

Escher Quartet with Terence Wilson, Piano
New Orleans Friends of Music, April 22, 2025

PROGRAM

String Quartet in B Minor, Op. 11	Samuel Barber (1910–1981)
Molto allegro e appassionato	
Molto adagio [attacca]	
Molto allegro (come prima)	
String Quartet No. 6 in F Minor, Op. 80	Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)
Allegro vivace assai	
Allegro assai	
Adagio	
Finale: Allegro molto	
Piano Quintet in A Major, Op. 81	Antonin Dvořák (1841–1904)
Allegro ma non tanto	
Dumka: Andante con moto	
Scherzo (Furiant): Molto vivace	
Finale: Allegro	

PROGRAM NOTES

by Marc Loudon

[*Note:* Performance links provided in these notes are generally available *YouTube* links that in some cases start with advertisements. You can skip the ads by clicking on the “Skip” message that will appear on the lower right of the video after a few seconds.]

Samuel Barber is regarded as one of the great American composers of the 20th century. Barber's musical vocabulary is tonal and unique. About two-thirds of his compositional output was for the human voice, and his instrumental music is characterized by a vocal lyricism. Barber's **String Quartet, Op. 11**, was begun 1936 while living in Austria with his partner, Gian-Carlo Menotti; Barber had just been awarded the prestigious Prix de Rome. As we discuss subsequently, Barber spent nearly seven years contemplating a revision of the third movement; the final form of the work was premiered in 1943 by the Budapest String Quartet.

The first movement is loosely in sonata form—that is, a main theme, a second theme, a development, and then a revisiting of the two themes. However, the movement contains several smaller sections of varied character. The main theme begins as an almost violent, angular unison outburst, but the second theme, labeled *tranquillo* (peaceful) in the score, follows shortly. This chorale-like section is followed by a playful section in the original tempo, and then a section marked *ben cantato* (singing well). We're then back to variations on the unison outburst. The movement ends by fading away into two short, three-note, unison strokes

This quartet is known even to the most casual listener by its second movement, which Barber transcribed for orchestra and also for mixed choir as his *Adagio for Strings*. Barber knew that he had composed something special; he wrote to the cellist of the Curtis String Quartet, “I have just

finished the slow movement of my quartet today—it is a knockout!” Musicologist Kai Christiansen provides the perfect description of the effect of the *Adagio*:

The “Adagio for Strings” has become practically a sacred treasure of American if not international music. Its extraordinary and seemingly universal blend of sorrow, hope, and beauty casts such a strong spell that it has been repeatedly called upon to commemorate the most devastating tragedies as the only music worthy of expressing the inexpressible, both the anguish and the hope, the solemnity and the ardent expression, a nearly overwhelming yearning unfulfilled, but acknowledged by some cosmic, spiritual compassion. It is catharsis and redemption delivered in ... wordless music, simply the sounds of sublime beauty.

Barber was not satisfied with his initially composed third movement, a rondo, and he discarded it prior to its premiere in 1943. Instead, he recruited ideas from the first movement to form a very short concluding postlude. Thus, the stunning *Adagio* lives between two similar “bookends.”

Following is a link to a performance of the Barber Quartet by the Auner Quartet:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaBKO518B30>

Many believe that **Felix Mendelssohn** composed his **String Quartet in F Minor, Op. 80**, as a homage to his beloved sister Fanny, who died unexpectedly in May of 1847. Mendelssohn, torn with grief, and unable to attend his sister’s funeral, left for Switzerland with his wife and brother to recover. There he painted watercolors, some of a Lucerne covered bridge which had depictions of the “Dance of Death” on its roof. He also composed the Opus 80 quartet, which was to be one of his last works. He died in November of 1847, six months after his sister, at the tragically young age of 38, joining the pantheon of great composers before and since who died before their time.

This quartet is a major stylistic departure from Mendelssohn’s earlier quartets. Three of the four movements suggest anguish, angst, and even anger, while the third movement is an elegiac song, or even a love song. It is always questionable to associate the mood of a composer’s works to be reflective of his state of mind; but, in this case, most analysts believe that the tone of the work is surely a reaction to Mendelssohn’s immense grief over the sudden death of his sister and his feeling of affection for her. The Marxist scholar Georg Knepler said that the quartet represents “the requiem of an era.”

