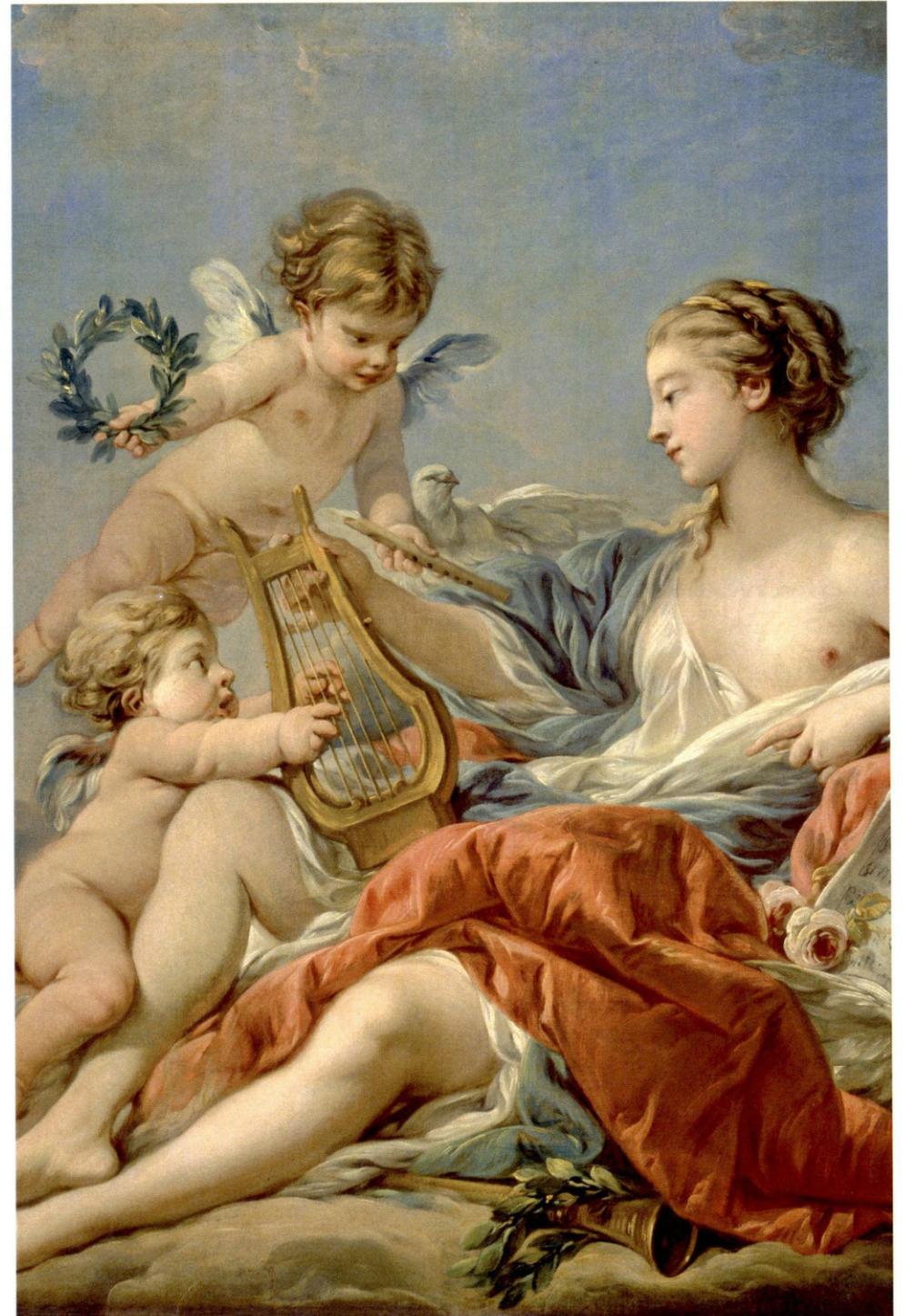




74th Season • 1

74TH SEASON OF CONCERTS

FEBRUARY 21, 2016 • NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART



PROGRAM



Bennewitz Quartet

3:30 • West Building, West Garden Court

Bennewitz Quartet

Jakub Fišer, violin

Štěpán Ježek, violin

Jiří Pinkas, viola

Štěpán Doležal, cello

Joseph Haydn (1732–1809)

