

The Harlem Quartet

Saturday March 26, 2022

2:00 PM

Bethel United Methodist Church Hall

Lewes, DE

PROGRAM

String Quartet No. 3 in F Major, Op. 73

Allegretto

Moderato con moto

Allegro non troppo

Adagio

Moderato

Dmitri Shostakovich

(1906 – 1975)

Strum

Jessie Montgomery

(b. 1981)

A Night in Tunisia

John Birks “Dizzy” Gillespie:

(1917 – 1993)

(arr. Dave Glenn and The
Harlem Quartet)

INTERMISSION

String Quartet No. 2 in C Major, Op. 36

Allegro calmo, senza rigore

Vivace

Chacony: sostenuto

Benjamin Britten

(1913–1976)

-Program Subject to Change-

The Harlem Quartet is represented by

Sciolino Artist Management

230 Central Park West #14J

New York, New York

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Program Notes

SHOSTAKOVICH

String Quartet No. 3 in F Major, Op. 73 (1946)

This quartet was written just after World War II when Shostakovich, then forty, shifted his emphasis from public orchestral music to more private chamber music. While he had already written nine symphonies, he was just settling into his emerging series of string quartets that would eventually number fifteen.

Many feel that *String Quartet No. 3* is among his best; it was a favorite of the composer himself. It shows Shostakovich in his full powers as a chamber music composer, skillfully deploying the string quartet to express his distinctive musical personality. The work features an astonishing range of textures, sonic effects and brilliant part writing. Although it is highly successful as abstract musical expression, it is nearly impossible to miss the quartet's topical and programmatic nature. The unspeakable hardships of life in the Soviet Union through the end of WWII took their toll on Shostakovich. Nervous, bitter and depressed, he found his most profound outlet in the relatively safe privacy and intimate expressive capability of chamber music

For the premiere, Shostakovich named the movements in the manner of a war story, most likely so that he would not be accused of "formalism" or "elitism". These movements were:

Blithe ignorance of the future cataclysm

Rumblings of unrest and anticipation

Forces of war unleashed

Homage to the dead

The eternal question: why? and for what?

Although these titles characterize the quartet as a reflection on the war, and vividly summarize the essential nature of the music, the composer retracted them, for unknown reasons, immediately after the 1946 premiere by the Beethoven String Quartet.

The first movement is initially light and easy, but sarcastically so. With two distinct themes and a nearly textbook sonata form, the music moves from merriment into disarming complexity and conflict. The movement ends with a wild acceleration that is more panic than mirth.

The second movement soon steers into an edgy, off-kilter waltz that draws each instrument into the fray of angular melody, restless tonality, menacing rhythms and shrill intervals. Suddenly the music shifts from a triple meter waltz into a duple meter march, a clear suggestion that the "*rumblings*" are those of war. The march has some of the same hollow brightness of the first movement.

The third movement is Shostakovich at his best. As an *Allegro*, with *fortissimo* dynamics, a propulsive rhythm, and huge multiple-stopped chords the music perfectly matches its original title of “*war unleashed*”. Yet in the midst of the drama, Shostakovich intersperses caricature and parody in the form of skittering dances and pompous, overblown marches.

The fourth movement *Adagio* shows another side of Shostakovich. It is a desolate, haunting, deep and earnest lament. It begins with a stark, heavy theme intoned by all four instruments in unison, which recurs in a series of anguished solos. These occur within a diversity of shifting ensemble configurations that ultimately sink into a funeral dirge, a forlorn duet for viola and cello.

With a moderate tempo, the final movement is episodic and ambiguous, mixing duple and triple meters, unsettling marches, and ghostly dances. This is perhaps suggesting that humanity will always waver between both gestures, equally oblivious to its tendencies towards complacency and destruction. The tension escalates into a final climax that erupts with a recall of the fourth movement dirge, an outpouring of grief and yet another blend of march and languid dance. The quartet dies away with an eerie glow: a long, unison passage hovers while a lonely violin sings a final lament that evaporates into an ethereal, disembodied harmonic. The “*eternal question*” remains unanswered.

MONTGOMERY

Strum (2006; revised 2012)

Jessie Montgomery is an acclaimed composer, violinist, and educator. She is the recipient of the Leonard Bernstein Award from the ASCAP Foundation, and her works are performed frequently around the world by leading musicians and ensembles. Her music interweaves classical with elements of vernacular music, improvisation, language, and social justice, placing her squarely as one of the most relevant interpreters of 21st-century American sound and experience. Her profoundly felt works have been described as “turbulent, wildly colorful and exploding with life” (*The Washington Post*).

Montgomery was born and raised in Manhattan’s Lower East Side during a time when the neighborhood was at a major turning point in its history. Artists gravitated to the hotbed of artistic experimentation and community development. Her parents – her father a musician, her mother a theater artist and storyteller – were engaged in the activities of the neighborhood and regularly brought their daughter to rallies, performances, and parties where neighbors, activists, and artists gathered to celebrate and support the movements of the time. It is from this unique experience that she has created a life that merges composing, performance, education, and advocacy.

Montgomery began her violin studies at the Third Street Music School Settlement, one of the oldest community organizations in the country. A founding member of PUBLIQuartet and currently a member of the Catalyst Quartet, she continues to

maintain an active performance career as a violinist appearing regularly with her own ensembles, as well as with the Silkroad Ensemble and Sphinx Virtuosi. Montgomery's teachers and mentors include Sally Thomas, Ann Setzer, Alice Kanack, Joan Tower, Derek Bermel, Mark Suozzo, Ira Newborn, and Laura Kaminsky. She holds degrees from the Juilliard School and New York University and is currently a Graduate Fellow in Music Composition at Princeton University.

