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Not too many young musicians would have the chutzpah to cold-call a major composer and propose a commission. But that's just the way Matt Detrick, violinist and founding member of the Houston-based **Apollo Chamber Players**, approached Libby Larsen.

"He explained what he was after, and I said, 'No, I don't have time,'" Larsen remembers. "He said 'Well, we really really want something. What if it were a short piece? Can't you just think about it?' and I said 'No, I really don't have time.' But he just seemed so genuine, so I went online and I got to know the Apollo Chamber Players. I was pretty stunned with their energy and their creativity. I remembered what it was like when you're young and full of talent and you're bubbling over. I really *didn't* have the time, but I just said 'yeah.'"

The result was *Sorrow Songs and Jubilee*, a six-minute work for string quartet, featuring Apollo's core members: Detrick

and Anabel Ramirez, violins; Whitney Bullock, viola and Matthew Dudzik, cello. It was the new work on a program devoted to Dvořák and his American sojourn, which gave Larsen a chance to pay tribute to one of her favorite composers: Henry Thacker Burleigh, an African-American pupil of Dvořák's.

Sorrow Songs and Jubilee served as the stunning kickoff for an unusual commissioning program: 20x2020, promising twenty new works by the end of the year 2020. Apollo's initiative has recently gotten past its halfway point, with ten other new works joining Larsen's, including contributions from Christopher Theofanidis and Malek Jandeli. Many of the pieces have a folk-music bent: Larsen's invokes black spirituals; Erberk Eryilmaz's *Thracian Airs of Besime Sultan* is based on folk music from Turkey, Romania, Greece, and Macedonia; Gilad Cohen's *Three Goat Blues* blends Jewish Provencale folk music with American blues and jazz.

These new pieces jibe with Apollo's aim of making chamber music accessible

Left to right: Matthew Dudzik, Anabel Ramirez, Matthew J. Detrick, Whitney Bullock

20-20 Vision

through programs that explore specific themes, many of them rooted in place: for instance, "Andean Walkabout," scheduled for March, which features works by Ginastera, Piazzola, and Gabriela Lena Frank, along with Javier Farias's *Quintet for String Quartet and Guitar*, a 20x2020 commission.

The folk-music tinge of Apollo's music making gives the group a recognizable public identity—a "brand," to use current jargon. But it also resonates deeply with the musicians themselves. "My father was a minister, but he's also a folk singer who plays the banjo, the fiddle, and the harmonica," Detrick explains. "My mother is a retired public school music teacher who plays classical violin. When I grew up, I played American fiddle tunes and hymns, mixed in with Bach and Mozart. This is what I've been doing my entire life." ■
www.apollochamberplayers.org

