



Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston
Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2020-2021 chamber music season
virtual chamber series 1: communing with nature
Saturday, October 24 through Saturday, October 31, 2020

Program:

Béla Bartók, Selections from 44 Duos for two violins, Sz. 98, BB 104
Franz Joseph Haydn, String Quartet in C Major, Op. 33, No. 3 “The Bird”
John Luther Adams, *songbirdsongs* for two piccolos & three percussion

Program notes by Gabriel Langfur Rice

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) was born in Nagyszentmiklos, Hungary, now part of Romania. His parents were enthusiastic amateur musicians and encouraged his early interest. He was playing the piano by age four, composing by six, and discovered to have perfect pitch at seven. He was a shy and physically frail child, and his family moved often. Nevertheless, he was performing in professional settings in his teens, and when he auditioned for the Vienna Conservatory and Budapest Academy of Music (later known as the Liszt Academy) in 1899, was offered scholarships to study piano and composition at both. He chose Budapest, which had grown rapidly to become one of the largest cities in Europe. His compositions of the time are unremarkable, but he was an outstanding pianist with a promising solo career. He became infatuated with the music of Richard Strauss, and Bartók’s own transcription of *Ein Heldenleben* for solo piano was a favorite performance showpiece. He joined the piano faculty in 1906, and was tenured there from 1909 to 1934.

In 1905 Bartók met Zoltan Kodály. They became close friends and began together to research traditional Hungarian music, traveling to collect and classify folk songs, setting them in the manner of art songs for solo voice and piano, and incorporating their rhythmic and melodic elements into original works. It was through this research, eventually expanded to include folk traditions of neighboring Eastern European cultures, that Bartók found a compelling and original compositional voice, and his reputation as both a composer and performer grew through the 1910s. The isolation of the war curtailed performing and ethnomusicological research, but he delved even more deeply in creative work, expanding his harmonic language in the direction of dodecaphonic atonality. In the early 1920s he returned to field work and a renewed performing career, becoming so busy that he took a full three years off from composition in the mid-1920s, even describing himself as an “ex-composer.” He resumed composing in 1926, following several

visits to Italy and much study of Baroque music. The 1930s saw him gaining ever more international acclaim; he joined the Permanent Committee for Literature and the Arts of the League of Nations' Commission for Intellectual Co-operation, and the latter part of the decade was probably the most productive time of his compositional career. His output from this period included the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, the Fifth and Sixth String Quartets, the Second Violin Concerto, and the *Contrasts* for violin, clarinet & piano.

The political situation in Europe in the late 1930s increasingly interfered with Bartók's musicological research, and he was also forced to change publishers and take steps to protect his manuscripts. A successful concert tour of the United States in 1940 inspired a move to New York later that year. His financial situation was quite difficult though, and his health faded steadily, with a diagnosis of Leukemia in 1944. He wrote the *Concerto for Orchestra* in 1943 on a commission from Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony, and completed the Third Piano Concerto just before his death in September 1945.

The 44 Duos for Two Violins were composed in 1930-31 at the request of the German violinist and teacher Erich Doflein, who asked for higher quality music to use with his young students. Unsurprisingly, Bartók used folk songs and dances as the basis for all but two of them, and he did not limit himself to Hungary; also represented are Slovak, Romanian, Ruthenian, Serbian, and Arabian music. Even the two completely original duos are clearly and specifically based on folk styles. His objective was for "students, from their very first years of study, to play works in which the natural simplicity of folk music, and its melodic and rhythmic features, can be found." Simple, of course, does not necessarily mean easy. Bartók's settings of the folk melodies are not transcriptions, but re-compositions if you will, and as the difficulty level increases (with the presumed growing skills of students) they are ingeniously scored to require not only more advanced technique but also increasing independence of rhythm and pitch. Overlapping accent patterns often imply polyrhythms, and in some cases he writes in unconventional key signatures and even has the two violinists playing in different keys altogether. Generations of violin teachers have used these fun, character-filled duos with their students, and they never fail to challenge and inspire. Although they were originally intended to be exclusively used as teaching pieces, Bartók did suggest groupings for performance, and the freshness and charm of the material makes them undeniably fun to listen to – and to play!

