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MEDIA RELEASE

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Chamber at Its Best: The Miami String Quartet

Benny Kim, Violin; Cathy Meng Robinson, Violin

Yu Jin, Viola; Keith Robinson, Cello

Tuesday, February 8 at 7:30 p.m.

Desert Hills Presbyterian Church

34605 N. Scottsdale Road, Carefree 85377

Tickets: \$35; Student (K-College) \$5

Call (480) 488-0806, toll free (866) 488-0806 or visit www.azmusicfest.org for tickets.

Complimentary valet parking is available.

String Quartet in D Major, Opus 20, No. 4

Allegro di molto

Un poco adagio e affettuoso

Menuet alla Zingarese: Allegretto

Presto e scherzando

Franz Joseph Haydn

(1732-1809)

String Quartet No. 3

Moderato

Allegro energico

Adagio

Moderato

Peteris Vasks

(b. 1946)

Intermission

String Quartet in A Major, Opus 41, No. 3

Andante espressivo; allegro molto moderato

Assai agitato

Adagio molto

Finale: Allegro molto vivace

Robert Schumann

(1810-1856)

The *String Quartet No. 27 in D Major, Opus 20, No. 4* of **Franz Joseph Haydn** (1732-1809) belongs to a group often called “The Great Quartets” as they are his mature and definitive contributions to this musical form. Written in 1772, the *Quartet* is “Papa” Haydn at his innovative best. One of his major advances is the independent material he gives each instrument.

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Here, in particular, the cello is freed from its role as “accompanist” and supportive bass; rather it is woven into the tissue of the composition. As you listen to the *Quartet*’s melodic and even Romantic (yes, that *is* the correct word) music, you can readily appreciate how new this style was to Haydn’s audience.

Haydn’s scores are often filled with musical surprises, and this *Quartet* has its fair share of them. The opening phrases of the First Movement are magically haunting; suddenly, there is a break in the music and a stunning change of mood. A second theme, played by the first violin, appears, using the repeated notes of the movement’s first phrases. An intricate development follows, then, silence! A false recapitulation – i.e. not in the correct (original) key – follows. This is Haydn having fun as he makes us wait for true recap in the prescribed Classical form and tonality. If you listen attentively, you’ll catch more such jokes!

In the Second Movement, the content is more personal and introspective. Formally, it is a theme with four variations that are passed around the instruments. The second violin takes the syncopated first variation. The cello takes the second, with the viola representing the bass line. The first violin plays the thematically expanded third. All then return to a more simplified exploration of the theme for the final variation.

The Third Movement is described as a minuet *alla Zingarese* (“in gypsy style”). The sound does indeed suggest folk music, most likely tunes remembered from Haydn’s childhood. The trio section is quieter and belongs to the cello. Then, the minuet returns to close the movement in keeping with Classical formal design.

The finale is marked *presto e scherzando* (“very fast and in a humorous manner”). This happy, rapid section makes use of chromatic passages, while also looking back to the gypsy flavor of the previous movement. Haydn again playfully starts and stops while presenting the thematic materials of this final part. Surely, the violinists are having fun as they share the sparkling second theme!

Bottom line: this *Quartet* has it all! Vigor, poignancy, Romantic melodic content, gypsy exuberance, varied dynamics and rhythmic interest; all combined with formal innovation. No wonder Haydn is rightfully called the “Father of the String Quartet.”

The compositions of Latvian **Peteris Vasks** (born 1946) are the musical embodiment of his strong feelings about political oppression, morality and the human condition: “My intention is to provide food for the soul and this is what I preach in my works.” The message in his *Quartet No. 3* -- “Christmas: Peace on Earth” -- is evident through his choice of thematic materials.

A Latvian Christmas carol serves as the foundation for the First Movement, which opens with a brief, restless, questioning phrase. This rustling, abbreviated motif lengthens and is heard under a sustained violin note. The cello’s sonorous timbre continues the composer’s message in a sighing melody that is soon brightened by the violins.

The Second Movement is more hopeful in spirit and infused with folksongs from the composer’s beloved homeland. The rhythm is syncopated and agitated: the instruments “scrub” and pluck the rustic dance phrases.

The Third Movement is once again filled with sad and imploring music. The material wanders chromatically, that is, ascending and descending by half-tone intervals. We hear a sharp cry, then weeping. The violins and viola weave above the cello voice in seeming despair. Dissonance makes the utterances sound even more urgent and dire. The movement is a deeply introspective expression of the composer’s doubts for future peace on earth.

