

ARIEL QUARTET

Sunday, February 13, 2022

Program notes by Connie Mayo



String Quartet No. 10 “Frozen Dreams”

Lera Auerbach (b. 1973)

1. Praeludium
2. Adagio molto, nostalgico sognando
3. Allegro ossessivo
4. Adagio tragico
5. Allegro moderato
6. Postludium

Lera Auerbach is a musician, writer and visual artist whose creative view is expansive and multidimensional. Born in the Ural Mountains of Russia, near the Siberian border, she learned to write music at the same time she learned to write words. She won numerous piano competitions and had her first opera performed by age twelve. At seventeen she was invited on a concert tour of the US, and when the tour concluded in New York, she decided to defect from the Soviet Union. She studied piano and composition at The Juilliard School, comparative literature at Columbia University and from there she went to Germany and graduated from the prestigious piano soloist program of the Hannover Hochschule fur Musik. After her Carnegie Hall debut in 2002, her career developed rapidly and she is currently in high demand as composer, piano soloist and conductor.

Auerbach has composed over 100 works, including 10 String Quartets, 4 Piano Trios, concertos and symphonic works, 10 ballets, 2 operas and many for solo instruments. When asked about inspiration for her work, she remarked, “Dreams often provide the creative spark. I dream, then dissect the dream into sounds, translate the sounds into symbols, which can resurrect the dream”.

The String Quartet No. 10, “Frozen Dreams,” was written in 2020 for the joint commission “Four Seasons” for string quartet. Four composers were asked to contribute one movement in which to “explore the perpetual flux of the natural world.” Auerbach wrote for the season of Winter. As an introduction to this quartet Auerbach wrote the following poem:

“The Seasons”

I

*Life is an ouroboros. Spring
Doesn't keep count, but accurately binds
Everything and everyone, life and death.
For centuries, this world's rebirth has turned
The earth. Only God, surely, knows
What lies behind this endless rotation.
When life lies ahead, we are more honest;
Stripping down the earth, we lay our deposit on love.
At times like this we can be happy in a cell
And the poorest shelter can become our palace.
At this age, the year seems long
And we battle windmills like the Don.*

II

*The days pass, and in this time of life
Silent Spring feels Summer's farewell breath behind.
We grow used to maturity, and it always
Reminds us of home, of our native land,
Of household chores, and of the family,
Of work and the titles we have taken on...
This time of hot middays, when the sun
Stares straight into its own reflection
Its single eye shattering the water
(Life allows us to submit to the flow) -
Stamping out grains of dust with yellow rays
It reaches the height of its paralyzed state.*

III

*The days pass and the birds fly by, away
The leaves fall, fall, but still they cannot
Quite find a place to settle on the ground...
At times my thoughts cohere-
A sign offered up my senses
Like a question put to a departing God.
Life resembles a flowing garment. Sewn
Out of days like a toga's folds, the last
Made from foreknowledge of coming winter.
The cradle is draped with sunset's shroud.
And the fir tree's fractured trunk
Crooked, like a hanging question mark.*

IV

*The days pass. Crow's nests-
Old rags on the bare branches.
The snow settling on your temple
No longer even melts, and iron nails
Start to come loose, and the frame of the house
Breaks up, springing leaks like a canoe
Or like an ancient ship. And the heart's gasp
Oppresses. Something weighs down on your breast
Sounds are muffled...The deadly scaffold
Rises up suddenly, across your path;
So unexpected is it that you have
Time for just three words: "For everything - forgive."*



String Quartet No. 12 in F Major Opus 96, “American”

Antonín Dvořák (1841 - 1904)

- I Allegro ma non troppo
- II Lento
- III Molto vivace
- IV Finale: Vivace ma non troppo

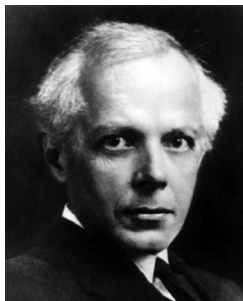
Dvořák, a Czech composer, was heavily influenced by the political situation of his time. The public was hungry for expressions of cultural identity as a movement toward national independence was growing. After years of “forced Germanization” by the ruling Habsburg dynasty, people loved hearing Dvořák’s music with its regional folk tunes representing their musical heritage.