String Quartet no. 30 in E-flat Major ("Joke"), op. 33/2, H. 3/38

Allegro moderato

Scherzando and Trio

Largo

Finale; Presto

Slavomír Hořínka (b. 1980)

Songs of Immigrants

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)

String Quartet no. 13 in G Major, op. 106

Allegro moderato

Adagio ma non troppo

Molto vivace

Finale; Andante sostenuto — Allegro con fuoco

The Musicians

The critically acclaimed Bennewitz Quartet is one of the top international chamber ensembles, a status confirmed by their victories in two prestigious competitions — the Osaka International Chamber Music Competition in 2005, and the international string quartet competition, Prémio Paolo Borciani, in 2008. As early as 2006, the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* wrote that “the music was remarkable not just for its clarity of structure, but for the beautiful tonal palette and purity of intonation in its execution. Only very rarely does one experience such skillfully crafted and powerful harmonies. . . . Great art.”

The Bennewitz Quartet especially enjoys playing and performing on the Czech domestic music scene. Particular highlights have included their cooperation with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra and its conductor Jiří Bělohlávek for a performance of Bohuslav Martinů’s *Concerto for String Quartet and Orchestra*. Last year they performed with the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra the Czech premiere of John Adams’s *Absolute Jest*. The members of the quartet also use their choice of repertoire and concert programming to actively promote Czech music, including excellent but overlooked composers, such as Jan Ladislav Dusík, Anton Rejcha, Pavel Haas, Viktor Ullmann, and Erwin Schulhoff. The Bennewitz Quartet has the privilege of working with outstanding artists, including Jean-Yves Thibaudet, Alexander Melnikov, Vadim Gluzman, Isabel Charisius, Danjulo Ishizaka, and others.

Their long-term cooperation with the Coviello Classics label includes a recording of Leoš Janáček’s two string quartets and Béla Bartók’s fourth. The second recording in the series, released in spring 2010, contains both of Bedřich Smetana’s quartets. The ensemble followed this with a recording of Dvořák’s complete *Cypresses* cycle on the Hänssler Classic label and expects to release a new recording with quartets by Antonín Dvořák on the SWRmusic label.

The quartet is named after violinist Antonín Bennewitz (1833–1926), who was a seminal figure in the creation of the Czech violin school.

Program Notes

In 1781, after a lapse of ten years, forty-nine-year-old Joseph Haydn returned to the string quartet, composing a set of six quartets that were published the following year as Opus 33. The publication bore a dedication to the “Grand Duke of Russia,” and so these quartets are most commonly known as the “Russian quartets.” Their other nickname, “Gli Scherzi” (The Jokes), refers to the fact that Haydn replaced the traditional title “Minuet” with the Italian word “Scherzo,” meaning joke or playfulness. Perhaps the most famous of the set is the second quartet in E-flat, known as the “Joke” quartet. The beginning is good-natured; it is an Allegro moderato with a bumptious violin tune over a steady “oom-pah” accompaniment, with the subsidiary themes based directly on the same rhythmic figure. The main point of interest in the development is a little flight of fancy for the first violin, a few measures of busy solo passagework that could almost pass for a cadenza had this section not been introduced with standard accompaniment in the exposition.

Next comes the Scherzando in three-quarter time, a standard minuet whose theme is vaguely from the same rhythmic figure underlying the first movement. It also contains a slightly comic figure that may give this movement its joke-like (scherzando) heading. Haydn keeps the tune in the tonic, refusing to modulate, making the subject’s repeats intentionally monotonous and therefore humorous. The Trio section contains a charming, rustic dance tune. The slow movement is a Largo. The stately melody rises from the cello to the top of the ensemble and undergoes a mild transformation in combination with a second, hesitant chordal theme. Otherwise, the subjects are varied only through subtle, expressive details; at one point, Haydn places a different directive over twelve out of eighteen consecutive notes.

