

# West Edge String Quartet

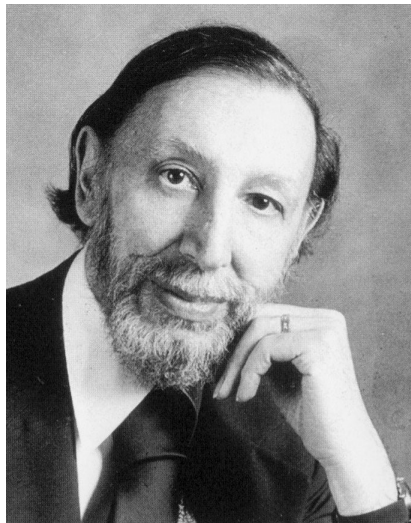
# The American Spirit

## Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

### Alan Hovhaness (1911-2000)

Four Bagatelles, Op. 30: No. 4

The composer Alan Hovhaness was one of the most original voices in twentieth century American music. Hovhaness began composing as a child, and only later received formal instruction in composition. Although Hovhaness grew up in Boston, his father was Armenian and inspired his son to love Armenian culture as well. Before long, Hovhaness was ardently exploring not only Armenian folk music but also the musical cultures of such far-off places as India, Japan, Korea,



Alan Hovhaness

and Indonesia. His interests in modality, counterpoint, and mysticism lent much of his music a meditative quality that some have seen as foreshadowing the music of later composers like Arvo Pärt and John Tavener.

Although the inspirations for Hovhaness were worldwide, this sense of self-reliance and freedom of vision is what makes Hovhaness most American. Reflecting on his music's separation from

prevailing trends, Hovhaness once wrote, "It is best that no mention be made of my scholarships or education because my direction is completely away from the approved path of any of my teachers." And, like the composers Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein who we more readily associate with American music, Hovhaness wrote for the common man: he said, "My purpose is to create music not for snobs, but for all people, music which is beautiful and healing. To attempt what old Chinese painters called 'spirit resonance' in melody and sound." Hovhaness remained true to his artistic vision throughout his long career, creating more than five hundred compositions and an amazing sixty-seven symphonies.

Hovhaness composed the Four Bagatelles of his Opus 30 in 1966. The term "bagatelle" refers to a genre of short instrumental pieces often written for solo piano. Undoubtedly, the most famous bagatelle is *Für Elise* by

Ludwig van Beethoven, a piece that every beginning piano student learns. The Four Bagatelles for string quartet by Hovhaness are much like *Für Elise* in their light, affectionate character. The Fourth Bagatelle heard this evening displays an East Asian sensibility through its timeless drone and nimble *pizzicati* reminiscent of traditional Indonesian gamelan music. The Four Bagatelles were recorded by the Shanghai Quartet in 1994 with their release of Hovhaness' first four string quartets on the Delos label.

### Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quartet No. 12 in F major, Op. 96 *American*

The Bohemian composer Antonín Dvořák came to the United States of America in 1892, and it was during his three-year sojourn to this country that he composed several of his best-loved works. His heroic and pioneering *Symphony from the New World* may well be the first of these American works to come to mind, but Dvořák also composed the more intimate String Quartet No. 12 in F major, Op. 96 subtitled *American* while on these shores. The energy of the *New World Symphony* complements well the bustle of New York City where Dvořák was employed as director of the National Conservatory of Music – despite that its immediate musical influences are the spirituals of African Americans, the romanticized lifestyle of the Native Americans as depicted in Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*, and the vastness of the American West. Dvořák captures a different facet of American life in his *American Quartet*, however – the quieter, rural existence he found while vacationing in Spillville, Iowa.

Dvořák arrived in Spillville on June 3, 1893, encouraged to visit the Midwest town by his assistant Josef Jan Kovařík. Although Kovařík had studied violin at the Prague Conservatory where Dvořák had previously been employed, Spillville was his hometown, and Kovařík hoped its community of Bohemian immigrants would be a welcome relief to the exhausting social engagements that accompanied Dvořák's prestigious position in New York. The Bohemian population of Spillville indeed welcomed Dvořák, and Dvořák was likewise happy to be among his own people once more. He could converse in his native tongue, play Bohemian folk melodies on the church organ, and enjoy the rustic lifestyle and nature of the small village. His children also came over from Europe to visit and spend time with him that summer. He wrote to a friend, "We're all happy together. We like it very much here and, thank God, I am working hard and I'm healthy and in good spirits."

## **Jackson Harmeyer Speaks with Composer Kermit Poling about his String Quartet No. 1 "Within the Orb of Glories Wearing"**

One of the highlights of the 2016 Sugarmill Music Festival is the West Edge String Quartet's performance of Kermit Poling's String Quartet No. 1 *Within the Orb of Glories Wearing*. Poling, a composer and violinist based in Shreveport, Louisiana, has led the West Edge String Quartet for many years, and it is only due to a recent surgery that Mr. Poling is unable to play with them this evening. I had the opportunity to speak with Mr. Poling about his piece, and he gave me several enlightening responses which I share here.

**What was your inspiration for this quartet?** *Within the Orb of Glories Wearing* was commissioned jointly by the Shreveport Summer Music Festival and St. John Berchmans Cathedral in Shreveport. The Shreveport Festival String Quartet gave the premiere on All Saints' Day (November 1) of 2008. It was the first of an ongoing series of pieces highlighting the saints.