With the Fourth Movement, hope again seems possible. The section opens with church-like chords, followed by jagged, rhythmically-charged phrases. There is a moment of silence, then a quiet passage leads back to the

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happier, although restless, theme of the First Movement. The instruments strum and dash to the edge of a musical cliff, then halt. The movement ends with sustained spare chords and bits of melody high in the violins. Peace, perhaps, at last.

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) once famously wrote, “I shall study Haydn and then I shall write string quartets that are not at all like Haydn.” He was true to his word: his quartets generally follow the structure championed by Haydn, but they represent the flowering of Romanticism. Schumann composed the three *String Quartets, Opus 41* in a five-week flurry of activity; the *A Major* being the last. All were dedicated to Felix Mendelssohn and were premiered as a birthday present to the composer’s wife, Clara.

The First Movement opens with a descending interval that provides material for both the first and second themes of this section. The expressive, lyrical second melody, played by the cello, is especially lovely. An interesting fact: Schumann develops only the first theme, while the recapitulation is actually based on the second melody (*not* the expected first). The first theme does reappear in the coda, and the movement’s final notes repeat the interval heard at the outset.

As in the Haydn, Schumann has structured the Second Movement as a theme and variations, albeit using an extremely loose approach to that form. Three of the variations actually *precede* the playing of the theme on which they are based! The theme itself is in the form of a canon, in which one instrument plays a melody, followed by another that enters, playing the identical thematic material. Here, violin and viola are featured. You will notice that the mood changes radically from the first two variations to the final two. This is in keeping with Schumann’s two journalistic “personae”: the first, Eusebius, is introspective and moody; the second, Florestan, exuberant and out-going. Here, the meditative ambience of the first pair gives way to the concluding variations, both in the unrestrained “voice” of Florestan.

The beginning of the profoundly emotional Third Movement is choralelike. A warm, second musical idea is introduced by the viola, followed by a wonderful conversation between the instruments. The music embodies the very definition of Romantic music: melancholy, free of formal constraints, dramatic, and alternating between rhythmically-charged passages and reined-in tempos.

The finale is a brilliant rondo, consisting of a syncopated, pulsing theme and three dissimilar sections that alternate with the recurring melody (ABACAD). After the first run-through, Schumann repeats the section with some development and harmonic alterations. This movement is written with a lighter touch than anything we have heard earlier, leading to a energetic coda that ends with a marvelous flourish.

Notes by Fran Rosenthal

About the Artists

Praised in the *New York Times* as having “everything one wants in a quartet,” the **Miami String Quartet** -- Benny Kim and Cathy Meng Robinson (violins), Yu Jin (viola) and Keith Robinson (cello) -- is among the most widely respected quartets in America. For over 20 years, their diversity in programming, poise in performance, keen sense of ensemble and impeccable musicality has made them one of the most sought-after ensembles in chamber music today.

The Miami String Quartet has appeared extensively throughout the United States and Europe. Highlights of recent seasons include performances in New York at Lincoln Center’s Alice Tully Hall and the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, as well as engagements in Boston, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, New Orleans, San Francisco,

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Seattle, St. Paul, and the group's own concert series in Palm Beach. International highlights include appearances in Bern, Cologne, Amsterdam, Istanbul, Lausanne, Montreal, Rio de Janeiro, Hong Kong, Taipei and Paris.

For the last several summers, the Quartet has served as resident ensemble at the Kent/Blossom Music Festival in Ohio, as well as appearing at Chamber Music Northwest, Brevard, Mostly Mozart, Ravinia, Rutgers Summerfest, Music from Angel Fire, Virginia Arts Festival - where it is the resident ensemble - and at festivals in La Jolla, Santa Fe, and Pensacola.

The ensemble's interest in new music has led to many commissions and premieres. In 2008, the group teamed up with Imani Winds to premiere Roberto Sierra's *Concierto da Camera*. That same year, the ensemble performed the premiere of Joan Tower's *Quartet No. 4, "Angels"* and Ricky Ian Gordon's *Green Sneakers* for baritone and string quartet.

The Quartet is Visiting Quartet-in-Residence at the Hartt School (Hartford, CT) and, since 2004, the Quartet-in-Residence at Kent State University (OH) in 2004, where the members also serve as faculty members. This is the ensemble's first appearance at *Arizona Musicfest*.

*Our sincere thanks to Platinum Impresarios
for sponsoring this splendid afternoon that showcases three centuries of chamber music!*