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monday october 20, 2008

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Ludwig van Beethoven
Serenade in D major opus 8 (1796-97)
for violin, viola and violoncello

Marcia: Allegro
Adagio
Menuetto
Adagio; Scherzo: Allegro molto; Adagio; Allegro molto; Adagio
Allegretto alla Polacca
Thema con Variazioni: Andante quasi Allegretto
Marcia: Allegro

intermission

Antonín Dvor ak
Quartet in E-flat major (1889)
for piano, violin, viola and violoncello

Allegro con fuoco
Lento
Allegro moderato, grazioso; Un pochettino piu mosso; Tempo I
Allegro, ma non troppo

Jeff Thayer, violin
Che-Yen Chen, viola
Charles Curtis, cello
Aleck Karis, piano

Notes on the Program
by Steve Cassedy

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Serenade in D major for String Trio, op. 8 (1796-97).

What exactly does it mean to use the word "Serenade" (spelled just like this in German) as the title for a piece of music in 1796? What might first come to mind to a non-German is the image of a young man who beckons his beloved to come (through the window or otherwise out of the house) join him, as in the famous song from the Schwanengesang cycle (1828) by Schubert or in the delightfully playful setting (1885-87) by Richard Strauss. Though each of these compositions is called a serenade in English, in German the word is Ständchen ("a small standing," because you stand before the house, or beneath the window, of the desired Mädchen). In fact, the word Ständchen was there first, and Serenade was pressed into service in German in the early eighteenth century to denote an Abendständchen ("evening Ständchen"), as the lexicographers put it. That's because the much more elegant-sounding sérénade (French, from Italian serenata, from sereno, "open air") suggests simply an evening entertainment—any evening entertainment, whether or not it consisted of musically coaxing a girl from her bedroom.

By the late eighteenth century, serenade had come to describe a composition written for a small chamber ensemble and generally consisting of at least five movements, where two of these movements would be slow and at least two would be minuets. Mozart wrote over a dozen serenades, scoring them either for winds alone or for an ensemble of mixed winds and strings.

But Beethoven's Serenade is scored for string trio: violin, viola, and cello. In the last decades of the late eighteenth century, string trios were generally written in three or four movements, like the classical sonata. A few, how-

ever, were written in divertimento form, with five or six movements. The most famous of these before Beethoven's time was Mozart's Divertimento for String Trio, K. 563. It was probably this piece that Beethoven had in mind as a model in 1794, when he composed his own six-movement String Trio in E-flat (op. 3). So when he sat down to write the Serenade in D major, he was joining together the genre of the divertimento for string trio with the formally related eighteenth-century tradition of the serenade.

For those who like to argue that Beethoven in his early years continued the practices of his predecessors, Haydn and Mozart, there's plenty in the Serenade that looks back to those more conventional practices. From the harmonic standpoint, the composition could hardly be described as radical. Of the six movements (counting the opening and closing March as just one piece), four open with, or include close to the opening, a "spelling" of the tonic chord: so the notes of a D major triad are played in succession at the beginning of the March, the first Adagio (second movement) opens with an arpeggiated D major triad in the violin, the second Adagio (fourth movement) starts out with the notes of a d minor triad played in succession, and the Allegretto alla Polacca includes a similar figure in the melody just seven measures from the beginning. Every single movement begins with a tonic-dominant-tonic alternation, and the young Beethoven rarely moves very far from the home key.

At first, this might not seem surprising. Beethoven had taken up residence in Vienna in 1792. When he composed the Serenade, his period of formal tutelage under Haydn was only a couple of years in the past, and the master continued to dominate the musical scene in the imperial city even during his stay in London, from early 1794 till summer of 1795. And yet only a few years before the Serenade, partly during the time he was Haydn's pupil, Beethoven had produced three piano sonatas (op. 2), dedicated to Haydn, that were anything but conventional. These early pieces treated listeners to a whole array of features that would soon become Beethoven's trade-

marks: bold dynamic contrasts, irregular rhythmic gestures, and disarming key changes, to name only a few. The same features appear in even more pronounced form in the Piano Sonata in E-flat major, op. 7, which Beethoven wrote at roughly the same time as the Serenade. One of the most striking features of this early work is its length: it's the second-longest of all Beethoven's piano sonatas (after the colossal—and much later—Hammerklavier Sonata, op. 106, composed 1817-18). If Beethoven was to make his mark in the musical world in small part because of the raw scale of his compositions during his middle, "Heroic" period (beginning around 1800, according to the customary chronology), he had already made quite a start in this direction as early as 1796. For a chamber work in six or seven movements, by contrast, the Serenade is actually on the short side. It generally takes under a half-hour to perform. Mozart's serenades and divertimentos with this many movements can clock in at close to forty minutes or more, depending on the performance.