Franz Joseph Haydn's long life (1732-1809) spanned the late Austrian Baroque, the Classical period of the late 18th century, and the beginning of the Romantic era in the 19th. He was born while Johann Sebastian Bach was still alive and died during the ascendancy of Beethoven. Not only did Haydn's music, along with Mozart's, define what we call the Classical (with a capital C) Era in music, the arc of his career began in the traditional patronage system of the Baroque and ended with international renown, helping to establish the Romantic ideal of the independent artist.

Unlike his younger friend and colleague, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Haydn was not celebrated as a child prodigy, though in different circumstances he might have been. His father was a master wheelwright and his mother had been a cook before marriage, but both were enthusiastic amateur musicians and all three of their sons became professionals. Joseph's early talents were

exceptional, with an uncanny musical memory and affinity for the violin and keyboard. He was offered a choir school education in Vienna, which included a thorough non-musical education as well as singing, violin, and harpsichord. As was typical, Haydn left the choir school when his voice broke and spent more than a decade scraping by as a freelance musician in much the same way freelance musicians do now: performing casual jobs, teaching lessons, etc. In 1753 he was fortunate to meet the Italian opera composer and singing teacher Nicola Porpora and serve as his assistant. Porpora had him study counterpoint and harmony from the traditional texts, Mattheson and Fux, in order to develop the skills he would need to establish a reputation as a composer.

In 1761 Haydn was employed by the Esterházy, the most wealthy and influential family of the Hungarian nobility. Initially his position was vice-Kapellmeister in deference to the aging Kapellmeister Gregor Joseph Werner, but Haydn was immediately put in charge of nearly all aspects of the court's musical activities. He oversaw an ensemble of 13-15 musicians that provided music for many different kinds of events, and he was expected to compose music at the request of the family patriarch. Beginning in 1762 that was Nicolaus Esterházy, an enthusiastic musician himself who primarily played the baryton, a relative of the viol that was both plucked and bowed, which is why Haydn wrote so many trios including the otherwise obscure instrument. The two men became personally close by performing together, which helped Haydn tremendously in navigating the waters of palace intrigue, as in the event of the court's flutist, Franz Sigl, accidentally burning down a house. Haydn was able to reduce Sigl's punishment to simply being dismissed and was later able to rehire him.

In 1766 Werner passed away, leaving Haydn as sole Kapellmeister, a position he would hold at least in name for the rest of his life. Over the course of Haydn's employment by the Esterházy he of course had to comply with their requests, but both his compensation and his ensemble grew as Nicolaus became more interested in opera and larger symphonies. The steady demand for new works, as well as the excellent, hand-picked professional ensemble at his disposal – not to mention his truly appreciative patron – can't be discounted in Haydn's development as a composer.

Haydn's initial contractual obligation to provide music only for the court and nobody else loosened over time, and in 1779 he began a lucrative side career of publishing instrumental works. Music printing and publishing for a larger audience was a new development, and the very idea of copyright was in its infancy. Haydn took advantage of every opportunity to maximize his income, even engaging in what would now be considered fraud as he sold multiple publishing rights for the same piece to publishers in different countries, even as he was selling individual subscriptions to those same pieces privately. In the years to come, he was generous with the practical knowledge he amassed regarding making a living as a composer independent of patronage, giving invaluable advice to Beethoven and others. Even as he prospered under the patronage system, Haydn paved the way for the next generation of composers to do their work more independently of the demands of the church and the nobility.

At the same time, he transformed his excellent reputation into genuine international celebrity, publishing a steady stream of instrumental music and songs for performance in the home and receiving commissions for symphonies and other larger works to be performed in Paris and London. This became extremely important when Nicolaus Esterházy died in 1790; his son Anton

disbanded the court ensemble and ceased musical activities immediately. Haydn was still officially employed by the family but with a reduced salary and no official ongoing duties, and he also received a stipend from Nicolaus' estate.

