



## PROGRAM NOTES

June 8, 2008

### YORK BOWEN

*Phantasy Quintet for bass clarinet and string quartet, Op. 93*

In the first half of the 20th century, England experienced a musical renaissance. It started, more or less, with Sir Edward Elgar and went on to include Frederick Delius, Gustav Holst, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Arnold Bax, and many others. It was a superbly rich—albeit occasionally inward looking—period of English music, and York Bowen (1884-1961) was a major figure in its pantheon. Often called the “English Rachmaninoff,” he was a prolific composer and pianist who performed with many famous musicians. Bowen was also a fine organist, viola, and horn player and a professor of piano at the Royal Academy of Music.

Written in 1932, the *Phantasy Quintet* derives its structure from the entry requirements of the Cobbett Phantasy Competitions, initiated in 1905 to further the cause of British chamber music. The work is written in a single movement, which attempts to cover the range of a full three or four movement sonata. Thus, the first section, corresponding to the first movement of a sonata, presents two themes in a ternary arrangement. The middle section, which is introduced by a quasi-recitative passage for bass clarinet followed by a linking passage featuring a viola solo, corresponds to a second movement, and the third, a brilliantly driven *allegro con spirito*, represents a finale. The whole piece, constructed with seamless skill, is rounded off with a sustained *tranquillo* coda, which returns to the mood of the opening bars.

June 8, 2008

### FELIX MENDELSSOHN

*String Quartet in E flat Major, Opus 12*

The year 1829 was a glorious year for Felix Mendelssohn. He became celebrated all over Germany for having resuscitated, at the *Singakademie* of Berlin, Bach's long-neglected St. Matthew Passion. On the strength of his success, Mendelssohn undertook a voyage to Italy, France, and England in order to sample a bit of non-German culture.

He was 20 years old that year and filled with boundless energy, dedicating the better part of each day to composing music. (Mendelssohn was also an accomplished artist and managed to find the time to fill many notebooks with drawings and paintings).

England welcomed the composer rapturously, giving him ever more confidence in his own gifts. The quartet in E flat Major, Opus 12, begun in the spring of 1829 just after the performance of The St. Matthew Passion, was completed in London that September. It bears the dedication “An B. P.” The initials belonged to a young Berlinoise named Betty Pistor, admired by Mendelssohn.

The quartet owes a great deal to the influence of “second period” Beethoven, exhibiting innumerable musical quotes and structural likenesses. The Canzonetta, particularly, recalls a Beethovenien scherzo but, as always, Mendelssohn, with his favorite little whirling motifs and staccato sixteenth notes, makes it unmistakably his own.



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### LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

*Quintet in E flat Major, Opus 4*

Although it may appear to be a chronological impossibility, the matrix of the Quintet in E flat Major, Opus 4, is to be found in Beethoven's Wind Octet, Opus 103. The octet was written in 1792, but not published in that form until well after the composer's death (1827). In 1792 Beethoven was just 22 years old, and he had left Bonn, the city of his birth, forever. He settled in Vienna where he remained until his death.

The conditions of his entry into Vienna were auspicious. Music-loving aristocrats supported him, and he lived, for short time, with the Prince Karl Von

Lichnovsky who had a private string quartet. The patronage of some of these benefactors is reflected in Beethoven's dedications of several important chamber works. He studied with Haydn and Salieri and distinguished himself not only as a composer, but as a formidable pianist with a gift for improvisation.

Soon after its composition, Beethoven revised the original wind octet, which he seems to have liked very well, to create a wind quintet. In 1795, he rearranged the wind quintet, tinkering with the harmony a little bit, and it became the String Quintet, Opus 4. Peggy Pearson has continued this tradition by arranging the quintet as it will be played today, and the oboe will replace the first violin.