The Serenade as a whole certainly does not stand out for the path-breaking character of its design or its harmonic construction. And yet it has its surprises. A few eighteenth-century serenades (most notable among them is probably Mozart's K. 239) began with a march. Beethoven begins and ends his with this genre. Commentators have noted that march movements in Mozart's music were often treated humorously, almost satirically. The opening movement of Beethoven's Serenade comes across as serious, though of course on the small scale of a string trio. Is it because Austria was currently at war with France, whose armed forces had newly been placed under the command of Napoleon Bonaparte? The thought is tempting, though there is no hard evidence to support it. Beethoven was not insensitive to international events. Like so many European artists and intellectuals outside of France, he initially supported Napoleon as a great liberator but dramatically changed his mind later, when the general decided to crown himself emperor. Listeners have heard martial strains in some of the "Heroic" works of the first decade of the nineteenth century. The final

movement of the Piano Concerto no. 5 ("Emperor", composed in 1809) is an example. The opening passages of the coda to the final movement of the Appassionata Sonata (composed 1804-1805)—seemingly coming out of nowhere—are quite likely modeled on the verbunkos, a Hungarian dance that was allegedly used to entice peasants into the imperial army during the Napoleonic wars.

No doubt the Serenade's most surprising element may be found in the second Adagio (the fourth piece in the suite). This movement alternates a dirge-like d-minor section with a sprightly, lightning-fast D-major scherzo. It would be hard to imagine a contrast in mood greater than the one the young Beethoven introduced here.

The listener might be struck, too, by the inclusion of a movement titled alla polacca, "in the Polish style." This designation was used almost interchangeably, in Beethoven's era, with the term polonaise to describe a Polish dance style (popular in the late eighteenth century and then, of course, exploited heavily by Chopin in the nineteenth). Beethoven would write two polonaises in his life: one for wind band in 1810 and one for piano in 1814. The final movement of the Triple Concerto for violin, cello, and piano, op. 56 (1803-1804) carries the designation rondo alla polacca. But the form does not normally occur in serenades and divertimentos, and the question is why Beethoven decided to use it here. What first comes to mind is an historical event of considerable importance that had occurred the year before Beethoven wrote the Serenade. Back in 1772 and then again in 1793, Russia, Prussia, and Austria had carved up and seized great chunks of the Kingdom of Poland in what were called "Partitions." In 1795, they completed the process in a third Partition, which caused the sovereign nation of Poland to disappear from the map till after World War I. Polish musical forms such as the polonaise and the alla polacca came to be expressions of support for a people who had lost their independence and their country. So was Beethoven's inclusion of an alla polacca an expression of nationalist

solidarity with a group many of whose members were now living within the Austrian Empire? Again, the thought is tempting, though we can't know for certain.

Finally, listen carefully to the second and fourth variations of the sixth movement (marked Andante quasi Allegretto). Having given the theme statement and the first variation to the violin, Beethoven then tries something rather new and different: he hands off the principal melody in the second variation first to the viola, then to the cello, asking the violist to play some technically demanding, attention-grabbing passage work. The cello then gets its turn at virtuosity in the fourth variation, which features that instrument in a solo role from beginning to end.

Music historians have observed that Beethoven, as he wrote throughout his career, appeared to follow a pattern that consisted in pushing the boundaries of a genre to the limit (at least as tacitly defined in the era when he was writing) for a time and then drawing back, producing more traditional work before moving on to the next convention-defying challenge. If this is true, the Serenade would paradoxically appear to represent both a gesture of defiance and a retreat. It alters the traditional structure of both the string trio so named and the serenade. The following year, 1797, Beethoven would produce a set of three string trios constructed on the conventional model of sonatas or symphonies: four movements, the first in sonata-allegro form. Future serenades, op. 25 and op. 41, would dispense with the march movement and follow a more conventional sequence of genres. At the same time, however, the Serenade, op. 8, has the sound of, well, the eighteenth century and might easily be mistaken, except by an expert, for a composition by Haydn or Mozart—hardly a mark of shame for a relatively untested, twenty-five-year-old newcomer to the world of Viennese music.