Johann Peter Salomon, a German-born concert producer living in London, invited Haydn there right away, with a contract for the 1791 season including an opera, six symphonies, some 20 other works, publishing rights, and concerts. He spent most of his time in London for the next four years, adding significantly to both his fame and his wealth.

From 1795 on, Haydn lived in Vienna, known widely by his nickname "Papa Haydn," owing to his advancing age and the universal acclaim he held as the greatest living composer. For a time he continued to compose some instrumental works, chiefly string quartets, but most of his energy was taken up by sacred choral works, including the two famous cantatas *The Creation* and *The Seasons*. Following several years of declining health, he passed away on May 31st, 1809. The war prevented a large funeral, but a memorial service – at which Mozart's Requiem was performed – was held two weeks later.

Haydn didn't exactly invent the string quartet, but he is universally given credit for developing it into the vitally important chamber music genre it has been ever since. He wrote no less than 68 string quartets (and as many as 83 by some cataloguing methods) over the course of his career, providing a rich and varied repertoire for the ensemble even before Mozart and others adopted it.

Composed in 1781, the Opus 33 quartets are one of the prime examples of Haydn's ability to generate income from multiple sources; he had sold subscriptions to them in advance to a number of wealthy patrons, and actually had to request that his publisher, Artaria, delay the general release. They are collectively known as the "Russian" quartets, because of an early performance for Russian Grand Duke Paul – later Tsar Paul II – who was visiting Vienna with his wife as guests of the Count and Countess von Norden. The Opus 33 quartets are also a fine example of Haydn's curiosity and continuous ability to evolve. In his letters to patrons he advertised that they were "written in a new and special way (for I have not composed any [quartets] for ten years.)" During the previous ten years none other than Wolfgang Mozart had entered the quartet game, and these new works of Haydn reflected quite a bit of the younger composer's buoyancy of touch and joviality of spirit. Opus 33 Number 3 in C Major has acquired the nickname "The Bird" because of the grace notes in the first theme. The bird-like trill elements continue throughout the piece. The Scherzo second movement is actually a gentle minuet, and the Adagio is a lovely melody that undergoes several inventive variations. Finally, the Rondo is filled with nervous energy that spins itself out and seems to simply fly away.

For **John Luther Adams** (born 1953), music is a lifelong search for home – an invitation to slow down, pay attention, and remember our place within the larger community of life on earth. Living for almost 40 years in northern Alaska, JLA discovered a unique musical world grounded in space, stillness, and elemental forces. In the 1970s and into the '80s, he worked full time as an environmental activist. But the time came when he felt compelled to dedicate himself entirely to music. He made this choice with the belief that, ultimately, music can do more than politics to change the world. Since that time, he has become one of the most widely admired composers in

the world, receiving the Pulitzer Prize, a Grammy Award, and many other honors. In works such as *Become Ocean*, *In the White Silence*, and *Canticles of the Holy Wind*, Adams brings the sense of wonder that we feel outdoors into the concert hall. And in outdoor works such as *Inuksuit* and *Sila: The Breath of the World*, he employs music as a way to reclaim our connections with place, wherever we may be.

A deep concern for the state of the earth and the future of humanity drives Adams to continue composing. As he puts it: “If we can imagine a culture and a society in which we each feel more deeply responsible for our own place in the world, then we just may be able to bring that culture and that society into being.”

Since leaving Alaska, JLA and his wife Cynthia have made their home in the deserts of Mexico, Chile, and the southwestern United States.

songbirdsongs is an early work for Adams, composed between 1974 and 1980. His own inspirations and descriptions are below, but of special note are the construction of the songs and the uniquely notated score he gives the performers. Each performer has one to three pages of music and a short written instruction for each song; the music is not arranged as a sequential score as musicians usually see, but rather a collection of short phrases to be played in (almost) any order. The sequence of how musicians enter and exit each song is determined and indicated in each player’s written instruction. For example, the instruction for Temple Blocks in *Morningfieldsong* is as follows: “enter with phrase #1, any time after Piccolo II has played it twice. Play each phrase two to four times, with rests between each repetition, before moving to the next. Play the phrases in any order, ending any time after Piccolo II.”