The Presto, a rondo finale, is built upon a quick, repeated-note tune of four giddy, two-bar clauses. After a couple of variations the music pulls up short for a brief, bleak adagio passage, whereupon the inane theme starts up again. But now in the coda — and here comes the joke — the tune is split into its four tiny components, with a two-bar rest after each one. And just when the melody seems finally to have spurted its final section, Haydn inserts a four-measure rest, suggesting that the work is over, but then has the quartet blurt out the tune’s first clause again, taking the audience by surprise and leaving the movement hanging in mid-air with an unfinished phrase.

Slavomír Hoříňka is an incredibly inspirational man and artist. His creative roots reach beyond the usual limits of classical music and enable him to reflect more deeply and directly on the issues and problems of society today. The original idea behind his *Songs of Immigrants* was to explore how far a string quartet, a typical ensemble in the European musical tradition, could interpret the original music of other nations. The challenge was to find a suitable formula to clearly delimit and embody the musical material while also steering the work towards a deeper message. The dialogue between the composer and the members of the Bennewitz Quartet was an important part of the creative process. However, the key influence on the final form of the work was a migrant shipwreck. In Hoříňka’s own words: “On October 3, 2013, just off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa, a tragic event took place, which fundamentally influenced my conception of the piece, and brought into focus the means by which I realized it. The vast majority of the 370 people [on board] who drowned came from Eritrea. The material used in my piece therefore comprises the traditional music of various ethnic groups living in Eritrea, the sounds of nature and wildlife

living on Lampedusa, and documentary sound recordings played rough and unedited on tape recorders operated by the quartet players. My compositional method draws entirely on analysis of recordings of ethnic music and documentary footage, which I either blend in various ways with live music, or 'resynthesize' using the quartet. I would describe my approach to composition as 'documentary.'

The binding element of the whole piece is the sound of the sea. It appears several times, either as authentic audio recordings on tape, or as a result of special playing techniques used by the string quartet. The piece includes a range of recorded documentary material related to the tragic event at Lampedusa: a tape of the rescue operation led by local residents, the recorded sounds of the divers exploring the shipwreck, and Pope Francis's prayer for the victims.

These authentic recordings are blended with passages of traditional Eritrean music and its various musical instruments and forms, performed by the string quartet. To achieve a true-to-life rendering of the sounds and colors of African music, the composer uses a range of non-traditional instrumental techniques, including quarter-tones and sixth-tones, which are present in the original music. The result is an interesting, colorful, and completely innovative piece — at once music and documentary — that not only evokes the tragedy but also acquaints listeners with the musical world of African nations.

In 1895, Antonín Dvořák returned from the United States, where he had written a quartet and a quintet for strings as well as his ninth symphony, *From the New World*. Once home, he composed two more string quartets. The *String Quartet no. 13 in G Major*, op. 106, was his penultimate chamber work. Although Dvořák had greatly enjoyed new experiences and popularity in the United States, he also felt homesick. After returning to his beloved Bohemia, he wrote of his great joy at being home and of the ease of working on the G-major quartet.

The opening Allegro moderato presents a simple, fragmentary motif — an upward leap followed by a cheerful cascade of notes. The development takes it into various tonal territories, including minor keys, and turns a small gesture into a substantial theme. A second theme is playful, with a prancing triplet accompaniment, and its development becomes the basis of the final cadence.

The slow movement alternates major and minor treatments of the theme, demonstrating the way contrasting emotions can coexist. Rich chords beneath a simple but mellifluous aria express deep contentment. When the melody moves into minor, the accompaniment takes on a poignant urgency.

The scherzo uses the cross-rhythms of the Czech folk dance known as the *skočná*. Instead of the usual ABA structure, this movement has two trios arranged in mirror fashion, making the outline ABACABA. Moods range from lively to lyrical, and keys travel as widely — from B minor to A-flat major to D major and back to B minor.

In the Finale, a brief slow introduction leads into a fiery presentation of the theme. As with the scherzo, internal symmetry balances the movement, with recurring episodes as well as recurring rondo themes. To enhance the cyclic organization even further, the prancing theme and the upward leap from the first movement make brief appearances.

Program notes contributed by the Bennewitz Quartet

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