In the winter of 1782, Leopold Mozart received a letter from his son, Wolfgang, in Vienna: “I suppose you have heard that the London Bach is dead? What a loss to the musical world!” The “London Bach” was Johann Christian, youngest son of Johann Sebastian, and probably the most famous while he lived of any of the members of that venerable family. Johann Christian profoundly influenced the formation of Wolfgang Mozart’s musical style, and the two composers harbored great mutual respect. They first met in 1764 in London, when the eight-year-old Mozart came to entertain the English court; Johann Christian, the Queen’s Music Master, was responsible for scheduling the prodigy’s appearances. The two got along splendidly. One contemporary report noted that Bach seated himself at the keyboard and took the boy upon his knee, with “each in turn playing a bar or so with such precision that no one would have suspected two performers.” To the further delight of the auditors, Johann Christian began improvising a fugue and little Wolfgang completed it. It was the graceful, flowing, galant style of J.C. Bach that served as the foundation for Mozart’s elegant compositional idiom.

Johann Christian was fifteen when his father, Johann Sebastian, died in 1750. He left Leipzig to continue his education with his older brother Carl Philipp Emanuel in Berlin, and moved to Italy in 1754 to study composition with the renowned pedagogue Padre Martini. Christian began writing Latin church music, and by 1757, he had been received into the Roman Catholic faith. (His staunchly Lutheran family might well have dubbed him the “Renegade Bach” for such a heretical action.) His appointment as organist at the Milan Cathedral in 1760 was quickly followed by the composition of his first opera, and it was not long before his church duties were neglected in favor of the more glamorous opera house. Reputation followed success, and in 1762, he accepted an offer to compose operas for the King’s Theatre in London, a city that was to be his home for the rest of his life.

Though his earliest operatic efforts in England met with considerable acclaim, Bach was soon forced from his position at the King’s Theatre by political intrigues. He turned to instrumental music, and established himself in the royal favor of the German-born Queen Charlotte with such effect that he was appointed Master of the Queen’s Music within two years of his arrival. At the same time he also renewed his friendship with Carl Friedrich Abel, a German composer and performer who had studied with Johann Christian’s father in Leipzig. Together they organized the Bach–Abel Concerts that were to be such an important stimulus in establishing the public instrumental concert. Their first concert was given in February 1764 (only two months before Mozart arrived) and their series of January-to-May weekly programs continued for almost twenty years, with much of the programming devoted to Johann Christian’s instrumental music. The modish currents of British taste began to flow away from Bach in his last years, and he suffered several financial reverses, including his overextended investment in a new hall for the concerts. His health began to decline in 1781 and he died on New Year’s Day 1782, deeply in debt. It is said that only four people attended the funeral. Queen Charlotte, however, remembered her old music master, and she enabled Bach’s wife, an opera singer, to return to her native Italy and live on a royal pension for the rest of her life.

It is thought that the six Quartets for Oboe (or flute) and Strings that Bach published in 1772 as his Op. 8 were written for either the oboist Johann Christian Fischer or the flutist Johann Baptist Wendling. Fischer (ca. 1733-1800) had established himself in Dresden as one of the finest oboists in Europe before he was driven out of Germany by the Seven Years’ War and ended up in London in 1768, where he taught, performed with several orchestras (including that of the Bach–Abel Concerts), composed and married the daughter of Thomas Gainsborough (who painted his portrait). Wendling (1723-1797), flutist of the celebrated court orchestra in Mannheim, first appeared in London in May 1771 and quickly fell into a close friendship with Bach. (Close enough that he fell in love with Wendling’s beautiful nineteen-year-old daughter, Augusta, and suggested marriage, but was refused. Augusta later became the mistress of the Mannheim Elector, Karl Theodor, who compensated her favors with a patent of nobility as Countess von Parkstein.) Bach enlisted Wendling for his concert series and wrote for him a quintet with oboe and strings for the spring programs of 1772 and composed another such piece annually for the next five years,
which were collectively issued as his Op. 11 in 1777.