Antonín Dvorak (1841-1904)
Piano Quartet No. 2 in E-flat Major, op. 87 (1889)

No one exemplifies the complexity of growing up in a multi-ethnic empire as well as Antonín Dvorak—or perhaps any Czech artist in the nineteenth century and through World War I. Like so many other ethnic groups in the Austrian Empire, the Czechs were a people without a nation at a time when nationalism—the aspiration to join together people of a single ethnic group within the boundaries of their own political state—was very much on the rise. The Austrian Empire's Czech population was concentrated primarily in the regions of Moravia, with its cultural center in Brno, and Bohemia, with its cultural center in Prague.

Dvorak grew up in provincial Bohemia, first moving to Prague in 1857, when he was sixteen. In the 1870s and early 1880s, he made a name for himself in part as an "ethnic" composer, with such pieces as the Czech Suite (1879), the Prague Waltzes (1879), My Homeland Overture (1881), the Hussite Overture (1883), and above all the hugely popular Slavonic Dances, first series (1878), and Slavonic Rhapsodies (1878).

Trouble came at the very end of the 1870s, and surprisingly it came not from the Emperor or other Imperial authorities but from the "liberal" ethnic Germans of the empire—in response to a series of events that had to do not with the Czech people but instead with the Slavic peoples of the Balkans. The events might very well be said to form an early prologue to the outbreak of hostilities in the summer of 1914. The Austrian Empire, having long confronted the Ottomans to the south and east and having sparred specifically over the Sultan's European holdings in the Balkan peninsula, gained control of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878, at the end of the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78), bringing in a new population of ethnic Slavs. The result was a surge in anti-Slav feeling among ethnic Germans, many of whom were not careful to distinguish between the Czechs of Bohemia and Moravia and the

Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims of the newly acquired territories. By the beginning of the 1880s, Dvorak, who enjoyed the favor of Emperor Franz Joseph (having written a march for the imperial couple's silver anniversary in 1879), found himself unable to perform, in his own homeland, the Czech compositions that had brought him so much fame over the previous decade.

Happily Dvorak's music had caught on in a big way outside the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and from 1883 till 1896 the composer spent a considerable amount of time traveling abroad, visiting Great Britain ten times and living in the United States almost continuously from 1892 to 1895. It was perhaps thanks to the hospitable responses he received in England that Dvorak, having largely put aside "ethnic music" in the early 1880s, returned to it in the second half of that decade. This is the period of the second set of Slavonic Dances (1886-87); a series of symphonic poems (1896) based on folktales gathered and published by the Czech historian, folklorist, and poet Karel Jaromír Erben; the Poetic Tone Pictures for piano (1889); the Dumky Piano Trio; and, of course, the Piano Quartet no. 2, in E-flat major (1889). This is also the period when, despite the slights Dvorak had suffered at the hands of the more nationalistic elements among the German-speaking population of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he received the Order of the Iron Crown, and Emperor Franz-Joseph personally granted him an audience, in 1889.

The Piano Quartet no. 2 certainly has its share of references to the composer's ethnic roots—and to the roots of ethnic groups in the empire besides the Czechs. The "Slavonic" (or maybe it would be safer simply to say "Central European") elements are confined largely to the third and fourth movements, but they are quite unmistakably present. Dvorak began the lovely third movement with a lilting waltz-like setting and then moved to a melody written in the modal Gypsy scale, like the one used in so many Hungarian dances (and similar, though not identical, to the one used in the Greek Misirlou and such archetypically Ashkenazic "Jewish" music as "Havah Nagilah," not to mention a host of klezmer tunes and Jerry Bock's "If I Were a Rich Man," from

Fiddler on the Roof). The fourth movement is one long, almost uninterruptedly exuberant dance, and Dvorak seems throughout to be quoting from his earlier series of compositions that bore the word Slavonic in their titles.

