Erwin Schulhoff (1894-1942)
String Quartet No. 1 (1924)

Erwin Schulhoff was born in 1894, to a German-speaking Jewish family in Prague, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Recognized as a child prodigy by none other than Dvořák, he was admitted to the Prague Conservatory to study piano (1902-04). He continued his studies at the Vienna Conservatory (1904-08), after which he studied with Max Reger at the Leipzig Conservatory (1908-10), followed by a course of study at the Cologne Conservatory (1910-14), as well as some lessons from Debussy.

Despite all these years of conservatory study, he emerged as a composer who plunged headlong into the twentieth century and embraced the new currents in both popular and art music. Schulhoff quickly gained a reputation as a formidable pianist who, along with the classical repertoire, championed the avant-garde music of his time, giving performances of the works of Scriabin, Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, Hindemith, and Bartok, along with the quarter-tone piano music of Alois Haba. Schulhoff even gave free classes at the Prague Conservatory in quarter-tone music.

A Prague music critic described him as "a distinguished virtuoso pianist, especially bred for new music, with a splendid technique, unequalled memory and radical interpretational will; a revolutionary composer, with both feet firmly planted on the ground." Schulhoff allied himself with the Dada art movement of the post-WWI era, dedicating a work, *Pittoresken*, to the artist George Grosz. One of his other Dada-inspired compositions, *In Futurum,* contains as its middle movement only a rest, marked "with feeling."

As might be expected, Schulhoff was attracted to American popular music: ragtime and jazz. Unlike Stravinsky, Milhaud, and Ravel, whose incursions into jazz were somewhat superficial and it must be said slightly condescending, Shulhoff worked as a jazz pianist in the "Hot Jazz" clubs of Europe in the twenties. Though he composed many jazz-inspired compositions, more importantly he was also a jazz improviser. His compositions were welcomed in many of the contemporary music festivals of the time, as well as in the more traditional venues.

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 the making of recordings. The Second Symphony and Concerto for String Quartet, both dating from 1932, were created especially for radio broadcast, exploiting his knowledge of microphones and sound mixing to achieve a scale and clarity suited to the new broadcast medium.

The rise of Nazism in Germany in the early 1930s changed Schulhoff's fortune and put him in jeopardy. As a Jew, his career in Germany, which had been quite successful in Berlin, Leipzig, and Dresden, was finished. He had always believed that there should be reconciliation between the Germanic and Czech cultures - not surprisingly, since by birth he belonged to both worlds. However, the Czech authorities of the time were suspicious of him for what they felt were his "pro-German views," despite the fact that German artists who he was associated with were being persecuted by the Nazis.

As if he didn't have enough trouble, Schulhoff had become a communist. His commitment to communist ideals was such that he even set the Communist Manifesto to music, as a cantata for four soloists, three choirs and a brass band. He became a Soviet citizen in 1939. When the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia, he sought to emigrate to the Soviet Union. He was awaiting his Soviet visa when, with the collapse of the non-aggression pact between Hitler and Stalin, he was arrested - as a Jew, a "Degenerate" (*Entartige*) artist, and a Soviet citizen. He was arrested in Prague and deported to the Bavarian concentration camp Wülzburg along with his son, where he died of tuberculosis according to one source, typhus according to another, and torture according to a third. Had he escaped to the Soviet Union, one doubts that he would have fared better under Stalin. What was it that caused him to seek refuge in the East rather than the West, America in particular, as did so many other musicians? Schulhoff's story is all the more poignant, given the current events unfolding in Central Europe; the latest incarnation of evil made to sound innocuous: "ethnic cleansing."

After the war his late Socialist works were somewhat revived in communist occupied Czechoslovakia. In 1962, manuscripts which he had left in Moscow during a visit in 1940, were discovered, further enabling a resurrection of his works. Today there is a sizable number of his works available on recording: symphonies, concerti, piano music, chamber music, ballet music and his opera, *Flammen* (the Flames).

The String Quartet No. 1 was composed after the successful premier of his Five Pieces for String Quartet (*Fünf Stücke fur Streichqüartett)* at the I.G.N.M. (International Society for New

Music) chamber music festival in Salzburg on August 8, 1924. The String Quartet was completed in Prague on Sept. 20, 1924. Dedicated to the Zika Quartet; the work received its premier performance on Sept. 3, 1925, at the I.G.N.M. chamber music festival, held this time in Venice.

