PROGRAM NOTES

Aleksandra Vrebalov (b. 1970)
Pannonia Boundless (1998)

Pannonia Boundless was commissioned by Kronos Quartet in 1997. Always open to new experience and eager to explore a new artistic territory, Kronos asked me to do six minutes of virtuosic music that would be based on Gypsy tunes and would employ a specific playing technique of these nomadic musicians.

After the research in Novi Sad radio archives and many visits to Gypsy taverns in Vojvodina, I wrote this piece as an homage to those musicians who from the margins of the society, as much as from the well known concert halls, have the power to touch our hearts.

Pannonia Boundless was released in 2000 on Kronos Caravan by Nonesuch, on Hello Kronos by Nonesuch, on Pannonia Boundless by TAJJ/SCNS, and published by Boosey & Hawkes in 2007.

It was used in a movie Soupirs d’ame, by a Canadian director Helen Doyle, and in a ballet, The Little Prince, by choreographer Dusan Tynek.

February 14, 2013 note:
I wrote Pannonia Boundless in my grandmother’s house in Sombor, the same house in which I had stayed during the NATO air raids in 1999. A neighbor had died as collateral damage. Today I learned that the piece was played by the best band in the world, the US Marine Band, at their chamber music concert in Washington, D.C. Strange, beautiful life.

—Aleksandra Vrebalov

Mohammed Fairouz (b. 1985)
The Named Angels (2012)

Since I was a little boy, I’ve been fascinated with the mythology of angels in Middle Eastern folklore. They embody justice, power, kindness, healing, death, and other universals that have made them pervasive in many of the world’s cultures. It is natural to express these attributes musically, since music is present in all human communities — it transcends the present and expresses the eternal, never-changing truths of the human condition.

The Named Angels refers to those angels that are named and recognized in the Islamic, Christian and Jewish traditions: Michael, Israfel, Gabriel and Azrael. Each of the four movements represents a character portrait of a specific Angel. The piece begins with a quick and vigorous movement titled Mikhael’s Thunder. Mikhael (Arabic for Michael, an archangel in Jewish, Christian and Islamic teachings) is an angel attributed with great visceral strength. He brings thunder to Earth but is also identified in the Quran as an angel of mercy, and in Book of Revelation he leads God’s armies against Satan’s forces. The movement captures that dichotomy as it vacillates between thunderous gestures and what I’ve marked as a “Hymn of Mercy” in the score.

Following Michael’s explosive portrait is a slow movement called Azrael, Malak Al Maut (Arabic for Azrael, Angel of Death). Azrael is the name used commonly used to refer to the Angel of death in the three Middle Eastern Monotheistic faiths. This narrative movement is framed by two chorales: an opening funeral chorale and a closing transformative chorale. It captures the attitude of the naturalness (even innocence) of death described in the Quran. This movement is more programmatic in structure than the others. It begins with a depiction of the exhalation of a last breath and proceeds to depict Azrael carrying the spirit beyond life and the metamorphosis of the human spirit in the apotheosis that ends the movement.

The next movement, Jibreel at Hira, begins without a pause. Jibreel (Gabriel) is the chief angel in Islam. He is the main messenger to the Prophets, delivering important words from God to Moses, Abraham, Jesus and others according to the Quran. In the Quran as well as the New Testament, Gabriel foretells the birth of Jesus to the
Virgin Mary while in the Old Testament he appears on several occasions as a messenger to the prophets. Gabriel delivers his final message to Mohammed at a cave called Hira. On a night that Muslims celebrate yearly as the Night of Power, Gabriel appears to Mohammed as he is meditating and commands him to read. The illiterate Mohammed begins to miraculously read in what becomes the first revelation of the Quran. The first part of the movement captures Jibreel’s tender and simple voice as he speaks to Mohammed and the movement builds in intensity capturing the transfixed ecstasy of the Prophet repeating the Angel’s revelation.

