



PROGRAM NOTES

Jerusalem String Quartet
October 2, 2018 – 7:30 p.m.
Plymouth Church, UCC

String Quartet No. 5 in A major, Op. 18, No. 5

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: Bonn, 1770

Died: Vienna, 1827

Composed: 1798-1800

When the young Beethoven left his native Bonn for Vienna in 1792, his patron, Count Waldstein, sent him on his way with these words: "With the help of assiduous labor you shall receive Mozart's spirit from Haydn's hands." What the Count meant was that even though Mozart had died the previous year, Beethoven could still study with Haydn, the other great Viennese composer. Things didn't quite work out that way, though, for Haydn and Beethoven didn't get along very well and the composition lessons didn't last very long. Still, Waldstein's words were prophetic on another level, as they implied that Beethoven could someday inherit the mantle of the two older masters. And in fact, once installed in Vienna, Beethoven lost no time in claiming his place as *im Bunde der Dritte* ("the third in the alliance," to quote a famous phrase from Beethoven's favorite poet, Friedrich Schiller). Having absorbed

the style of Haydn and Mozart early on, he now began to put on his own personal stamp on that style. With his first twenty opus numbers, written between 1795 and 1800, he thoroughly assimilated *and* carried on the genres of concerto, piano sonata and chamber music; by 1799-1800, he was ready to write his first symphony.

In Beethoven's six string quartets published as Op. 18, the influence of Haydn and Mozart cannot be denied. What is more, scholars have shown that some ideas in these quartets even predate the move to Vienna and originate in compositional essays from the Bonn period. Yet at the same time, Beethoven's unique voice is already manifest on every page.

The quartets were written for and dedicated to Prince Franz Joseph von Lobkowitz, one of Beethoven's most important aristocratic

patrons. Simultaneously with Beethoven, the 67-year-old Haydn was also working on a set of quartets for Lobkowitz. Yet Haydn eventually withdrew from the project, not wanting to compete with his rebellious former student. He finished only two quartets, out of six that had been planned. These two, eventually published as Haydn's Op. 77, give some indication that the influence between the two composers ran both ways, and the older man was responding to a challenge from the unruly young genius he referred to, with a mixture of admiration and jealousy, as the "Grand Mogul."

Commentators on Beethoven's A-major quartet, in particular, never fail to point out the young composer's debt to Mozart's quartet in the same key (K. 464) from the set of six works dedicated to Haydn. No one will dispute this claim, which is based on the external structuring of the work: like Mozart, Beethoven placed his minuet in second place, and included a set of slow variations in the key of D major. The more important question, however, is whether this quartet *sounds* anything like Mozart. And there, the answer has to be a definite no. From the very first measures we hear the sudden offbeat accents so typical of Beethoven, a certain dance rhythm rarely used by Mozart, and myriad other fingerprints that unmistakably belong to Beethoven and no one else.

The general feeling of the opening movement is rather cheerful and lighthearted, but that feeling seems to be constantly contradicted by the frequent incursions into the minor mode and the sudden rests interrupting the musical flow. As a result, we are kept on the edge of our seats, never knowing what is going to happen in the next minute.

Experts have called the second-movement minuet "simple," mainly because it is an old-fashioned minuet rather than the more novel scherzo. Yet it is a sophisticated simplicity; even when the texture is down to the two violins as it is at the beginning, the phrases don't always go where they are expected to, nor are they necessarily over after the standard length of eight bars. The sudden outburst in a minor key in the middle of the minuet, followed by a general rest, is certainly a surprise, as is the varied recapitulation involving some contrapuntal imitation. The trio would be "simple" indeed, and even "Schubertian" as has been claimed, were it not for those persistent and disquieting offbeat accents.

With its theme all made up of scales, going first down and then up, the third movement again looks like a model of simplicity. It is one of many variation themes by Beethoven that are kept purposely "bare-bones" in order to allow for some spectacular development in the variations. But the latter turn out to be much more than the figurative embellishments of traditional variation writing. The very first one introduces counterpoint. The second variation may be more conventional, but the third is a breathtaking essay in musical color, the fourth a stunning chromatic chorale, and the fifth a grandiose statement of almost symphonic breadth. One would expect a sixth variation, but instead—after a sudden leap into a remote key—Beethoven appends a coda (conclusion) which is really a free meditation on the opening portion of the theme.

The finale is brilliant and virtuosic, with a swiftly running first theme and a second one that moves quite a bit more slowly. Both themes are manipulated with great ingenuity and are finally combined in the witty coda.

String Quartet in F major

Maurice Ravel

Born: Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France, 1875

Died: Paris, 1937

Composed: 1902-1903

Ravel was twenty-seven years old when he wrote his first and only string quartet. He was still, at least nominally, a student, as he was auditing Gabriel Fauré's composition class at the Paris Conservatoire. But he had been active as composer for years, with numerous public performances behind him. He had failed, however, to win a prize from the Conservatoire, which was a condition for graduation. In particular, the prestigious Prix de Rome continued to elude Ravel, who was eliminated from the contest no fewer than five times. This situation became more and more ludicrous and it finally led to a much-publicized scandal in 1905. The director of the Conservatoire had to resign, and Ravel confirmed his status as one of the leading French composers of his generation, in fact the only one whose work could be compared to that of Claude Debussy.