In his general instructions to the performers, Adams asks them to play with “free intonation and inflection of birdsong, not in exact temperament. Time should also be free and fluid.” He also asks them to “try and play ‘mindlessly,’ shaping the music as it unfolds. Care should be taken to avoid pre-conceived plans, sing-song patterns and ‘square’ phrasing. Don’t be afraid of silences! They are essential to the music...In these songs, counterpoint is an informal, spontaneous cross-play between parts. This requires a paradoxical balance between sensitive playing with the other musicians and not being overly influenced by them.”

In other words, the performers are asked to improvise, but within specific parameters. The musical materials of each song are the same from one performance to the next, but the exact sequence, timing, and combinations of them are left to the moment. No two performances are ever identical, just as no two mornings will ever have the exact same combination of birds singing.

Composer’s Program Notes:

These small songs are echoes of rare moments and places where the voices of birds have been clear and I have been quiet enough to hear. Now and then this magic finds me wandering (like one of Harry Partch’s Lost Musicians) in search of my own voice.

If I have abdicated the position of Composer (with a capital “C”) it is because, like ee

cumming: “I’d rather learn from one bird how to sing than teach ten-thousand stars how not to dance.” After all, what do we really create but answers to Creation?

This music is not literal transcription. It is translation. Not imitation, but evocation. My concern is not with precise details of pitch and meter, for too much precision can deafen us to such things as birds and music. I listen for other, less tangible nuances. These melodies and rhythms, then, are not so much constructed artifacts as they are spontaneous affirmations.

No one has yet explained why the free songs of birds are so simply beautiful. And what do they say? What are their meanings? We may never know. But beyond the realm of ideas and emotions, language and sense, we just may hear something of their essence. From there, as Annie Dillard suggests, we can begin “learning the strange syllables, one by one.”

Morningfieldsong

Hoarfrost, like spun glass, glows in first sun. The river rushes by. On the wind, float fragments of song...lighter than the morning air.

Apple Blossom Round

In a spring-morning orchard, Orioles burst into endless, free-form canon...a shower of blossoms and song.

Meadowdance

From sawgrass prairies to autumn wheatfields, the Redwing and Meadowlark are singers of the open places. The wind rises. A soft rain begins to fall...Still, the dance goes on.

Joyful Noise

Is an attempt to catch some of the spontaneous joy and wild humor in the music of the Carolina Wren, Tufted Titmouse and Cardinal.

Evensong

Northern spring...gentle, spruce-scented breezes...meltwater, and the low drumming of a grouse...through new leaves, shimmering light, the silver tones of Thrushes.

Wood Thrush

This was my first setting of birdsong. It dates from spring 1974. I was living in an old farmhouse in Georgia. Each morning before dawn, and again at dusk, haunting, liquid music reverberated through the cool air. As I walked among oaks, dogwoods, poplars and sycamores, now and then I would catch a glimpse of the singers, always deeper in the woods. I listened carefully to these phrases for weeks before trying to write them down. Even now, it is difficult to articulate the feelings the song of the Wood Thrush stirs in me.

Notquitespringdawn

...hidden voices announce a new season and a new day...

Mourning Dove

...Just after summer sunset...Green corn breaking warm earth...Plaintive calls floating over the mist...

August Voices

...On a hot afternoon, at the edge of a pine woods...Short, cryptic Vireo phrases, the tireless trilling of a Pine Warbler, and Purple Martins in cascading spirals of flight and song.

- *Gabriel Langfur Rice*

Adams biography and note provided by the composer, edited by Gabriel Langfur Rice

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