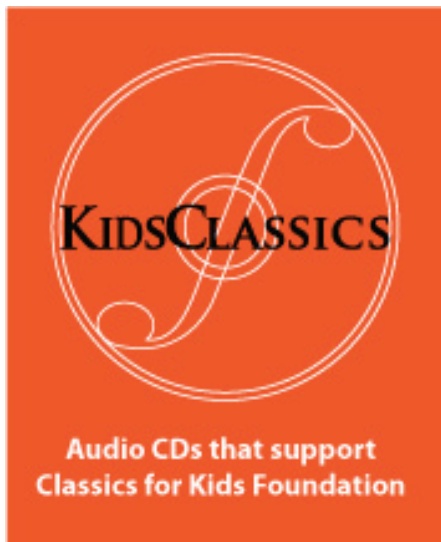




KidsClassics # 201301

Muir String Quartet Kreisler, Schulhoff, Berg

String Quartet in A minor by Fritz Kreisler
Five Pieces for String Quartet by Erwin Schulhoff
String Quartet Op. 3 by Alban Berg



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Notes

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String Quartet in A minor (1919)

FRITZ KREISLER [1875-1962]

[track 1] **Fantasia**
 [track 2] **Scherzo. Allegro vivo, con spirito**
 [track 3] **Einleitung und Romanze**
 [track 4] **Finale. Allegro molto moderato**

“Kreisler was one of the most universally beloved and lovable characters in musical history.”

—Louis P. Lochner,
 Kreisler’s biographer

“Among his colleagues Kreisler was unanimously considered the greatest violinist of the century. He was neither a fiery virtuoso nor a classicist, though he had plenty of technique and could play Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms with as much musicianship and knowledge as any classicist. Where he differed from all other violinists was in his charm, and in the sheer aristocracy of his conceptions. His tone was of unparalleled sweetness. Above all violinists he had an infallible sense of rhythm and rubato. His interpretations were natural, unforced and glowing. As a composer he wrote what might be described as transfigured salon music. If the test of music is longevity, Kreisler’s music bids fair to be immortal.” [Excerpt, music critic Harold Schonberg, *The New York Times*]

It is difficult to avoid the association of violinist Fritz Kreisler and the musical tastes and style of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. It is also difficult to avoid the 20th century prejudice that labels *all* his compositions as “mere showpieces” for the violin, lacking in substance. Although many works have survived centuries because of virtuoso performers, this too would prove ineffectual if audiences chose to reject them. Audience preferences will always dictate, of course in varying degrees. Regardless, Kreisler’s individual virtuosity and musical abilities—interpreter, composer, transcriber, adapter—are certainly not in question. His works are saturated with grace and warmth, reflecting his kind, compassionate and congenial nature.

Kreisler’s father was a distinguished

Viennese doctor as well as an amateur violinist who encouraged his son’s musical career. Fritz Kreisler graduated from the Vienna Conservatory at age 10, taking first prize over students twice his age; this triumph was repeated at the Paris Conservatory winning the school’s Gold Medal at age 12, over numerous older competitors. This marked the end of his formal violin instruction. As a *wunderkind* he traveled across the Atlantic to conquer American audiences, touring 1888-1889. Kreisler then returned to Vienna and decided against a career in music; he devoted his energies to academic studies, completed pre-medical training and served two years in the Austrian army. He was interested in art (studied in Paris and Rome), medicine, philosophy, science, math, politics and literature; he was fluent in many languages, was a talented writer and a passionate collector of rare books. However, the lure of music proved irresistible and at about age 18, Kreisler returned to the violin; his debut with the Vienna Philharmonic came in 1898 with a performance of the Bruch G Minor Violin Concerto. The major impetus for his international career was his debut the following year with the Berlin Philharmonic, performing the Mendelssohn Concerto. He returned to America in 1900 and made his London debut in 1901, creating a sensation everywhere. He was awarded the Beethoven Medal (London Philharmonic Society) and in 1910 he premiered the Elgar Violin Concerto, written for and dedicated to him. At the outbreak of World War I, Kreisler rejoined his regiment, but was wounded and discharged from service. He moved to the United States in 1914 (he was married to American Harriet Lies), eventually becoming an American citizen after various struggles with the Nazis. Kreisler retired in 1950; a legend in his own time, he was considered a “violinist’s violinist.” Kreisler’s individual artistry seemed to give the violin human qualities. He died in New York.

Kreisler historians divide his works, though some resist classification, as follows: original compositions; transcriptions of original compositions; stylistic studies in the manner of a particular composer; paraphrases; adaptations and publications on fingering and bowing, etc. As an

inexperienced performer, before achieving popularity and status, Kreisler had to endure certain conventional restrictions. For example, it was considered arrogant for a young performer to compose his own pieces. Kreisler confronted this problem by pretending to “discover” long-lost masterpieces in monasteries around Europe (although he never actually visited any); Kreisler himself would write these “newly-discovered” masterpieces, receiving praise from critics and audiences. This deception, however, was intended to gain opportunity and attention, not money. Eventually the secret was revealed and although a scandal followed, Kreisler survived, as did his music.