**Who are the saints the movements depict? Why did you choose these saints and not others?** The saints loosely depicted are St. Paul, St. Cecilia, St. Hildegard von Bingen, St. Maximilian Kolbe, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, St. Joseph Thamby, and St. John Berchmans. They were selected by Fr. Peter Mangum, the pastor of St. John Berchmans. The idea was to balance the piece with both well-known and lesser-known saints.

**Are there particular melodies, motives, or themes we should be listening for? Are any themes directly inspired by the saints?** Each movement is inspired by the life of a particular saint, but none are specifically programmatic. That being said, however, there are a few specific musical ideas used in reference to the saints being depicted. For example, St. Hildegard's movement is based upon one of her own melodies, "*O frondens virga*." In Thamby's movement, the viola is used like the *tabla*, an Indian percussion instrument. Kolbe's movement is decidedly dissonant which reflects Kolbe's time in Auschwitz; it also makes use of a Polish hymn tune. The last movement includes a loose reference to "When The Saints Go Marching In" – a request by Lenny Kacenjar of the Festival String Quartet.

**How many times has this quartet been performed? Have there been any special performances you would like to mention?** This quartet has easily been performed over fifty times by the Festival String Quartet over the years – probably with some movements excerpted even more frequently. A DVD has just been released of the piece as performed by the Festival String Quartet, and it includes interesting insights into each saint as provided by Fr. Mangum. We are expecting this video to be shown on an international cable network. The piece has also been performed by the West Edge String Quartet in various places. We are hoping to release a CD recording soon.



Kermit Poling

**You have also created an orchestral version of this quartet. Did you make any substantial changes for the orchestral version, or is it basically the same piece with additional players?** A lot of the music is the same but I did make some changes more befitting of a chamber orchestra.

**Are there connections between this quartet and your other two string quartets?** The other two quartets are a continuation of the saint series, although the commissions and premieres came from different places. The Second Quartet *Along These Footsteps to Paradise* is a bit more transcendent in feel – to me anyway – and the Third Quartet *Visions of the Virgin* focuses on the Virgin Mary.

**Do you see yourself writing additional string quartets in the future?** Yes, as there are additional commissions pending. And, there are a lot of saints!

**Is there anything else you would like to say about this piece?** Even though the histories of the various saints are fascinating, it is not necessary to be completely familiar with them to enjoy this piece. It really is more like a suite of contrasting movements that gradually builds to a finish.

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**Dvořák with  
Family and Friends  
in New York City**

Left to right: his wife Anna, son Antonín, Sadie Siebert, Josef Jan Kovařík, mother of Sadie Siebert, daughter Otilie, and Antonín Dvořák

Dvořák's joy comes across quite clearly in the *American Quartet*. From the shimmering figures in the violins and the joyous melody soon introduced by the viola which jointly open the first movement *Allegro ma non troppo*, it is apparent that Dvořák has found few regrets in his new Spillville surroundings. If one hears more melancholy in the slow, second movement marked *Lento*, the best explanation might be the potential for loneliness Dvořák perceives in such a wide-open landscape: he wrote, "A farmer might be separated from his neighbor by perhaps four miles, particularly in the prairies... you won't meet anyone and you're just glad to see the infinite numbers of cattle in the meadows and woods." The third movement *Molto vivace* has more to do with the song of a bird called the scarlet tanager Dvořák would hear on his early morning walks in Spillville. With the song of the scarlet tanager on his mind, Dvořák crafted a scherzo with two intervening trio sections. The fourth movement *Finale. Vivace ma non troppo* radiates joy in much the same way the first movement had. A brief interlude in the movement's rondo form has suggested to some scholars the sound of the church organ which Dvořák would play on many occasions.

Dvořák composed the *American Quartet* as quickly as ever, drafting the entire work in a mere three days and completing the full score within the next two weeks. The entire work was, therefore, composed during Dvořák's first month in Spillville. With the Kovaříks, Dvořák was able to play through the Quartet while still in town. The official premiere,

however, came on January 1, 1894 in Boston as given by the Kneisel Quartet with violinists Franz Kneisel and Otto Roth, violist Louis Svecenski, and cellist Alwin Schroeder. Since its premiere, the *American Quartet* has remained one of the most popular compositions in the string quartet repertoire.

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**About Jackson.** Jackson Harmeyer is a composer, music scholar, and advocate of music. Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars' College located in Natchitoches, Louisiana in May 2013 after completing his undergraduate thesis "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers." As series director of the successful Abendmusik Alexandria chamber music series from May 2014 to April 2016, Jackson played a vital role in the renewal of interest in chamber music across Central Louisiana. This interest has encouraged the creation of the annual Sugarmill Music Festival and the new series Nachtmusik von BrainSurge, both of which Jackson will remain active in as concert annotator and creative consultant. Jackson has in fact written program notes for many of Central Louisiana's key music presenters, including the Rapides Symphony Orchestra, Arts Council of Central Louisiana, and Northwestern State University. He also blogs at MusicCentral where he shares concert experiences, gives listening recommendations, posts interviews with contemporary composers, and offers insights into his own compositions. Jackson has followed classical music around the world, including trips to Colorado's Aspen Music Festival and the BachFest Leipzig in Germany. As a composer, he has worked to integrate a modern vocabulary into established classical forms in ways that are not only innovative but also engaging to the general listener. His four-movement Suite for solo guitar, Op. 21 received its world premiere on November 5, 2015 and has also been aired on public radio. In fall 2016, Jackson will begin graduate studies at the University of Louisville with the ultimate goal of earning his doctorate in musicology.



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