central Moravia during the War, but, as he lived in Brno with Zdenka, his wife of 37 years, and she lived with her husband in Písek, they saw each other only infrequently thereafter and remained in touch mostly by letter. The true passion seems to have been entirely on his side ("It is fortunate that only I am infatuated," he once wrote to her), but Kamila did not reject his company, apparently feeling admiration rather than love for the man who, with the successful staging of his Jenufa in Prague in 1915 (11 years after its premiere in Brno), was at that time acquiring an international reputation as a master composer. Whatever the details of their relationship, Kamila's role as an inspiring muse during the last decade of Janá?cek's life was indisputable and beneficent—under the sway of his feelings for her he wrote his greatest music, including the operas Katya Kabanova, The Cunning Little Vixen, and The Makropoulos Affair; the song cycle The Diary of the Young Man Who Disappeared; the two string quartets (the second of which he titled "Intimate Letters"); the Glagolitic Mass; and the Sinfonietta for Orchestra.
It seems fitting, perhaps inevitable, that Janá?cek's last work—the String Quartet No. 2—was the one most closely bound to his love for Kamila. By the beginning of 1928, a decade after they first met, he had sent her over 500 letters that revealed his innermost thoughts and feelings; his most recent ones even referred to her as his "wife," in quotation marks. He was then seriously considering ending his own long-time marriage, which had never been very happy and had turned absolutely icy after Zdenka came to realize the depth of her husband's passion for Kamila the preceding spring. (Janá?cek even re-wrote his will to make Kamila his primary beneficiary; Zdenka had to go to court to get that provision overturned.) The domestic tensions between the Janá?ceks flared into a nasty quarrel on New Year's Day 1928, and Leo?s determined to retreat to his cottage in his native village of Hukvaldy, but he was stuck in Brno for a week, finishing the opera The House of the Dead. He visited Kamila for two days before arriving in Hukvaldy on January 10th, and saw her again at the performance of Katya Kabanova in Prague on the 21st. A week later, from Hukvaldy, he wrote to Kamila that he was beginning "a musical confession," a new string quartet that he proposed titling "Love Letters," and which would call for a viola d'amore—the "viol of love"—rather than the usual viola. "Our life is going to be in it," he promised. The Quartet No. 2, ultimately subtitled "Intimate Letters" and scored for standard string quartet (the soft tones of the viola d'amore made it a poor partner for other strings), was finished in just three weeks. Janá?cek reported to Kamila the

intense—almost frantic—passion that drove him during its creation: “I’m so glad at how my pen was burning when I wrote it! How quickly, how pantingly I wrote! How it didn’t want to stop! Oh, little soul, we’ll flicker together! All this feeling, as if it were piled upon itself … as if it had lifted you and me from this earth, as if everything was joyfully, lovingly hovering; and in that feverish mood, these Intimate Letters were born.” He fretted that the work was not a suitable match for his fiery emotions: “Feelings on their own are sometimes so strong that the notes hide, run away. A great love—a weak composition. But I want it to be: a great love—a great composition.” He did not present the score to Kamila until a private reading in his home on May 18th had soothed his apprehensions about the piece. On July 29th, Kamila and her husband joined Janá?cek for a holiday in Hukvaldy. Despite David Stössel’s presence and an alarming change in his health three weeks before, Janá?cek wrote in Kamila’s album that he was contented: “You are sitting beside me and I am happy and at peace. In such a way do the days pass for the angels.” On a walking expedition into the surrounding hills on August 8th, 11-year-old Otto Stössel went missing, and Janá?cek, though seriously ill, joined the search party. He became flushed and overheated, took to his bed, and the following day was diagnosed with pneumonia. On August 12, 1928, five weeks after his 74th birthday, he died in the hospital at Ostrava. His last composition, his testament to the love that had renewed his passions and fired his creative spirit, his “Intimate Letters,” was premiered just a month later in Brno by the Moravian String Quartet.

Janá?cek explained to Kamila that the work’s opening movement depicted “my impression when I saw you for the first time.” A bold motive of halting gestures, probably representing the composer, is given by the violins above a tremulous note in the cello. The viola, glassy-toned in its sul ponticello (“at the bridge”) effect, gives out a haunting phrase of unsettled tonality that, as the composer’s biographer Jaroslav Vogel wrote, “expresses the chilling mystery of an encounter with an utterly new and potentially great experience.” A leaping, flickering arpeggio for the first violin completes the thematic material, whose three elements are varied, superimposed, and abutted throughout the remainder of the movement.

The Adagio, according to the composer, concerns “the summer events at Luhacovice Spa in Moravia,” where Janá?cek saw Kamila for the first time in a year-and-a-half in July 1921. The sad, arching, short-breathed melody first sung by the viola suggests the months of their separation. This theme is expanded and transformed by the other instruments, sometimes quietly, sometimes forcefully, and acquires as accompaniment the flickering arpeggio from the opening movement as it unfolds. The sudden intrusion of an excited dance tune in limping meter conjures a tea-time salon orchestra at the spa. The dance disintegrates, the sad opening music returns, and the composer is again left alone, with only the remembered thoughts of his first meeting with his beloved to comfort him.

Janá?cek told Kamila that he intended to make the third movement “particularly joyful and then dissolve it into a vision that resembles your image.” An extraordinary formal plan resulted. The first portion of the movement, despite Janá?cek’s claim to jollity, is occupied by a frozen drudge of a theme in plodding rhythms, the sort of music that Shostakovich used to portray emotional numbness. The heart-beat of this theme’s rhythm is sustained by the viola as the underpinning for a warm melody—Kamila’s theme—that is yet another variant of the quartet’s opening gesture. This music grows to a climax before the first subject returns; the movement ends with a brief review of its themes.

