Escher String Quartet
Adam Barnett-Hart, violin | Brendan Speltz, violin
Pierre Lapointe, viola | Brook Speltz, cello

QUARTET IN B-FLAT MAJOR, K. 589 (PRUSSIAN) (1790)
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91)
Allegro
Larghetto
Menuetto: Moderato
Allegro assai

QUARTET NO. 4, BB. 95 (1928)
Béla Bartók (1881–1945)
Allegro
Prestissimo, con sordino
Non troppo lento
Allegretto pizzicato
Allegro molto

:: INTERMISSION ::

QUARTET NO. 11, IN C MAJOR, OP. 61, B.121 (1881)
Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)
Allegro
Poco adagio e molto cantabile
Scherzo – Allegro vivo
Finale: Vivace

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QUARTET IN B-FLAT MAJOR, K. 589 (PRUSSIAN)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (b. Salzburg, Austria, January 27, 1756; d. Vienna, December 5, 1791)

Composed 1790; 24 minutes

As a patron of music, Frederick the Great, the music-mad monarch, who even found time to play the flute on the battlefield, was a hard act to follow. But his nephew, Friedrich Wilhelm II (1744-97), rose to the challenge. His chosen instrument was the cello and he had a passion for string quartets and quintets. A skilful performer, Friedrich Wilhelm had almost 2,500 documented instrumental parts in his library. One year after taking over the Prussian throne, he appointed Luigi Boccherini his court composer. Other fine performers obtained positions at his court. Haydn dedicated his Op. 50 quartets to him. Ignaz Pleyel followed with no less than 12 quartets. Other composers also tagged at the royal purse strings, naturally favoring the cello in the music they proffered.

In the spring of 1789, Mozart set his sights on a position at the Prussian court or at least a commission from the King. Legend (and many history books) have it that after the three-month trip, which included Leipzig, Dresden, Berlin and Prague, Mozart returned to Vienna a disappointed man. He had with him a small amount of money and a commission to write what he described a year later in a letter to Viennese textile merchant Michael Puchberg as “six easy clavier sonatas for Princess Frederike and six quartets for the King.”

Recent research, however, has revealed that it is by no means certain that Mozart was even received at King Friedrich Wilhelm’s court in Potsdam, and the commission for six quartets appears to have been a speculative venture by a composer who was hard pressed for cash. But composition of the quartets did not come effortlessly. One year after visiting Potsdam, Mozart was describing to Puchberg that what we now refer to as the three completed Prussian quartets were a ‘troublesome task.’ There are surviving false starts to all three finales and, for K. 589, a cancelled attempt for a minuet and a draft for a full (different) finale. This was all in Mozart was describing to Puchberg that what we now refer to as the three completed Prussian quartets were a ‘troublesome task.’ There are surviving false starts to all three finales and, for K. 589, a cancelled attempt for a minuet and a draft for a full (different) finale. This was all in keeping with Mozart’s self-imposed need for innovation. And it helps prove that this innovation was hard-won, no matter how fluent and effortless the quartets may strike us when listening to them.

K. 589 begins elegantly with the cello taking a prominent role in introducing the subsidiary themes. The lyrical upper register of the ‘royal’ instrument takes the lead in announcing the beautiful, arching theme of the slow movement. In the slow movement, all four instruments play an equal part in a texture of unusual richness and subtlety, with particular attention to the cello, which is given a prominent role in the exposition. The andante theme is broken up into two musical ideas that are heard in the first violin. The second and fourth movements are again related. Both are scherzo-like, with the second played mused throughout and the fourth played pizzicato throughout. The key of the second is E-flat, a third above C, while the theme of the fourth is A-flat, a third below C. The symmetry is sustained in the central, slow movement, which falls into an ABA form, thereby completing an overall arch: ABCBA.

Bartók’s Fourth Quartet is virtually without themes. Instead, short motifs are rigorously developed. The first movement is based entirely on a six-note cello fragment, which moves stepwise upwards from B-flat to D-flat, then down again. The slow movement is flanked by the scurrying second movement and the related fourth where Bartók introduces a variety of pizzicato sounds, including the so-called ‘Bartók pizzicato’ where the string is snapped hard against the fingerboard of the instrument. In this evocative slow movement, we hear several urgent, yet melancholy cello rhapsodies at the outset, based on the sounds of an ancient Hungarian folk instrument, a sort of clarinet, called a tárogató. They are soon heard in combination with the haunting and very Bartókian ‘night music’ of bird song and insect sounds of the central section. The finale is a ferocious Magyar dance, thrilling in its energy, exuberant in its forward drive.

QUARTET NO. 11, IN C MAJOR, OP. 61, B.121

Antonín Dvořák (b. Nelahozeves, Bohemia, September 8, 1841; d. Prague, May 1, 1904)

Composed 1881; 28 minutes

Antonín Dvořák composed the eleventh of his 14 string quartets for Joseph Hellmesberger, the Viennese court Kapellmeister, concertmaster of the Vienna State Opera and Conservatory director, the very pillar of the Viennese musical establishment. Hellmesberger’s string quartet had a reputation as Vienna’s finest for over three centuries when they first began to perform music by Dvořák. It was a good time for the musician from provincial Prague. After four decades of poverty and state stipends, his music was now being championed by Brahms and the influential Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick. His music was being published by a German publisher, thanks to Brahms’s recommendation, and the Vienna Philharmonic Society had just requested a new symphony.

At the beginning of October 1881, he immersed himself in a new opera for the inauguration of the new National Theater in Prague, reassuring Hellmesberger that he would work on the opera in the mornings and the quartet in the afternoons. By the middle of November, he opened a Viennese newspaper: “I see in the papers that on December 15, Hellmesberger is to perform my new quartet, which does not yet exist,” he wrote with some humor to a friend. “There is nothing left for me to do but to compose it!”

Three weeks later, the quartet was complete. The mood is at once intimate, with an affirmative theme that is rich in potential for development. It soon plunges dramatically into the minor and Dvořák explores the resulting major-minor ambiguity throughout the opening movement. The music travels through a range of emotions from the joyous to the wistful. The spacious slow movement, one of Dvořák’s generously romantic utterances, again successfully exploits a frequent major-minor shift in modality. It is based on a discarded sketch for the F major Violin Sonata, Op. 57 of the previous year. Similarly – probably to hasten completion of the work – the third and fourth movements incorporate themes from a Polonaise for cello and piano that Dvořák was working on a year or two earlier. The Scherzo brings a return to the urgency of the opening movement and an echo of a motif from its opening theme. In its brilliant trio section, Dvořák allows his love for folk-like themes to surface, though the development of the material remains securely within the traditions of the Viennese quartet. Dvořák knew he was treating a fine line between national feeling and an international musical language. “Viennese audiences seem to be prejudiced against a composition with a Slav flavor,” he had written to conductor Hans Richter just the previous year, recognizing that political tensions could intrude on concert hall performances. In the finale, rigorous development of musical motifs continues as the driving force behind exuberant, technically demanding, Slavonic-colored music.

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