Regional folk music was an essential part of Dvořák. He was born into a family of modest means in a small village northwest of Prague where he frequently heard the polka, dumka and furiant at village dances. His talent was recognized early by an elementary school teacher who gave him violin lessons, and at sixteen he attended the Institute for Church Music in Prague where he learned basic composition. To earn money he played the violin in coffeehouses and restaurants. Painfully poor for years, he persisted in educating himself in the art of composition. He studied the scores of the great composers and composed prolifically, though none of his music was yet performed.

Dvořák’s luck changed in 1875 when he applied for a grant from the Austrian government that was intended for talented but poor artists. A member of the jury was Johannes Brahms, who recognized his talent, recommended Dvořák to his publisher and became a primary supporter. His first published works were the Moravian Dances and the 4-hand Slavonic Dances. People delighted in them, particularly the Slavonic Dances which they could play at home.

The ‘American’ quartet was composed in just fifteen days in 1893 in the small Iowan Czech village of Spillville. Dvořák was on summer vacation from his job heading a new music conservatory in New York City. Dvořák’s family came from Prague to join him in the countryside. Happy and relaxed, he stated that he, “wanted to write something melodious and simple.”

A characteristic, unifying element throughout the quartet is the use of the pentatonic scale which gives the whole quartet its open, simple character. Though often associated with American folk music, the pentatonic scale is common in much ethnic music worldwide, and certainly in the folk dance and song forms of Dvořák's homeland. Because Dvořák showed keen interest in Negro Spirituals and Native American music, many have also debated their influence in this quartet.



String Quartet No. 5, Sz. 102

Béla Bartók (1881 - 1945)

- I Allegro
- II Adagio molto
- III Scherzo: alla bulgarese
- IV Andante
- V Finale: Allegro vivace

Bartók was an influential 20th century Hungarian composer and a pioneering ethnomusicologist whose music contains a mixture of modernist dissonance and nationalist elements. Like Dvořák, he was drawn to the study of native folk music. He focused first on the folk music of Hungary, then journeyed to Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Serbia and Turkey with his close friend, Zoltan Kodaly, recording and transcribing the songs people performed for him.

In his autobiography, Bartók stated, "The outcome of these studies was of decisive influence upon my work, because it freed me from the tyrannical rule of the major and minor keys. The greater part of the collected treasure, and the more valuable part, was in old ecclesiastical or old Greek modes, or based on more primitive (pentatonic) scales, and the melodies were full of most free and varied rhythmic phrases and changes of tempi, played both rubato and giusto."

Gradually Bartók began to incorporate what he studied into his own music, breaking down the diatonic system of harmony and adding asymmetrical rhythms and modern dissonances. New techniques of strumming, snapping and sliding along the strings and beating them with the wood of the bow were introduced in his string quartets. "Night Music" with its eerie dissonances, sounds of nature and lonely melodies characterize an aspect of his mature period.

Bartók's six string quartets, considered one of the major achievements of the first half of the 20th century, are compared in greatness to those of Beethoven. The 5th string quartet is mellower and less dissonant than his previous quartets. It is structured in "arch form," a broad, symmetrical plan in which "the central movement is flanked, mirror-fashion, by parallel balancing movements: fast-slow-scherzo-slow-fast." The two slow movements are good examples of Bartók's night music. In the Scherzo he uses the strong, unevenly divided "aksak" (meaning limping or slumping) rhythms he discovered in Bulgarian folk music. The work was written in 1934, commissioned by the most prominent music patron of the time, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge. She also established the Berkshire Music Festival which led to the establishment of Tanglewood.