But to reduce the Piano Quartet No. 2 to an exercise in Central European folklore would be to commit a gross injustice. The first movement offers little in the way of ethnic fare but plenty in the way of musical innovation. Dvorak begins the composition with a striking conflict between the piano and the strings, giving the strings a lush opening melody and asking the pianist to respond insolently with a set of jabbing dotted rhythms. The confrontation of equal and doughty forces is a hallmark of this entire composition. Like Johannes Brahms (1833-97), with whom he had established a close friendship some ten years earlier, Dvorak has taken care in the quartet to match the piano, on one side, with all the instruments (strings, in this case) on the other (as Brahms did in his piano concertos and his chamber music for piano and strings), making them equal partners but hugely expanding the compass of both beyond anything that had characterized chamber music or concerto compositions earlier in the nineteenth century. And, speaking of Brahms, in the stunning second movement of Dvorak's quartet, one can almost hear echoes of the senior composer's contemporaneous chamber music: think especially of the A-major and d-minor violin sonatas (performed for the first time, respectively, in 1886 and 1888). We hear the same restless energy from the piano, the same pathos in the legato phrases from the violin, even the same harmonic sequences.

It's worth mentioning that Brahms was probably as fascinated as Dvorak with the non-German ethnic cultures in his adopted homeland (he had permanently settled in Vienna in 1863, at the age of thirty), as evidenced by the number of waltzes, Hungarian dances, songs set to traditional Bohemian lyrics, and Zigeunerlieder (Gypsy songs) we find among his compositions. What multi-ethnic Austria-Hungary meant to Dvo rak in the last decades of the nineteenth century, as it did no doubt to German-born Brahms, was

ultimately not so much the place where individual nationalities asserted themselves to the exclusion of others but the place where the confrontation both among those nationalities and between those nationalities and the dominant German culture meant a productive cosmopolitanism. The Piano Quartet No. 2 is just that: cosmopolitan. Written during his "second Slavonic period," the work betrays an urge to transcend narrow ethnocentrism, while still giving a significant nod to the ethnic traditions that set composers such as Dvorak apart from the dominant German culture of the empire.

Steve Cassedy is Professor of Slavic and Comparative Literature and Associate Dean of Graduate Studies at UCSD. He received classical piano training at the Juilliard School, Pre-College Division, and at the University of Michigan School of Music. In recent years, he has begun a "second career," lecturing on music and demonstrating from the piano. In summer of 2007, he presented an "Encounter" on Beethoven at the La Jolla Music Society's SummerFest in Sherwood Auditorium, La Jolla. This past May, the Jewish Community Center in San Diego featured him in a three-part series on Jewish composers, titled "Conversations from the Piano with Steven Cassedy."

Violinist Jeff Thayer is Concertmaster of the San Diego Symphony as well as Concertmaster and guest artist of the Music Academy of the West (Santa Barbara). Previous positions include assistant concertmaster of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, associate concertmaster of the North Carolina Symphony, and concertmaster of the Canton (OH) Symphony Orchestra. He is a graduate of the Cleveland Institute of Music, the Eastman School of Music, and the Juilliard School's Pre-College Division. His teachers include William Preucil, Donald Weilerstein, Zvi Zeitlin, and Dorothy DeLay. A native of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, Mr. Thayer began violin lessons with his mother at the age of three. At fourteen, he went to study with Jose Antonio Campos at the Conservatorio Superior in Cordoba, Spain. He has appeared as soloist with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the San Diego Symphony, the Jupiter Symphony, the North Carolina Symphony, the Canton Symphony Orchestra, the Pierre Monteux School Festival Orchestra, the Spartanburg Philharmonic, the Cleveland Institute of Music Symphony Orchestra, The Music Academy of the West Festival Orchestra, the Williamsport Symphony Orchestra, the Nittany Valley Symphony Orchestra, and the Conservatory Orchestra of Cordoba, among others. He attended Keshet Eilon (Israel), Ernen Musikdorf (Switzerland), Music Academy of the West, Aspen, New York String Orchestra Seminar, the Quartet Program, and as the 1992 Pennsylvania Governor Scholar, Interlochen Arts Camp. Other festivals include La Jolla Summerfest, the Mainly Mozart Festival (San Diego), Festival der Zukunft, and the Tibor Varga Festival (Switzerland). Through a generous loan from Irwin and Joan Jacobs, Mr. Thayer plays on the 1708 "Sir Bagshawe" Stradivarius.

