

Notes on the Program

By Kathryn Bacasmot

Benjamin Franklin (attributed)

Quartet in F major for Three Violins and Cello

- Born January 17, 1706, in Boston
- Died April 17, 1790, in Philadelphia
- Composition date unknown
- Duration: 7 minutes

Among the cadre of colorful characters in the history of the United States is the singular figure of Benjamin Franklin. Reflecting on his legacy, we recall his experiments with the electrical nature of lightning, his role in the founding of the United States, his work as a statesman and diplomat, and his publication *Poor Richard's Almanack*. Franklin's musical interests are discussed with less frequency, but they were a source of personal enjoyment (he and Thomas Jefferson played guitar and violin together) and an area in which he had surprising influence.

Franklin's most prominent contribution to music was inspired by a concert he attended in England of someone playing glasses, producing sound by rubbing the tops of each glass in a circular manner, with pitches determined by various levels of water. Constantly innovating, Franklin was determined to build a more efficient design that would also enable harmonic complexity. The result was the glass armonica in 1761, which nestled glass bowls together in decreasing size and rotated them horizontally on a spindle. After the bowls were dampened with water the performer played them like a keyboard. Its ethereal sound was bewitching, and the instrument became so popular that even Mozart wrote music to be played on it.

It is uncertain whether Franklin composed any music. For 30 years his Junto club gathered to exchange ideas and sing together, and while some of his letters include song texts, they lack musical notation, suggesting they used preexisting melodies. However, in 1941, a musicologist named Guillaume de Van stumbled across a string quartet score in the library of the Paris Conservatory, inscribed with the name Benjamin Francklin. Initially, it was excitedly ascribed to Franklin, despite the spelling, which was assumed to be a mistake. Today, that attribution is considered doubtful, largely because no mention of the quartet is made in any of Franklin's extensive correspondence or writings. The true composer remains unknown.

Regardless of authorship, the Quartet in F major is an intriguing work and provides insight into the kinds of music people experienced in their everyday lives in the 18th century. The score is written for three violins and a cello, but its most distinct feature is the use of *scordatura*, or alternate tunings, allowing it to be played entirely on open strings. No performer's left hand ever presses down on the strings to alter pitches, making it ideal for amateurs. This also creates a distinct, clear, sound without vibrato (Franklin disliked the ornamentation in Handel, and probably would have enjoyed this pared-down approach). Another notable characteristic of the quartet is its organization as a Baroque era dance suite featuring an intrata (or entrance) in the form of a lively march, two menuettos, each in swaying triple meter, a rollicking capriccio, and a siciliano, evoking the pastoral atmosphere of Sicily.

Joseph Haydn

Quartet in E-flat major for Strings, Hob. III:38, Op. 33, No. 2, “The Joke”

- Born March 31, 1732, in Rohrau, Lower Austria
- Died May 31, 1809, in Vienna
- Composed in 1781
- Duration: 18 minutes

In the library of the Benedictine Monastery in Melk, Austria, is an incomplete manuscript copy of the set of quartets that comprise Haydn’s Op. 33, copied by a scribe in the Esterházy household. On its pages Haydn wrote the following: “Six quartets by me Joseph Haydn in my own hand. I humbly ask you to observe the piano and forte” (referring to the dynamic markings in the score).

This represents the remains of a major promotional campaign undertaken personally by Haydn in 1781, during an exciting and pivotal moment in his career. By then he had spent 20 years working first as Vice-Kapellmeister, later elevated to Kapellmeister, for the Esterházy princes. At the start of 1779, Haydn signed a new contract with Prince Nikolaus that contained a crucial change allowing him to publish and sell his own music. Wasting no time, Haydn immediately began to hustle, writing letters to individuals he thought might want to purchase his six string quartets, Op. 33. He enticed them with the prospect of receiving an exclusive advance issue in manuscript form, prior to publication, and described them in glowing terms: “They are of a new and entirely special kind, for I haven’t written any for ten years.” Scholars have debated how new or special the Op. 33 quartets are, but generally agree their freshness and playfulness is enhanced compared to Haydn’s previous quartets.

Broadly speaking, Haydn’s contribution to the development of the string quartet genre was to elevate the level of complexity in the conversation happening between the parts. His genius was his ability to take something simple and spin it into something spectacularly entertaining. The opening measures of the quartet Op. 33, No. 2, are straightforward, but as the movement progresses, we realize our ears have been treated to a seemingly endless variety of transformations of a few simple gestures.

