

Program notes for Harlem Quartet program #2:

String Quartet No. 2 – Celso Garrido-Lecca

Celso Garrido-Lecca's Second String Quartet is dedicated to Victor Jara, one of the most revered songwriters of *la nueva canción* who was brutally murdered during the 1973 Chilean coup. This is a piece that uses atonal language in alluring and poetic ways. Constructed over concise melodic and rhythmic cells placed at the beginning of each movement as a kind of organic seed, the quartet's five interconnected parts flow into each other. Two nostalgic elegies are nested in between a Prologue, an Interlude, and an Epilogue that evaporates as a clear gesture of a life cut short.

—Luisa Vilar-Payá, *Universidad de las Américas, Puebla, Mexico*

Almendra – Abelardo Valdés

Born in Havana in 1911, Abelardo Valdés is commonly known for his contributions to the creation of the Cuban *danzón* style. *Almendra*, his most famous *danzón* work, has been arranged for string quartet by Nicky Aponte and Harlem Quartet. In this piece, the quartet explores the rhythmic drive and Cuban-style improvisatory techniques that have defined the *danzón* for over a century and made it one of Cuba's primary musical exports to the world.

El Cumbanchero - Rafael Hernandez

Rafael Hernandez is one of the most enduringly loved composers of Puerto Rican popular music in history. *El Cumbanchero*, which translates to "party-goer" in English, was composed just following World War II, becoming a hit all across the Americas by the 1950s. It is widely believed that President John F. Kennedy heartily greeted Hernandez as "Mr. Cumbanchero" prior to a ceremony at the White House for Puerto Rican governor Luis Muñoz Marín, and the piece has firmly established its place among the standards of Latin American music.

Recently arranged for string quartet by Guido Lopez-Gavilán (father of Harlem Quartet first violinist, Ilmar Gavilan), the piece has become a fixture in Harlem Quartet's repertoire.

String Quartet in C Major, Op. 59, No. 3 - Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

While categories will never fully explain Beethoven, they remain a way of dealing with his greatness and his elusiveness. The sixteen string quartets of Beethoven's monumental canon span thirty-six of his fifty-seven years and represent, perhaps better than any other of his works, the revered Early, Middle, and Late periods of his compositional life. These so-called "periods" are not mere academic divisions but rather a glorious arc of Beethoven's work. So, too, do they encompass his deafness from his first awareness of it to a final and awful silence.

The three "Razumovsky" quartets of Op. 59, so named after their commissioner and dedicatee, Count Andrey Razumovsky, were written between July and September of 1806 and represent the Middle Period as well as a daring exploration into an uncharted territory of emotional expression. Op. 74, "Harp," and Op. 95, "Serioso," came, respectively, in 1809 and 1810 and are fascinating transitions between the Middle and Late periods, suggesting what has been and what will come.

Conflict is inherent in the public reception of the entire Op. 59 quartets. The reactions to the three "Rasumovsky" quartets stretched from animosity to bewilderment. A member of the Schuppanzigh Quartet reportedly complained about the technical difficulties of the F Major Quartet, causing

Beethoven's famous retort quoted in Antony Hopkins *Music All Around Me*: "When I composed that, I was conscious of being inspired by God Almighty. Do you think I can consider your puny little fiddle when He speaks to me?" Also quoted in Eliot Forbes' *Thayer's Life of Beethoven* is Beethoven's response when violinist Felix Radicati said to him, concerning the Op. 59 quartets, "Surely you do not consider this music." Beethoven replied, "Not for you, but for a later age."

While we might conclude that the animosity has receded, surely we cannot hear any of the Op. 59 quartets without some sense of wonderment over the differences among them. It is this total individualism that drives the opus and explains its transitional position between the elegance of the Op. 18 quartets and the elusive greatness of the late quartets.

"Let your deafness no longer be a secret—even in art," Beethoven scrawled on a page of sketches for the Op. 59 quartets. So it is that he unleashed his truthfulness upon us who, even in this century, remain startled.

The curious opening statement of the first movement of the Op. 59, No. 3 Quartet seems almost suspended in time compared to the reckless forward motion that will follow. Tucked into that slow and stern opening, however, is a hint of the elaborate music to come in the *Andante con moto* and *Allegro vivace* sections. Things literally blossom—in tempo, melodic and harmonic invention, and rhythmic power. One surprise after another occurs including the spectacular two octave leaps by the violin. While this is music of great spaciousness, it is also highly ornamented with virtuosic demands made on all four instruments including the cello which was the instrument of Beethoven's patron, Count Razumovsky. In order to please his patron, Beethoven had incorporated Russian themes in the two earlier Op. 59 quartets, but he made no such accommodation in this movement or in any of the C Major Quartet. This is elaborate music in the richest 18th century style but shot through with a Modernism yet to come.

Of no less wonder is the alluring second movement which has been variously described in the past in terms of its despairing and mysterious qualities. Contemporary ears might hear it as frankly sensual. What suggests that sensuality is the crawling minor scale Beethoven employs, giving the movement almost the flavor of an exotic dance. To say "belly dance" probably pushes the image too far, but we would love to brave that description. Motion, however, is central to the movement, indicated even by Beethoven's specific *con moto* tempo marking. Anchoring this motion is the plucking of the cello that opens and closes the movement and persists throughout it. The ornamentation of the first movement remains in this second movement but with a new anguish.

Sensuality is briefly mitigated by the graciousness of the *Minuetto*. Beethoven may appear to resume his 18th century guise, but little is ever really traditional in Beethoven and especially in the Op. 59 quartets. A simple arpeggio becomes extraordinary in his hands. Even the modesty of this movement is suspect with its artful relief from the exotic intensity of the preceding movement.

We are hurled without pause into the famous conclusion. It is this movement that enlarged the scope of string quartet writing and performance beyond any previous example. Despite virtuosic display and complex fugal writing, this movement and the entire Quartet remain a deeply personal and individual statement.