Since 1999, Montgomery has been affiliated with The Sphinx Organization, which supports young African-American and Latinx string players. She currently serves as composer-in-residence for the Sphinx Virtuosi, the Organization's flagship professional touring ensemble. She was a two-time laureate of the annual Sphinx Competition and was awarded a generous MPower grant to assist in the development of her debut album, *Strum: Music for Strings* (Azica Records). She has received additional grants and awards from the ASCAP Foundation, Chamber Music America, American Composers Orchestra, the Joyce Foundation, and the Sorel Organization.

In the composer's words:

"*Strum* is the culminating result of several versions of a string quintet I wrote in 2006. It was originally written for the Providence String Quartet and guests of Community MusicWorks Players, then arranged for string quartet in 2008 with several small revisions. In 2012 the piece underwent its final revisions with a rewrite of both the introduction and the ending for the Catalyst Quartet in a performance celebrating the 15th annual Sphinx Competition.

"Originally conceived for the formation of a cello quintet, the voicing is often spread wide over the ensemble, giving the music an expansive quality of sound. Within *Strum* I utilized texture motives, layers of rhythmic or harmonic *ostinati* that string together to form a bed of sound for melodies to weave in and out. The strumming *pizzicato* serves as a texture motive and the primary driving rhythmic underpinning of the piece. Drawing on American folk idioms and the spirit of dance and movement, the piece has a kind of narrative that begins with fleeting nostalgia and transforms into ecstatic celebration."

GILLESPIE

A Night in Tunisia (1942)

John Birks "Dizzy" Gillespie was an American jazz performer, bandleader, composer, educator and singer. On the trumpet, he was a virtuoso improviser, building on the style of Roy Eldridge but adding layers of harmonic and rhythmic complexity previously unheard in jazz. His combination of musicianship, showmanship and wit made him a leading popularizer of the new music called bebop. His beret and horn-rimmed glasses, scat singing, bent horn, pouched cheeks and light-hearted personality provided some of bebop's most prominent symbols.

A Night in Tunisia is a quintessential Gillespie composition. Its origins remain somewhat of a mystery, though several sources claim to have located its genesis in Gillespie's time as a member of Benny Carter's band.

The tune later became a staple number of Billy Eckstine's big band. This band featured, alongside Gillespie, saxophonist Charlie Parker and vocalist Sarah Vaughan. At this time, the song was introduced as *Interlude*, with lyrics by Vaughan. She was one of the first vocal artists to record it, featuring Gillespie as a sideman.

Though later recordings would feature alternate lyrics by Jon Hendricks that more appropriately fit the "new" title, *A Night in Tunisia*, Gillespie would continue to refer to the composition as *Interlude*. He was apparently unaware of how, why or when the title-change exactly occurred, reportedly saying: "some genius decided to call it *A Night in Tunisia*." Attractive as the idea is to use the piece as a symbol of imaginings of Africa, the weight of evidence suggests that the composition existed well before it acquired the "*Tunisia*" tag.

Musically this tune demonstrates its composer's ambition to step away from the conventions of 1940's jazz. This is shown by its Afro-Caribbean rhythms and innovative approach to harmony and melody. Today, the song is recognized as one of the most influential tracks in the evolution of the modern jazz idiom. It is said to have appeared in over 300 commercial recordings. In January 2004, The Recording Academy added the 1946 Victor recording by Gillespie to the Grammy Hall of Fame.

BRITTEN

String Quartet No. 2 in C Major, Op. 36 (1945)

Britten was charged with writing two pieces for a concert commemorating the 250th anniversary of the death of British composer Henry Purcell. One of the works was this string quartet.

Britten regarded the compositions of Purcell very highly: they embodied many of the aesthetic characteristics that he strived for in his own music, including what he termed qualities of "*clarity, brilliance, tenderness and strangeness*." As with many composers of the mid-20th century, a form of nationalism still colored Britten's search for his own unique compositional voice. He wanted to distance himself from the "pastoral" school of composers such as Vaughan Williams, who based their musical language on the harmonies of traditional English folk songs and works of composers from the Elizabethan era; Britten found his solution to expressing nationalism by delving into the works of Purcell for inspiration.

One already hears the influence of Purcell at the very opening of the first movement. As the two violins and cello play the introductory theme, the viola plays a drone strongly reminiscent of that heard in Purcell's *Fantasia upon One Note, Z.745*.

The second movement is a brilliant *scherzo* that makes reference to the musical language of Dmitri Shostakovich, a composer whom Britten greatly admired and who would later become his close friend.

Britten's usage of the third movement's title "*Chacony*" refers back to Purcell, who used that name for the musical form more often called *chaconne* or *passacaglia*. It consists of a theme and 21 variations. In a program note for the premiere, Britten wrote: "*The sections may be said to review the theme from (a) harmonic, (b) rhythmic, (c) melodic, and (d) formal aspects*". Purcell wrote a well-known *Chacony in G minor* that Britten must have been familiar with when he composed this quartet; he subsequently arranged the piece for modern string orchestra in 1955.

The Zorian Quartet made the first recording of the present work. It occupied seven sides of a four-disc 78 rpm set. On the eighth side was *Purcell's Fantasia upon One Note*, with Britten playing a sustained middle C drone on viola.

The first public performance was also by the Zorian Quartet at Wigmore Hall, London on November 21, 1945 in a concert to mark the exact 250th anniversary of the death of Purcell. The work was commissioned by and dedicated to Mary ("Mrs J. L.") Behrend, a patron of the arts. Britten donated most of his fee towards famine relief in India.