

November & December 2020



Fugue State

Sasha Callahan, violin
Katherine Winterstein, violin
Alexander Vavilov, viola
Leo Eguchi, cello

PROGRAM

The Art of the Fugue, BWV 1080
Contrapunctus XII, a 4
Contrapunctus XIII, a 3

J.S. Bach (1685–1750)

Five Folksongs in Counterpoint

Florence Price (1887—1953)

String Quartet No. 7

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906—1975)

Grosse Fuge, Op. 133

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770—1827)

It seems fitting that during this time when so many different perspectives and points of view are struggling to find harmony together, we turn to a compositional style built upon multiple voices existing and interweaving together. In fact, the tension and dissonance and the inherent struggle add to the beauty and expressive potential. Even the challenge of listening to more than one voice at the same time, hearing the unique plurality that occurs when multiple independent voices join together, seems like a good exercise right now. Of course my metaphor relies heavily on the four geniuses whose music you will hear, and who employ counterpoint in very different ways to explore the dynamic genre of the string quartet.

We begin the program with mirror fugues from the king of counterpoint, J.S. Bach, taken from his *Art of Fugue*. These two miraculous little works showcase Bach's command over counterpoint by requiring him to create fugue subjects that mirror each other (if one line goes up, there must be a partner that goes down). It seems the stricter the technique, the more creative Bach gets, and these works are so beautiful and musically satisfying, you can enjoy them even if you don't follow the structure at all. Set for string quartet, you will be able to see and hear each independent voice with great clarity, and witness the interaction between the voices.

We then move to a totally different expression of counterpoint, a piece by the African American trailblazer Florence Price that has only recently received the attention it deserves. Her *Five Folksongs in Counterpoint* (also known as *Negro Folksongs in Counterpoint*) were premiered in 1951 and then nearly forgotten about until 2015. Price takes five familiar songs, *Cavalry*, *Clementine*, *Drink to me only with thine eyes*, *Shortnin' Bread*, and *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* and explores them using contrapuntal techniques. In doing so, she creates a unique style that utilizes the many expressive capabilities of the string quartet. Each movement has a totally different feel, in keeping with the varied subject matter of the songs. It is at once modern and traditional, and blends Price's deep understanding and command of classical composition with an interest in her heritage as an African American. It's worth noting that Ms. Price has strong ties to the Boston area: she attended New England Conservatory and graduated with honors in 1906 with both an artist diploma in organ and a teaching certificate.

Next we turn to our 7th pairing of string quartets by Shostakovich and Beethoven. Shostakovich's 7th quartet is by far his most concise quartet, clocking in at a pithy 12 minutes. In it you hear Shostakovich's yearning, deeply emotional language and stark use of contrast (qualities that describe Beethoven's signature stamp to a tee as well). The work is in three movements without a break, and it is in the final movement that we arrive at his contribution to our exploration of counterpoint. Shostakovich gives us a brash, exhilarating, almost belligerent fugue, which ultimately returns to the theme from the first movement before turning the corner into something more personal and intimate.

Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* closes the program. Originally conceived as the final movement of his Op. 130 string quartet, the movement was deemed nearly incomprehensible at the time—Stravinsky famously said of the work that it will forever be contemporary. I thought I'd share a few words written about the work by Mark Steinberg, violinist of the Brentano quartet:

"Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*, Op. 133 is one of the great artistic testaments to the human capacity for meaning in the face of the threat of chaos. Abiding faith in the relevance of visionary struggle in our lives powerfully informs the structure and character of the music; this is surely one of the composer's most inspiring achievements"

Given the times we find ourselves in, we thought the challenges and rewards of this incredible work were a fitting close to this program devoted to plurality and finding order out of chaos.