

JULY 17 OPENING NIGHT—THE SOUL OF CENTRAL EUROPE

Friday, July 17, 2009, 7:30 PM

United Methodist Church, San Luis Obispo

*Overture on Hebrew Themes for
Clarinet, String Quartet and Piano, op. 34* (1919)

Sergei PROKOFIEV (1891–1953)

Under Tsar Nicholas II (who reigned from 1894 to 1917), Russian Jews faced rampant anti-semitism, leading many people to emigrate to other countries for refuge. After the 1917 October Revolution, it was evident that the new Soviet government was hostile to intellectual freedom, and many Russian artists also eased their way out of Mother Russia. Thus it was that Sergei Prokofiev encountered various Russian friends in New York—among them Simeon Bellison, a clarinetist who had founded the Jewish ensemble Zimro. There was not a vast repertory available to the unusual sextet, consisting of a string quartet, a piano, and clarinet, and so Zimro requested that Prokofiev write a piece for them, giving him a cherished collection of Jewish folk melodies to use for inspiration.

Prokofiev seems to have accepted the notebook of folk tunes out of politeness, since he believed that composers should produce original music rather than relying on someone else's melodies. However, Prokofiev must have found some of the "pleasant themes" appealing, for he soon crafted the *Overture on Hebrew Themes* by interweaving two of the tunes. (The specific tunes have not been identified, leading one biographer to speculate that the melodies were original after all, composed in the "spirit" of the older Jewish melodies.)

Regardless of the source of the melodies, Prokofiev combined them into an engaging work, opening with a klezmer-like march for the clarinet, followed by a lush, soulful melody for the cello. The overture is punctuated by lovely passages that seem to shimmer, and both tunes return to wrap up the piece in proper "sonata-form" manner. Prokofiev reported, somewhat to his surprise, that the *Overture* was "quite a success."

String Quartet No. 4, Sz. 91 (1927)

Béla BARTÓK (1881–1945)

Whereas the Jewish klezmer tradition gave inspiration to Prokofiev's *Overture on Hebrew Themes*, Béla Bartók turned to his Hungarian heritage for many aspects of his Fourth String Quartet. Echoes of Hungarian folk songs can be found in the asymmetrical rhythms, modal scale passages, ornaments, and the overall "mood" of many sections. At the same time, though, Bartók incorporated much of his own personality into the work; he was becoming increasingly celebrated for his innovative treatment of the "old" string quartet genre. This blend is perhaps Bartók's most celebrated achievement: his ability to mix folk traditions with the experimentalism of 20th-century art music.

Both traits are evident in the opening moments of the first movement. The initial violin melody makes heavy use of half-steps, a small melodic interval that figures prominently in Magyar music—but the melody is quickly imitated in the other instruments, reflecting the interest in counterpoint that modern composers were exploring. In other sections of this "Allegro," some of the strings play hammered rhythms that resemble the pulsation of a folk dance underneath sinuous, gliding melodies.

Bartók regarded the "Allegro" and the fifth movement as a pair of outer shells, so the two movements have much in common. The outer shells frame a pair of "inner shells," the second and fourth movements; these, too, create a "mirror" effect, sharing a frenetic character that resembles a relentless "scherzo," or joke. The fourth movement uses pizzicato throughout, including an occasional "Bartók pizzicato," requiring the string to be plucked with such energy that it snaps back against the fingerboard. Bartók called the third movement the "kernel" of the quartet, and it seems to float in space—contrasting sharply with the drive of the other movements.

Piano Trio in g minor, op. 15 (1855; rev. 1857)

Bedřich SMETANA (1824–1884)

Although parents are not supposed to have “favorites” among their children, the first-born often holds a special place. Moreover, when one is a composer, a child who demonstrates extraordinary musical talent is a great joy. The Czech composer Bedřich Smetana thus took enormous pleasure in the accomplishments of his gifted eldest child, Bedřiška (whom the family called “Fricínka”). Smetana was understandably devastated in 1855 when the 4 1/2-year-old Fricínka suddenly succumbed to scarlet fever.

It is also understandable that Smetana would turn to composition for solace—resulting in the *Trio in G minor for Piano, Violin, and Violoncello*, a work he completed some three months after Fricínka’s death. Smetana composed only a handful of chamber pieces over the course of his life, and the other two examples (string quartets) also came out of a period of powerful emotion (while he was losing his hearing). Smetana himself played the piano at the premiere, although that first performance was not entirely successful. Critics were unprepared for the rhapsodic opening of the first movement (starting with just the violin), the somewhat stormy “polka” quality of the central movement (Fricínka had loved to dance), and the agitated finale (that yields for a time to a funeral march, but returns to the faster tempo—then concludes in a triumphant major mode). Liszt, however, approved of the work, and after some additional revision, the trio now stands as a testimony to Smetana’s clear power as a composer.

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