The opening movement of the unfailingly euphonious Oboe Quartet in B-flat major (Op. 8, No. 6; Warburton B56) describes a sonata form, the structural procedure that was just reaching its mature, settled state around 1770. First and second themes are musical cousins, distinguished mainly by key and the little imitative figure that begins the subsidiary subject. Ideas from both themes are echoed in the development before the earlier materials are recapitulated following a few oboe flourishes. The genial closing Rondo, in the style of a minuet, is based around the reprises of the gracious melody heard at the outset.

**Quintet for Oboe, Two Violins, Viola and Cello in E-flat major, Op. 55, No. 5 (G. 435)**

**LUIGI BOCCHERINI (1743-1805)**

*Composed in 1797.*

Luigi Boccherini was the foremost Italian composer of instrumental music during the late 18th century. The son of a cellist, he learned his father’s instrument early and well, and made his public debut in his native Lucca at the age of thirteen. The following year, 1757, he and his father took up appointments in the orchestra of the court theater in Vienna, where Luigi’s reputation as a performer began to be matched by that of his compositions, as indicated by their widespread contemporary distribution in manuscript copies. In April 1764, he returned to Lucca as composer and cellist at the church of St. Maria Corteorlandini. At the end of 1766, Boccherini embarked on a concert tour with a hometown friend, violinist Filippo Manfredi, which ended in Paris several months later; they remained there at least until the summer of 1768. Boccherini’s playing and compositions were much admired in the French capital, and many of his works, mostly chamber music for strings, were printed by local publishing houses. His appearances at the Concert Spirituel in 1768 were apparently the inspiration for him to compose a number of concertos for cello, four of which were printed in 1770-1771.

In 1768, Boccherini moved to Madrid at the urging of the Spanish ambassador to Paris. The following year he composed and dedicated to Don Luis, the Spanish Infante, younger brother of King Charles III, a set of quartets, and was rewarded with an appointment beginning in November 1770 to serve the Infante as virtuoso di camera ["chamber virtuoso"] e compositor de musica. The next fifteen years were a time of security and steady activity for Boccherini: he married in 1771; he had the support of his employer, for whose musical establishment he wrote hundreds of string quintets and other chamber works; and his reputation was spread throughout Europe by the publication of many of his compositions in Paris. This happy period came to an end in 1785, when both Boccherini’s wife and Don Luis died. Two years earlier, through the Prussian ambassador, Boccherini had met Prince (later King) Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia, himself a cellist and an avid lover of music. The Prince had expressed a desire to have some new works provided to him by Boccherini, but his contract with Don Luis prohibited him from composing for anyone else. With the Infante’s death, however, Boccherini was free to accept new employment, and he was appointed chamber music composer to Friedrich Wilhelm on January 21, 1786.

The records of Boccherini’s activities for the decade following 1786 are scarce, but he seems to have remained in Madrid, where he filled Friedrich’s commissions as well as those from several Portuguese, Spanish and French patrons. Following Friedrich’s death in 1796, and the refusal of his successor to continue Boccherini’s employment, Boccherini’s income became undependable. Apparently because of his gentle nature, he was regularly cheated by his publishers, despite their sizeable profits from the sale of his music, which remained popular in Paris, London and elsewhere. Occasional commissions came his way, as did a small pension granted to him by Don Luis, but the pianist and composer Sophie Gail reported finding him in distress during her visit to Madrid in 1803. His condition had been exacerbated by the deaths the preceding year of two daughters; his second wife and another daughter passed away in 1804. Boccherini died in Madrid on May 28, 1805, from respiratory failure; in 1927, his remains were returned to Lucca.

In 1797, Boccherini wrote a set of six quintets for oboe and strings for his friend Gaspar Barli, a musician at the Spanish court. The Oboe Quintets exploited Barli’s nimble technique, unusual range and lyrical sonority by incorporating the instrument into the ensemble as a melodic twin of the first violin,
sometimes being called forward in concertante fashion but more often serving as an equal partner, in duet and in discussion, with the strings.