Haydn also played with expectation by substituting the usual minuet movement with something livelier—a scherzo, in a pivot toward lightheartedness. Here, the contrasting section adds a winking levity as the first violin shimmers and slides in the upper register.

The *Largo sostenuto* third movement immediately flips the spotlight onto the low strings, grounding the mood and continuing in a more reserved and elegant manner, here and there punctuated by emphatic chords. Mozart once praised Haydn’s ability to “amuse and shock, arouse laughter and deep emotion, as no one else,” and in the *Presto* we are given a front row seat to this skill. Haydn gives us a rousing rondo, in which we hear a main theme returning between excursions into contrasting material.

The final measures give the quartet its famous nickname, “The Joke,” as Haydn plays with expectation using a key factor in humor, which is timing. We are kept on our toes with a series of feints as the piece seems to end, and then almost ends again, and finally truly ends (usually accompanied by the sound of relieved laughter).

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Quartet in B-flat major for Strings, K. 589, “Prussian”

- Born January 27, 1756, in Salzburg
- Died December 5, 1791, in Vienna
- Composed in 1790
- Duration: 23 minutes

In the spring of 1789, Mozart embarked on a journey from his home in Vienna to Potsdam to visit the court of King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia. Mozart painted this trip optimistically to his wife Constanze as an opportunity to make a positive connection that would hopefully result in commissions from Friedrich Wilhelm, who was an accomplished amateur musician like his uncle, Friedrich II, “The Great,” before him. Along the way, Mozart made stops in Prague, Dresden, and Berlin. He also made a special detour to Leipzig to pay homage to Johann Sebastian Bach’s legacy there, improvising on Bach’s organ, and examining Bach’s autograph scores. However, when Mozart finally arrived in Potsdam, the situation on the ground did not match the positive picture he had painted. The king, when notified of Mozart’s arrival, simply routed him to the court cellist and director of chamber music, Jean Pierre Duport. Mozart later wrote to Constanze he was invited to play for the Queen and received a commission for six string quartets for the king and six keyboard sonatas for Princess Friederike. However, no court records exist to support any of Mozart’s claims.

During these years Mozart struggled immensely with money. He earned a good amount but spent too much. That summer, he began writing a string of desperately apologetic yet pleading letters to his friend Michael Puchberg, asking for money to help fill the gaps. It appears that in Potsdam, Mozart may have indulged in wishful thinking, hoping if he showed up the king would want to meet him, and that writing music for the family would entice them to commission more works by the former Wunderkind. But the scheme did not work. Mozart began writing the six quartets but only completed three, K. 575, K. 589, and K. 590—the last in the genre he would write before his early death. “I have now been forced to give away my quartets (that exhausting labor) for a mere song,” he wrote plaintively, “simply in order to have cash in hand to meet my present difficulties.” They were published posthumously.

Despite the bleak spirit that haunted Mozart, the quartet K. 589 opens with an *Allegro* shimmering with relaxed brilliance. The two violins ease us in, followed by the viola and cello, the latter of which will have some prominence throughout as it was Friedrich Wilhelm II’s instrument. The movement is shaped by the rhythm of triplets that lend a rippling, buoyant feeling briefly interrupted in the stormier seas of its middle section. Ever a master of melody, Mozart opens the slow *Larghetto* with a gracious theme introduced by the cello and echoed in the first violin. In the score, he marks it to be delivered “sotto voce,” or under the voice. Syncopated rhythms here are offset by luxuriously flowing cascades of scales.

The stately mood of the *Menuetto* is periodically overtaken by short exuberant outbursts, culminating in an energetic and bustling Trio section, which takes an unexpected dip into a minor mode, enhancing the sense of drama. Finally, the *Allegro assai* recalls the triplet rhythms from the opening, as well as the ascending scale figures, now sped up, from the third movement. Here, the melodic material is playfully tossed around the ensemble. Rather than winding up to a flashy conclusion, the work ends with a surprising, breezy nonchalance.