The Philharmonia Pocket Score of this work contains a short essay which quotes the contemporary Prague critic Erich Steinhard as follows:

> "The string quartet, a fiery outburst of temperament, is made all of a piece, and one has the feeling that the composer's pen could hardly keep pace with his inspiration, though this is in no way to decry the quality of the invention and its intellectual elaboration. But I defy anyone, (with the possible exception of Hindemith) to equal him [Schulhoff] in the tempestuous pace of the first movement, and its natural musicality, its clarity and its homophony … A catchy melody with simple accompaniment, which often flows along in stereotyped figures, characterizes the next movement, while the third arouses rhythmic interest with a playful Slovak theme and presents the appearance of folk music. All three movements are fast moving. Not until the last section does an Andante-like passage, where the accompaniment mimics the earlier Allegretto melody, introduce a sensitive and contemplative mood, at the close of an otherwise boisterous and cheeky piece of writing." (*Die Musik*, March 1927, p. 438)

--Program note by Joseph Way, used with permission

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
String Quartet in G Major, Op. 18 No. 2 (1798)

In 1798, at age of 28, Beethoven realized that he was losing his hearing. Several years later in 1801, he wrote to his friend Franz Gerhard Wegeler, "For the past three years my hearing has been growing constantly weaker…. For two years now I have ceased to attend any social function, for I cannot bring myself to tell people, 'I am deaf.'"

While he was being drawn into a world of silence, Beethoven was also undergoing another kind of turmoil as he searched for new and unique forms of expression to extend his musical inheritance from Haydn and Mozart. By following the older masters and publishing his first six string quartets together in a single Opus, a departure from his previous practice, Beethoven acknowledged Haydn and Mozart as his sources of inspiration. Yet his distinctive musical personality and forward-looking musical vision infused the old compositional practices with new flexibility and scope, more powerful emotional content, and an imposing monumentality.

The briefest of the Opus 18 quartets, the Second Quartet in G major emerges as a charming and witty work. Despite its apparent light, happy character, it is considered difficult to perform, and Beethoven's notebooks reveal that the lightness was achieved only after a lengthy struggle, covering 32 notebook pages, to blend many disparate elements into a smooth creation.

The quartet opens with a series of short, balanced phrases followed by a gruff bridge passage that leads to the second subject. The development is devoted exclusively to material from the first subject and the bridge.

The Adagio second movement features the solo violin at first, but Beethoven takes the closing cadenza figure of this section, quadruples its tempo, and sends the music scurrying off in a parody-like Allegro. The slow, gentle strains of the Adagio return, now in variation and shared by all players.

In the Scherzo third movement, the two violins gleefully toss the music back and forth until the other instruments join in to introduce a more sober note. In the trio that follows, the two contrasting moods – playful and serious – are expanded. In the transition back to the repeat of the Scherzo, the cello plays a descending scale line, and the violins, unable to contain their enthusiasm, anticipate the repeat of the first section.

Beethoven referred to the last movement as "*aufgeknopft*" ("unbuttoned"), connoting a free, informal character. Starting with perfectly symmetrical, four-square phrases, it goes on to an impish second theme with a syncopated start and a delightful counter melody. Rollicking along lightheartedly, it builds to a brilliant conclusion.

Written between 1798 and 1800, the six quartets Op. 18 were dedicated to Prince Karl Lobkowitz, an Austrian nobleman, and their premieres were given at Friday morning musicals held at the Prince's Viennese home. They were published in 1801.

--Program note adapted from the *Guide to Chamber Music,* by Melvin Berge

A Klezmer Nutcracker: *Freylakh* (adapted from *Trepak*)
Music by Pyotr I. Tchaikovsky, arranged by Steve Cohen

Steve Cohen received his training at the Manhattan, Eastman and Juilliard Schools of Music, and has composed a large catalogue of symphonic, chamber, liturgical and musical-theater pieces.

Cohen's choral music has been performed by the Zamir Chorale, Kol Zimrah (Chicago), the Zemel Choir of London and the Gregg Smith Singers, and is heard regularly at the North American Jewish Choral Festival.

Honors for Cohen's music include the 2004 Composer's Award given jointly by the West Virginia Symphony Orchestra and the Museum in the Community (for the orchestral piece Juggernaut), first and second prizes in the 2006 Susan Galloway Sacred Song Award contest (for Psalm 84 and Psalm 121), the 2007 New York Treble Singers Composition Award (for Hashkiveinu), 2006 and 2008 Shalshelet Festival Awards (for Hashkiveinu and Y'did Nefesh) and the 2008 Aeros Prize (Wind Quintet).