The E-flat major Oboe Quintet is a formal curiosity and an anomaly in the Op. 55 set — it has three movements, the other five have only two: one in moderate tempo, the other a Minuetto. The E-flat Quintet’s unusual structural attribute is that the first and third movements are essentially the same, with the Minuetto separating them — the first movement is marked “Andante lento” (i.e., a slow walking tempo) and the last “Lento come prima” (“Lento, like the first [movement]”). Whether the result of Boccherini’s creative intent or a publisher’s idiosyncrasy, the E-flat Quintet, gracious and melodious throughout, achieves a pleasing (and traditional) form: A (Lento) — B (Minuetto) — A (Lento again), with the center occupied by an inventive Minuetto (itself in A–B–A form) of quirky rhythms and a trio in a wistful minor mode.

Sonnets and Rondeaux for String Quartet

GIOVANNI SOLLIMA (born in 1962)

Composed in 2007.

Composer and cellist Giovanni Sollima was born into a family of musicians in Palermo, Sicily in 1962 and studied cello with Giovanni Perrier and composition with his father, Eliodoro, at the Conservatorio di Palermo; he graduated with highest honors. He undertook advanced studies in cello with Antonio Janigro and in composition with Milko Keleman at the Mozarteum University of Salzburg and the Musikhochschule in Stuttgart. Sollima first established a reputation as a cellist, touring throughout the United States, Canada and Japan, appearing at many prominent Italian festivals and concert series, and collaborating with such noted artists as Claudio Abbado, Giuseppe Sinopoli, Jörg Demus and Martha Argerich. In 1995 in New York, he founded the Giovanni Sollima Band, with which he has tried to synthesize what he describes as “elements of classical, rock and jazz music, as well as of ethnic music characteristic of Sicily and such other Mediterranean lands as North Africa, Israel, the Middle East, Balkans, Turkey and Andalusia.” Sollima’s compositions — three operas, dance scores, pieces for string and chamber orchestra, chamber music, and works for piano, chorus and solo voice — have been performed and commissioned by distinguished soloists and ensembles in Europe and America. He has also composed for directors Robert Wilson, Peter Greenaway, Peter Stein and Marco Tullio Giordana, and collaborated with such diverse vocal artists as Italian bass Ruggero Raimondi, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee Patti Smith and Italian rock star Elisa. His music has been recorded on the BMG, Point Music, Agorà, Nonesuch and Warner Brothers labels. Sollima teaches at the Romanini Foundation in Brescia and the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome, where he was appointed a Member of the Academy, the highest honor in Italy for a musician.

Alfonso Mastrapasqua, violist of Italy’s Alkemia Quartet, which recorded Sollima’s Sonnets and Rondeaux in 2017 on the Dynamic label, wrote of the work, “Sonnets and Rondeaux could be defined as the sum of the atmospheres Sollima conjures up with his quartet writing. In a schematic succession of slow (sonnets) and fast (rondeaux) pieces, we find all his colors, textures and sound ambiances, his minimal thematic structures, and his harmonic progressions, which recall, with their uncomplicated chords, Renaissance instrumental music (Rondeau I) and Celtic music (Rondeau II), as well as an Arabic vein (Rondeau III) that suddenly turns into a ‘country’ passage.”

String Quartet No. 4

BÉLA BARTÓK (1881-1945)

Composed in 1928.
Premiered on March 30, 1929 in Budapest by the Waldbauer Quartet.

After the fiendish winds of the First World War had finally blown themselves out in 1918, there came into music a new invigoration and an eagerness by composers to stretch the forms and language of the ancient art. Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Webern, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Copland and other of the most important 20th-century masters challenged listeners and colleagues throughout the 1920s with their daring visions and brilliant iconoclasms. It was the most exciting decade in the entire history of music.
Béla Bartók, whose folksong researches were severely limited geographically by the loss of Hungarian territories through the treaties following the war, was not immune to the spirit of experimentation, and he shifted his professional concentration at that time from ethnomusicology to composition and his career as a pianist. He was particularly interested in the music of Stravinsky, notably the mosaic structures and advanced harmonies of the Diaghilev ballets, and in the recent Viennese developments in atonality and motivic generation posited by Arnold Schoenberg and his friend and disciple Alban Berg. A pronounced modernism entered Bartók’s music with his searing 1919 ballet, The Miraculous Mandarin, and his works of the years immediately following — the two Violin Sonatas, piano suite Out of Doors, First Piano Concerto and String Quartets No. 3 and No. 4 — are the most daring he ever wrote. He was reluctant to program them for any but the most sophisticated audiences.