His lyrical String Quartet is generally considered his most ambitious composition. Kreisler noted: “This is my confession or avowal to Vienna, what that city meant to me and my great love of the Viennese spirit.” The opening *Fantasia* consists of several continuous sections: a cello recitative, a delicate waltz and an intense, anxious episode, followed by a return of the recitative and the waltz. The *Scherzo* is light in spirit with a sweetly melodic trio. The third movement has been described as “images of old Vienna” from the composer’s childhood. The *Finale* is a permutation of a polka with once again a reminiscence of the recitative and waltz that opened this Quartet.

Kreisler’s works preserve a touch of history impossible to describe with words. They complement the available academic facts about music and performance in a city that was for a long time the center of a great musical era.

Five Pieces for String Quartet (1923) ERWIN SCHULHOFF [1894-1942]

[track 5] **Alla valse Viennese: Allegro**
[track 6] **Alla Serenata: Allegretto con moto**
[track 7] **Alla Czeca: Molto Allegro**
[track 8] **Alla Tango: Andante**
[track 9] **Alla Tarantella: Prestissimo con fuoco**

Jazz improviser, classical pianist, Dadaist, protégé of Dvořák and Debussy and dancehall aficionado, Erwin Schulhoff, born to a German-speaking Jewish family in Prague—then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was a rising star in the cultural world of 1920’s

Europe. Among the first to integrate jazz and neoclassical composition, his work was nearly erased by the Holocaust and the Iron Curtain. Recognized as a child prodigy the Czech-born Schulhoff received early musical encouragement from Dvořák. On his advice, the ten-year-old Erwin entered the Prague Conservatory. He continued his studies at the Vienna Conservatory, after which he studied with Max Reger at the Leipzig Conservatory and followed by a course of study at the Cologne Conservatory, as well as some lessons from Debussy. Other important musical influences of his youth included Richard Strauss and members of the modern Russian school: Mily Balakirev, Anatoly Liadov and Alexander Scriabin. At age 17, Schulhoff won Leipzig’s Mendelssohn Prize for piano and, five years later, for composition. Military service during World War I changed the direction of Schulhoff’s life, but he continued composing. He cultivated an association with the avant-garde Dadaist movement and became heavily influenced by jazz. Arnold Schoenberg’s expressionist techniques and the neo-Classical idiom of Igor Stravinsky helped to develop his eclectic style. Schulhoff returned to Prague (1923) to teach at the Conservatory. His compositions during this period display the growing influence of Czech folk music and he also found a direct source of inspiration in fellow countryman, Leos Janáček. An avowed communist, Schulhoff considered relocating his family to the Soviet Union in 1939, after Hitler’s seizure of Czechoslovakia. He became a Soviet citizen in 1941, but his efforts to avoid the Nazis failed. The rise of Nazism in Germany changed his fortune and put him at risk. As a Jew, his career in Germany, which had been quite successful, was basically finished. Some of his music was banned and he was forced to work under a pseudonym. Schulhoff, a Czech Jew now associated with an enemy nation, was captured and imprisoned in the Bavarian Wälzburg concentration camp where he died, age 48; conflicting sources attribute the cause to tuberculosis, typhus or excessive torture.

Schulhoff emerged as a composer with a unique musical language who embraced the latest 20th century currents in music. Schulhoff, along with the classical repertoire, championed the avant-garde music of his time, giving performances of the innovative works

of Scriabin, Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, Hindemith and Bartók. He has been described as “a distinguished virtuoso pianist, especially bred for new music, with a splendid technique, unequaled memory and radical interpretational will; a revolutionary composer, with both feet firmly planted on the ground.” As might be expected, Schulhoff was attracted to American popular music—ragtime and jazz. Unlike Stravinsky, Milhaud and Ravel, whose forays into jazz were somewhat transitory, Schulhoff worked as a jazz pianist in the “Hot Jazz” clubs of Europe. He composed many jazz-inspired compositions and was celebrated as a jazz improviser, a brilliant pianist with impressive technical facility. His compositions illustrate his persuasive merger of folk and contemporary elements. In the 1960s, manuscripts, which Schulhoff had left in Moscow during a visit, were discovered, and contributed to a resurrection of his works.

For even the cultivated music enthusiast, Schulhoff is often an unknown composer. His compositional output was substantial including six symphonies, three string quartets, a string sextet, a large collection of piano music including five sonatas, concerti, choral music, an opera and miscellaneous incidental and chamber music. Jazz shows a particularly strong influence throughout Schulhoff’s music of all types, more than any other single European composer who is otherwise considered “classical.”

Another interesting aspect of Schulhoff’s musical career was his work in radio. During his tenure as pianist for the Prague Radio Orchestra, he involved himself in creating works especially for live radio broadcast, as well as studio work involving recordings; his knowledge of microphones and sound mixing were influential with the then new broadcast medium.