The virtuosic opening movement starts with an *agitato* section that boils up from the lower instruments to a screaming counterpoint that moves from high to low based on the interval of an inverted diminished fifth, which suggests instability. The second theme is a falling melody in the relative major key (A-flat) that provides only brief respite from the *agitato*.

The second movement, a scherzo, has no resemblance to the archetypal Mendelssohn scherzos of nymphs, elves, and fairies that we hear in the incidental music to *Midsummer Night’s Dream* or the D minor *Piano Trio*; rather, it is a syncopated *Totentanz* (Dance of Death) that maintains the minor key. The trio section starts with growling theme played only by the lower two instruments.

The third movement, an *Adagio* in the relative major key, suggesting Mendelssohn’s earlier songs without words. One senses in this movement an effort to bring solace to a sense of resignation and grief.

In the final movement we return to F minor. A feature of this movement is the violent, almost angry, tremolos thrown back and forth between the instruments. The major key of the second

theme, as in the first movement, provides only brief relief. The movement concludes with virtuosic triplets maintained by the first violin against a final reprise of the opening theme, until we arrive at the two emphatic, final chords.

The following link leads to a performance of the trio by the Marmen Quartet:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WST6UspwAM>

Antonin Dvořák composed his **Piano Quintet, Op. 81**, in a three-month period in the Fall of 1887, about six years before his sojourn in America, where he composed his *American Quartet*, which was performed by the Dover Quartet for the Friends of Music earlier this season. This was Dvořák's second and most successful effort at composing for the piano quintet. This quintet has become one of the great treasures of the chamber-music literature. Dvořák's themes in this quintet are so beautifully song-like that, even on first hearing, you feel as if you have heard them before.

The first movement of the four-movement quintet, in modified sonata form, opens quietly with a cello solo accompanied only by a gently rocking triplet figure in the piano. However, the movement quickly transitions into stirring material played by the entire ensemble, then a recapitulation of the opening solo, this time in the first violin, starting in A major and transitioning into A minor. More episodic material leads to the second theme in the viola. The development section employs variations of both the first and second themes, and then we arrive at the recapitulation, this time in the piano, the second theme in the viola, and exciting episodic material based on the two themes that brings us to the exciting coda based on the opening theme at the end of the movement.

Dvořák entitled the second movement "Dumka." A dumka is a Slavic, specifically Ukrainian, musical form that typically features a slow, introspective, and often sad or melancholic main theme, followed by a contrasting section that is more lively and joyful. This movement is essentially a Rondo (a form in which the order of sections is A-B-A-C-A-B-A). The "A" opening theme is wistfully beautiful, even sad; and the intervening "B" and "C" sections are lively. Dvořák marks these *Un pochettino piu mosso* (a tiny bit faster) and *Vivace* (lively), respectively. The movement closes introspectively with the final "A" section, ending with a quiet F-sharp minor chord.

The third movement is a scherzo subtitled "Furiant," which is a Bohemian dance with a rapid tempo and energetic character. The rowdy two outer furiant sections in A major are bookends for the middle section in F Major, marked *poco tranquillo* (somewhat more tranquil), which is announced with twelve long, quiet chords in the piano. We hear in this quieter section subtle variations on the theme of the first movement played by individual instruments over chordal accompaniments and quiet arpeggios in the piano. A short reprise of the opening section finishes the movement with a rapid, downward cascade in the piano and two final A-major chords.

The finale is a rondo (A-B-A-C-A-B-A). The "A" section is a boisterous polka, while, in the "B" and "C" sections, we hear trumpet calls and clever sequential treatments of the opening theme. In the final reprise of the polka, quiet chords recall the middle section of the third movement that lead to the exciting conclusion in a final variation of the polka.

The following link leads to a performance by Menachem Pressler (on his 90th birthday!) and Quator Ebèn:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKHL8XPeLpE>