The Quartet No. 4 was composed during the summer of 1928, soon after Bartók returned from his first tour of America as pianist and composer. (It was one of the ironies of Bartók’s life that both his last home and the hospital in which he died in 1945 were, literally, across the street from Carnegie Hall, where he had made his American debut with the New York Philharmonic and Willem Mengelberg in Carnegie Hall on December 22, 1927.) The Fourth Quartet (like many other of his works from the 1920s) drew the inspiration for its thematic material from the folk sources that Bartók had been researching in Hungary and the Balkans for the previous two decades by transforming the simple gestures of indigenous music into high art. In an essay on The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music that appeared in the periodical Melos in 1920, Bartók wrote of the methods of absorbing folk influences into concert music:

“At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a turning point in the history of modern music. The excesses of the romanticists began to be unbearable for many. Invaluable help was given in this change (or rather let us call it rejuvenation) by a kind of peasant music unknown until then. The right type of peasant music is most varied and perfect in its forms. Its expressive power is amazing, and at the same time it is devoid of all sentimentality and superfluous ornaments. It is simple, sometimes primitive, but never silly. It is the ideal starting point for a musical renaissance, and a composer in search of new ways cannot be led by a better master.

“What is the best way for a composer to reap the full benefits of his studies in peasant music? It is to assimilate the idiom of peasant music so completely that he is able to forget all about it and use it as his musical mother tongue.... The question is, what are the ways in which peasant music is taken over and becomes transmuted into modern music? We may, for instance, take over a peasant melody unchanged or only slightly varied, write an accompaniment to it and possibly some opening and concluding phrases. This kind of work would show a certain analogy to Bach’s treatment of chorales.... Another method by which peasant music becomes transmuted into modern music is the following: The composer does not make use of a real peasant melody but invents his own imitation of such melodies.... There is yet a third way in which the influence of peasant music can be traced in a composer’s work. Neither peasant melodies nor imitations of peasant melodies can be found in his music, but it is pervaded by the atmosphere of peasant music.” It was this last, fruitful avenue, the one that provides for the building of original themes from the constituent atoms of folk music, that Bartók adopted for his Quartet No. 4.

Folk influence pervades the Fourth Quartet. It is evident in the small-interval melodic leadings, gapped scales and snapping rhythms of the first movement; in the whirling motion and fiery syncopations of the two scherzos; in the florid, chromatic melody of the central movement, which evokes the melancholy pastorales of the tárogató, a Hungarian single-reed woodwind instrument (the composer’s biographer Halsey Stevens wrote that it was “somewhat like a straight wooden saxophone”) that Bartók encountered during his field researches. The tendency of themes constructed from these tiny folk gestures when subjected to the developmental and harmonic pressures applied by Bartók is, however, to fragment and fly apart. To counterbalance this problem, Bartók used for this Quartet a rigorous overall formal structure that describes an arch shape centered upon the third of its five movements: fast–scherzo–slow–scherzo–fast. The first and fifth movements are paired in their mood, tempo and thematic material, an association further enhanced by sharing the same music in their closing pages. The second and fourth movements, both scherzos, are related in their themes, their head-long rhythmic propulsion, and their use of novel effects from the strings: the second movement is played throughout with mutes, while the fourth movement requires a continuous pizzicato, including the percussive snapping of the strings.
against the fingerboard that Bartók was among the first composers to use. The slow movement, the mid-
point of the structure, is itself organized symmetrically in three parts (A–B–A) around the twittering
“night music” of its central section.

©2020 Dr. Richard E. Rodda