Hugo Wolf

Italian Serenade for String Quartet

- Born March 13, 1860, in Windischgrätz, Styria (now Slovenj Gradec, Slovenia)
- Died February 22, 1903, in Vienna
- Composed in 1887
- Duration: 7 minutes

Born into a large, musical, family in the Austrian Empire, Hugo Wolf was taught piano and violin from an early age. Seeing his first opera at just eight years old ignited an unrelenting passion, and after several years of academic struggle, Wolf successfully petitioned to study music. Thanks to his aunt who supported him, he moved to Vienna to enroll at the conservatory, where his classmates included Gustav Mahler. Wolf's studies were cut short, however, due to his rebellious nature, which got him expelled. After briefly returning home, Wolf made a living in Vienna by teaching music students, some of whom came from notable families, including the daughters of physician Josef Breuer, whose work with Sigmund Freud contributed to the development of psychoanalysis. It was during these years working in the city that Wolf contracted syphilis after a friend took him to visit a brothel. The disease would eventually lead to his insanity and early death at age 42.

For three years, between 1884 and 1887, Wolf worked as a music critic. However, his forthright style of appraisal earned him some significant enemies who occasionally seized opportunities to retaliate. On one occasion, Wolf so deeply hurt and offended members of the Vienna Philharmonic that his composition, submitted to the orchestra as part of a review of new works, was played and then summarily dismissed with gleeful derision. Shortly after this humiliation, Wolf resigned from criticism to focus again on composition.

It was in this period that the *Italian Serenade* was written within just a few days in early May 1887. A work of exquisite craftsmanship, it opens in a lighthearted manner as the violin sings over a galloping, syncopated accompaniment in the ensemble. Halfway through, the mood shifts abruptly. The action pauses, and the cello interjects a sorrowful, slightly alarmed cry creating an air of unsettled drama, which is taken up by the other voices. From there, the sense of distress begins to dissipate, slowly releasing tension and returning to the warmth and ease of the opening theme.

Wynton Marsalis

Selections from *At the Octoroon Balls* for String Quartet

- Born October 18, 1961, in New Orleans
- Composed in 1995
- Duration: 25 minutes

In 1892 the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák was hired as artistic director and professor of composition at the National Conservatory of Music in America in New York City to help answer the question, “What is ‘American’ music?” Throughout his tenure he met with African American composers, was introduced to spirituals, and became acquainted with Native American melodies, observing in a *New York Herald* interview, “These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are American. They are the songs of America, and your composers must turn to them.”

Shortly after Dvořák left the United States in 1895, jazz developed out of African American communities in New Orleans. It quickly flourished into a nationwide phenomenon as a distinctly American form of music that many European composers enthusiastically embraced. In early 1928, Maurice Ravel embarked on a lengthy tour of the United States and Canada, relishing the opportunity to experience jazz firsthand. On February 26 he remarked to the *New York Times* reporter Olin Downes how much he admired and valued the genre, specifically noting his own use of jazz idioms in his recently composed Violin Sonata No. 2.

Since then, jazz and classical have blended to varying degrees in the hands of many composers, including William Grant Still, George Gershwin, and Duke Ellington, to name a few. A vibrant contribution to the repertoire was added in 1995 with *At the Octoroon Balls*, Wynton Marsalis’s first foray in the string quartet genre, co-commissioned by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and Jazz at Lincoln Center. Structured as a seven-movement suite, *At the Octoroon Balls* is a synthesis of history, narrative, and sound from New Orleans—Marsalis’s hometown. The title refers to 19th-century gatherings in New Orleans where free women of mixed race and white men socialized within a complex system of race, class, and gender relations. Marsalis elaborates on the scene, commenting, “A ball is a ritual and a dance. Everybody was in their finest clothing. At the Octoroon Balls there was an interesting cross-section of life. People from different strata of society came together in pursuit of pleasure and fulfillment. The music brought people together.”

Marsalis’s hybridization of jazz idioms with the string quartet framework is a richly evocative portrayal of complex layers of culture, emotion, and meaning. The first of the selected movements on this program, *Many Gone*, is a lament for lives lost in slavery, punctuated by allusions to spirituals and field hollers. *Hellbound Highball* is a train thundering down the track until it slowly screeches to a halt. A mysterious, ghostly aura emerges in *Blue Lights on the Bayou*, and the work concludes with the stylish, somewhat tipsy, *Rampart Street Row House Rag*.

Program notes © Kathryn Bacasmot