The Five Pieces for String Quartet (*Fünf Stücke für Streichquartett*) were written when Schulhoff returned from Germany to Prague. Dedicated to composer Darius Milhaud (1892-1974), they signaled an important creative period for Schulhoff that would eventually lead to the composition of his major chamber music, including the two numbered string quartets, the string sextet, a violin sonata and a duo for violin and cello. The Five Pieces comprise a witty dance suite, a neoclassical glance back to the

Baroque era with the sharp dissonances and rhythmic drive characteristic of the modern period. The music is compelling. It provides a perfect synopsis of several aspects of Schulhoff's multi-faceted music, including parody, Czech folk music, dance music popular in Europe during the 1920s and rhythmic vitality. The Suite opens with an "offbeat" Viennese Waltz (the 3 beats of the waltz rhythm placed within 4/4 meter). The second movement is a somewhat grotesque little serenade. The third movement is a vigorous dance, evoking Czech folk music, perhaps reminiscent of Bartok. The fourth movement, the longest of the set, is a slinky Tango. The final movement is a frenetic tarantella. These *Pieces* were a great success at the festival of the International Society for New Music in Salzburg (1924), inspiring Schulhoff to compose two string quartets in 1924 and 1925. Schulhoff wrote: "Music should first and foremost produce physical pleasures, yes, even ecstasies. Music is never philosophy, it arises from an ecstatic condition, finding its expression through rhythmical movement." Schulhoff clearly found his own direction among his contemporaries, backed up by his great creative skill.

String Quartet, Op. 3 (1909-1911)

ALBAN BERG [1885-1935]

[track 10] **Langsam**
[track 11] **Maßige viertel**

"The best music results from ecstasies of logic."

—Alban Berg

The Second Viennese School is represented by the music of Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) and his followers/students, particularly Anton Webern (1883-1945) and Alban Berg. (The "First" Viennese School is unofficially represented by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven and others.) Berg and Webern would help him write one of the central chapters in 20th music. Schoenberg composed the first music that was called atonal. Schoenberg was the first composer in history to desert tonal harmony, the harmonic framework of all European music to date. The influence on his students Webern and Berg was profound, growing throughout the 20th century. Berg came to Schoenberg (in response to a newspaper ad for composition lessons, 1904) essentially without formal

training and/or finances (Schoenberg did not charge him for lessons; Berg's relationship with Schoenberg was complicated; Berg's father had died when he was 15 and Schoenberg quickly became a surrogate father as well as a mentor and model). Berg seemed immediately comfortable with the spirit and sensuality of the modern romantic. Berg's atonal musical language seems to hover around tonal confirmation. For this reason, he would be criticized as a compromiser, not brave enough to totally dismiss tonal structure, "tainted by sentimentality and a nostalgia for tradition." Not surprisingly, Berg's music would eventually be praised for the most strictly systematic of the three Second-Viennese composers, a masterful blend of expression and form.

Written as a graduation exercise, Berg's String Quartet, Op. 3 was the last of his scores composed under Schoenberg's guidance; however it still reveals Berg's unique identity: richness and freedom of its musical language and its powerful originality. There are no themes in the classical sense. Berg experiments with atonality, anticipating 12-tone music about a decade away. This Quartet is comprised of two contrasting movements, introspective and lyrical (a departure from the traditional four movement form), though still closely related; the second movement begins with the final notes of the first; consequently, the break between the two is brief. The beginning two motives (an opening flourish followed by a reserved chordal reply) provide the seed for the entire Quartet. There is no key signature and therefore no implied tonal center; however, a tonal impression lingers. *Langsam* is achingly passionate with bleak passages contrasted with flourishes of great vigor; the second movement *Mäßige Viertel* is a vigorous rondo with five repeats of the theme (though not exact) separated by contrasting episodes; it begins with a slashing gesture from the violin, surrounded by anxious pizzicatos and tremolos. A series of harmonics (a tone produced on a stringed instrument by lightly touching an open or stopped vibrating string at a given fraction of its length so that both segments vibrate; also called overtone) punctuate the writing, along with a mixture of surprises. Various idiomatic string techniques are utilized, including harmonics, pizzicato, *sul ponticello* (bowing close to the instrument's bridge) and *col legno*

(bouncing the wooden part of the bow against the strings).

This String Quartet stands at the crossroads of the past and future. Its personality is connected to the 19th century. The vocabulary is still recognizably that of Wagner and Mahler, but Berg has stretched it beyond the established limits. Although the last traces of tonality remain, Berg's music is rarely tied to the standard triad and he seems to be searching for a new harmonic language. The final measure is powerful—a D minor triad followed by a dissonant chord, resulting in an indefinite tonality. A firm resolution is masterfully avoided. Schoenberg wrote about this Quartet: "it surprised me in the most unbelievable way by the fullness and unconstraint of its musical language, the strength and sureness of its presentation, its careful working and significant originality." Initially, the musical community was not so impressed with Berg's music; thankfully, this would of course change over time.

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