Taiwanese violist Che-Yen Chen has established himself as a prominent recitalist, chamber, and orchestral musician. Principal violist of the San Diego Symphony, he captured the first prize of the 2003 William Primrose Viola Competition and "Yuri Bashmet prize" of the 2003 Lionel Tertis Viola Competition and will be making his New York concerto debut with the

New Amsterdam Symphony Orchestra as the winner of NASO Concerto Competition. He has performed throughout United States and abroad in venues such as the Alice Tully, Carnegie, Jordan, Merkin, Snape Malting Concert, Taiwan National Concert, Weill Recital, and Wigmore halls, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Library of Congress, and Kimmel Center. An advocate of chamber music, Mr. Chen is a founding member of the Formosa Quartet, was a member of Chamber Music Society Two at Lincoln Center, a Jupiter Chamber Player, and took part in Musicians from Marlboro and Musician from Ravinia tours. His festival appearances include Chamber Music International, the Aldeburgh, Bath International Music, Kingston Chamber Music, Marlboro, Primrose, and Ravinia festivals, La Jolla SummerFest, International Viola Congress, Mainly Mozart, and Taiwan Connection. Mr. Chen began studying viola at the age of six. A four-time winner of the National Viola Competition in Taiwan, he came to the United States and studied at the Curtis Institute of Music and the Juilliard School under the guidance of Michael Tree, Joseph de Pasquale, and Paul Neubauer.

Charles Curtis has been a professor in the Music Department of the University of California, San Diego, since Fall 2000. Previously he was principal cello of the Symphony Orchestra of the North German Radio in Hamburg, a faculty member at Princeton, the cellist of the Ridge String Quartet, and a sought-after chamber musician and soloist in the classical repertoire. He holds the Piatigorsky Prize of the New York Cello Society, and received prizes in the Naumburg, Geneva and Cassado international competitions. He has appeared as soloist with the San Francisco Symphony, the National Symphony, the Baltimore Symphony, the Symphony Orchestra of Berlin, the NDR Symphony, the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, the Orquestra de la Maggio Musicale in Florence, the Janacek Philharmonic, as well as orchestras in Brazil and Chile; under the baton of distinguished conductors such as André Previn, Herbert Blomstedt, Max Rudolf, John Eliot Gardiner and Christof Eschenbach. His chamber music associations have taken him to the

Marlboro, Ravinia, Wolf Trap, La Jolla Summerfest and Victoria Festivals, among many others. He has recorded and performed widely with soprano Kathleen Battle and harpsichordist Anthony Newman, as well as with jazz legends such as Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter and Brad Mehldau.

For over twenty years Aleck Karis has been one of the leading pianists in the New York contemporary music scene. Particularly associated with the music of Elliott Carter, Mario Davidovsky, and John Cage, he has championed their works all over the world. Among his numerous solo piano discs on Bridge Records are acclaimed recordings of Stravinsky, Schumann, Carter and John Cage. Recently, Karis performed Birtwistle's marathon solo work Harrison's Clocks in London and New York, Feldman's Patterns in a Chromatic Field in New York, and appeared at the Venice Biennale.

At home with both contemporary and classical works, Karis has performed concertos from Mozart to Birtwistle with New York's Y Chamber Symphony, St. Luke's Chamber Orchestra, the Richmond Symphony and the Erie Symphony. He has been featured at leading international festivals including Bath, Geneva, Sao Paulo, Los Angeles, Miami, New York Philharmonic's Horizons Festival, Caramoor, and the Warsaw Autumn Festival. He is the pianist with Speculum Musicae. Awarded a solo recitalists' fellowship by the NEA, Karis has been honored with two Fromm Foundation grants "in recognition of his commitment to the music of our time." Karis has recorded for Nonesuch, New World, Neuma, Centaur, Roméo and CRI Records. His solo debut album for Bridge Records of music by Chopin, Carter and Schumann was nominated as "Best Recording of the Year" by OPUS Magazine (1987) and his Sonatas and Interludes for prepared piano by John Cage received a "Critic's Choice" from Gramophone in 1999. His most recent CD, on the Tzadik label, is an acclaimed recording of "Patterns in a Chromatic Field" for cello and piano, by Morton Feldman. He has also recorded solo music by Davidovsky, Babbitt, Glass, Primosch, Anderson and Yuasa. Cham-

ber music recordings include works by Carter, Wolpe, Feldman, Crumb, Babbitt, Martino, Lieberson, Steiger, and Shifrin. Karis has studied with William Daghlian, Artur Balsam and Beveridge Webster and holds degrees from the Manhattan School of Music and the Juilliard School. Currently, he is a Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego.

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