“The finale,” Janá?cek explained, “won’t finish with fear for my pretty little vixen, but with great longing and its fulfillment.” The movement, a quirky hybrid of sonata and rondo, returns often to its boisterous opening strain, though in modified forms. A leaping motive of trilled notes, a sort of second subject, provides thematic contrast. The two ideas are played against each other throughout the movement in unpredictable, frequently startling ways before the quartet arrives at a triumphant exclamation in its closing measures.

Quartet No. 2 in D major

Alexander Borodin (1833–1887)

In June of 1881, Borodin was in Weimar trading compliments with Franz Liszt. Despite the gratification of this activity, Borodin was eager to return to Russia, where he was to meet his wife for

a summer holiday in Zhitovo at the country estate of his friend, the composer Nikolai Lodyzhensky. The stay was to be a welcome, two-month respite for Borodin from the strenuous duties of his career as one of the country's leading researchers and teachers in chemistry and medicine. In addition to spending time with
his wife, Catherine ("Catherine the Great," he sometimes chided her), he could also compose uninterruptedly, a luxury he rarely enjoyed. So little time did his schedule leave him for creative work, in fact, that he accurately labeled himself as a "Sunday composer." In 1875, he wrote to an acquaintance, "In winter, I can only compose when I am too unwell to give lectures. So my friends, revising the usual custom, never say to me, 'I hope you are well,' but 'I do hope you
are ill.' At Christmas I had influenza, so I stayed home and wrote the 'Chorus of Thanks' in the last act of Prince Igor." Given leisure and a halcyon summer setting at Zhitovo, he completed his String Quartet No. 2 during July and August, virtually his only important work finished in a single session. The new piece was premiered
by the Galkin-Degtyerev-Rezvetsov-Kuznetsov Quartet at a concert of the St. Petersburg branch of the Imperial Russian Music Society on January 26, 1882.

The summer of 1881 was the 20th anniversary of Borodin's meeting his wife. Since he dedicated the score to her, his biographer Serge Dianin thought that "it is logical to assume that this work is a memento of his love as a young man for Catherine." As musical evidence for his theory, Dianin cites the unabashedly lyrical nature of the work, and the fact that Catherine was given to intense sentimentality over anniversaries with her husband. Dianin then goes on to posit that the first movement represents Borodin's "growing love for Catherine"; the second, "a description of one of their walks" (the composer told his friend E.M. Braudo that this Scherzo "attempted to conjure up an impression of a light-hearted evening spent in one of the suburban pleasure gardens of St. Petersburg"); the Notturno "is simply a love scene"; and the Finale "relates to their married life." It is a pleasant conceit and may not even be untrue, though Borodin left no evidence other than the score's dedication to support it.

The quartet's opening movement follows conventional sonata form, with its smooth, even-treading main theme given immediately by the cello; the more animated complementary melody is initiated by the violin above a pizzicato accompaniment. The second and third movements, a scherzo and a nocturne, will be forever linked with the 1953 Broadway musical Kismet, whose score was the result of unashamed raids upon Borodin's music by Robert Wright and Luther Davis. Though the artistic merits of such a practice are debatable, the popularity that Borodin's melodies gained in their theatrical transmogrifications is vivid testimony to his lyric genius. The closing movement juxtaposes two thematic strains in contrasting tempos as the bases for another sonata form, a technique that Andrew Porter suggested might have been indebted to Beethoven's Opus 135 quartet, whose finale grows from the musical rendering of the exchange, "Muss es sein? Es muss sein!" ("Must it be? It must be!").

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The Prazak Quartet—one of today´s leading international chamber music ensembles—was established in 1972 while its members were students at the Prague Conservatory. Since then, the Quartet has gained attention for its place in the unique Czech quartet tradition, as well as for its musical virtuosity.

The Prazak Quartet won the first prize at the Prague Conservatory Chamber Music Competition in 1974, and within 12 months, the group's international career had been launched with a performance at the Prague Spring Music Festival. In 1978, the Quartet took the first prize at the Evian String Quartet Competition, as well as a special prize awarded by Radio France (for the best recording during the Competition). Further prizes were awarded at various other Czech competitions.

For nearly 30 years, the Prazak Quartet has been at home on music stages worldwide. The musicians are regular guests in the major European musical capitals, and have been invited to participate at numerous international festivals, where they have collaborated with such artists as Menahem Pressler, Cynthia Phelps, Roberto Diaz, Josef Suk, and Sharon Kam. Highlights of recent seasons include performances in Paris, Amsterdam, Dresden, Frankfurt, Berlin, Venice, and Madrid.

In North America, the Prazak Quartet has performed in New York (Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, 92nd Street Y), Los Angeles, San Francisco, Dallas, Houston, Washington (DC), Philadelphia, Miami, St. Louis, New Orleans, Berkeley, Cleveland, Tucson, Denver, Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal.
The Quartet's 2002–03 North American tours include appearances in New York (Carnegie Hall), Houston, Dallas, Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Tucson, Chicago, Indianapolis, Palm Beach, Oberlin, Berkeley, Costa Mesa, and La Jolla.
The Prazak Quartet records exclusively for Praga/Harmonia Mundi, which, to date, has released 20 award-winning CDs. In addition to numerous radio recordings in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic, the Prazak Quartet has also made recordings for Supraphon, Panton, Orfeo, Ottavo, Bonton, and Nuova Era.

Instruments:
First Violin: Lorenzo Guadagnini, ca. 1730
Second Violin: Tomás Pilar, 1995
Viola: Tomás Pilar, 1985
Violoncello: Giovanni Grancino, 1710
(State Collection)