The final movement Israfel’s Spell, begins with an invocation of Israfel’s trumpet sounding the Day of Judgment. This heralding theme interweaves with hints of a quick dance. In the Quran, the shaking of the Earth is described as the Earth dancing a dablkeh (a vigorous and ancient Arabian dance form). This develops into a fullyfledged apocalyptic dance. Edgar Allen Poe’s rendition of Israfel was the point of departure for this musical movement. At the opening of the poem Israfel, Poe quotes a particularly musical passage of the Quran: “And the angel Israfel, whose heartstrings are a lute, and who has the sweetest voice of all God’s creatures.” This informs the first lines of the poem that, in turn, gave me the title for this movement:

In Heaven a spirit doth dwell  
“Whose heartstrings are a lute”  
None sing so wildly well  
As the angel Israfel,  
And the giddy stars (so legends tell),  
Ceasing their hymns, attend the spell  
Of his voice, all mute.

—Mohammed Fairouz (2012)

**Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)**  
**String Quartet No. 2 in A minor, Op. 13 (1827)**

**Performance Time:** c. 30 minutes

When asked to name classical music’s greatest child prodigy, nearly all minds move to Mozart. However, while Mozart was obviously a prodigious (and prodigiously marketed) youthful talent, a case can be made that Mendelssohn’s teenage works far surpass Mozart’s when considering depth of expression, mastery of compositional technique, and overall musical affect. (Consider that by the time Mendelssohn was writing the Quartet in A minor at the age of 18, he already had to his credit the Overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and his Octet.) The two composers shared many traits: both were extraordinary prodigies possessing tremendous aural skills, preeminent violinists and pianists, prolific composers from an early age, and both suffered tragically young deaths (Mozart at 35 and Mendelssohn, 38). However, while Mozart displayed a whimsy and abandon of character as exemplified in his operas, Mendelssohn was introverted and introspective. It was Mendelssohn’s desire to look to the past that provided the impetus for his Quartet in A minor.

Mendelssohn enjoyed a classical education unique to most composers of the day. As a young boy in an intellectual household, he studied languages, painting, and philosophy. (His grandfather was the noted philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn.) His childhood home in Berlin was frequented by the most prominent scientists, mathematicians, and artists of the day. Later, Mendelssohn received an intensive and varied education at the University of Berlin. His educational training extended to music composition, studying counterpoint with Carl Freidrich Zelter and a collection of Bach family manuscripts possessed by his aunt, a patron to C.P.E. Bach.

In 1827, Beethoven died, leaving as some of his last works a collection of string quartets. These works were panned upon their premiere as the incomprehensible product of a deaf madman. Mendelssohn, however, recognized the brilliance and gravity of Beethoven’s late quartets and took to their study. In homage to Beethoven, Mendelssohn would employ stylistic elements of Beethoven’s late quartet while composing the A minor quartet.
In that same year, Mendelssohn had some fascination with a poem by Johann Gustav Droyson, “Ist es Wahr?” (“Is it true?”), a poem the composer set to song a few months previous. Adopting the programmatic and motivic construction of Beethoven’s Op. 135 quartet, “Muss es sein,” Mendelssohn revisited the head motive of the poem, using its musical embodiment (the rhythmic figure long-short-long) as the quartet’s motivic unifier. Mendelssohn did not overtly indicate to what “it” refers; the full line of the poem fills out our understanding:

Is it true? Is it true? That you are still there in the arbor, by the grape vines, waiting for me? And cry to the moonlight and the starlight for news of me? Is it true? Speak! What I feel none can know but she who feels thus and who, true to me forever, true to me forever, forever will remain.

Precedence for Mendelssohn’s adoption of song as a identifying feature of a string quartet can be found in Schubert’s “Death and the Maiden” quartet and “Trout” quintet.

The A minor quartet is cyclical, opening and closing with the Ist es Wahr theme. The chorale-like Adagio breaks into a tempestuous Allegro recalling the Sturm und Drang literary movement. The second movement again opens with a chorale-like opening theme before introducing a fugal subject in the viola. The contrapuntal nature of the movement recalls Beethoven’s Op. 95 (“Serioso”) quartet. The third movement begins with the first violin playing a melody over pizzicato accompaniment evoking a popular seventeenth-century song. This simple melody is interrupted with a prototypical Mendelssohnian scherzo in a fleet and nimble-footed vein.

The fourth movement strongly echoes the final movement of Beethoven’s Quartet in A minor, Op. 132. Both begin with a free violin melody over tremolo accompaniment. The subsequent music shares strikingly similar bass figures. The fast material dissolves into the first movement’s opening chorale, highlighting yet again the Ist es Wahr theme.

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