Ravel's string quartet—dedicated “to my dear master Gabriel Fauré”—is clearly modeled on Debussy's celebrated *Quatuor* from 1893, yet Ravel displays a sense of color and melody that is all his own. To both composers, the string quartet as a medium suggested—in fact, demanded—adherence to classical tradition. Yet nothing was farther from them than academicism of any kind. The defining moment of both works is precisely the tension that exists between the classical forms and a positively non-classical sensitivity that is manifest at every turn.

Melody, harmony and rhythm are usually thought of as the most important ingredients of music. Ravel's string quartet, written at

the beginning of the 20th century, was nothing less than prophetic in the way it added a fourth element, *sound*, as a factor of equal importance. The use of special playing techniques (*pizzicato*, *con sordino*, *arpeggio*, bow on the fingerboard) is as crucial to the unfolding of the piece as is the alternation of themes. Their succession, especially in the second and third movements, creates a musical form of its own, entirely non-traditional this time.

In the first movement, classical sonata form—a legacy that reached Ravel through the intermediary of Fauré—is realized with great clarity and ingenuity. Note the characteristic *pianissimo rallentando* (extremely soft and slow playing) at the end of the movement, similar to the analogous moment in Ravel's Piano Trio of 1914. (On the other hand, the opening movement of Debussy's string quartet ends with a loud and fast coda.)

The second movement of Ravel's quartet is based on the contrast between two themes of opposite character: one *pizzicato* [plucked], and one *bien chanté* [“sing out!"], with bow. Again, it seems that the movement looks into the future (once more, ahead to Ravel's Piano Trio of 1914) rather than into the past (back to the Debussy quartet). The middle section, in which all four instruments use mutes, is an expressive slow movement in miniature, with subtle variations on both scherzo themes.

The unique beauty of the third movement evolves by fits and starts, as it were, through

the sometimes abrupt juxtaposition of segments in different tempos, keys, and meters. An expressive melody, whose primary exponent is the viola, is interrupted by memories of the first movement's opening theme. After a more animated middle section, culminating in a passionate outburst, the initial slow tempo returns with its exquisite harmonies.

The last movement (which Fauré thought

unbalanced and too short) is based on an *ostinato* ("stubbornly" returning pattern) in an asymmetrical 5/8 meter. After a while, this *ostinato* yields to a more regular 3/4 which, once more, contains echoes of the first movement. A different musical character—the first aggressive, the second more lyrical—corresponds to each of these two meters. Their contrast carries the movement forward, right up to the singularly forceful conclusion.

String Quartet No. 3 in F major, Op. 73

Dmitri Shostakovich

Born: St. Petersburg, 1906

Died: Moscow, 1975

Composed: 1946

Shostakovich made the string quartet his medium of choice at a time when the genre had only a very limited tradition in Russia. Despite the beautiful contributions of Tchaikovsky and Borodin, the main interests of those composers lay elsewhere. Only Shostakovich's teacher, Alexander Glazunov, had cultivated the string quartet with any degree of regularity. In addition, the Soviet regime was demanding large-scale works for extensive performing forces and was deeply suspicious of the string quartet, which, after all, had roots in "bourgeois" homes. Maybe these reasons explain why Shostakovich didn't turn to quartet writing until he was well established as a symphonist. (His First Quartet was written shortly after the resounding success of the Fifth Symphony.) In later years, he increasingly came to regard the quartet as his most personal way of expression.

The third of Shostakovich's fifteen string quartets, a work in five movements, was written in 1946, one year after the end of World War II. It begins with a humorous,

almost flippant melody that sets the tone for a light-hearted movement full of wit and charm, although not devoid of a few slightly harsher accents, especially in the strongly contrapuntal development section.

The real clouds don't start gathering until the second movement. The simple broken triads of the viola, in unchanging quarter-notes, sound rather menacing from the outset, as the accompaniment to a chromatic theme in the first violin. By the time all four instruments have entered, the mood is one of intense nervousness, manifested by the second theme that grows out of a palpitating *staccato* motif, played extremely softly by the entire group.

The third movement is one of Shostakovich's "brutal" scherzos; its melodic material unfolds over a set of "angry" rhythmic *ostinatos* (repeated figures). A more playful second theme, introduced by the viola, functions as the *trio* (middle section). The recapitulation is intensified by added contrapuntal imitation

and harmonies that are even more astringent that they were the first time.

The fourth movement is a deeply tragic Adagio, written in the form of a passacaglia (variations upon an unchanging bass theme). Its pathos-filled melody is first presented in a powerful unison by second violin, viola and cello; it is later repeated by the first violin, softly, like a lament. With the final repeat of the theme, played by the viola with only the sparsest of accompaniments in the cello, we reach the lowest depths of despair.

The finale is the longest and most complex movement of the quartet. It opens with an enigmatic cello melody punctuated by the *pizzicato* (plucked) notes of the viola. This theme—gently lilting but filled with chromatic tension—is developed at length, joined by a beautifully sings second melody and a humorous third one, which recalls the first movement. Yet at the climactic point the tragic lament melody of

the fourth movement returns with devastating power. After this outburst, the humorous theme reappears, but in the minor mode instead of major, losing much of its cheerfulness. And the lilting first theme ends up as a solitary *adagio* melody for first violin, reaching the instrument's highest register in a subdued *pianissimo* as the other instruments play a single F-major chord held for a full twenty-six measures.

In the Third Quartet, Shostakovich reversed the traditional "darkness-to-light" sequence so often found in classical music. Moving from a cheerful opening to four movements of increasing seriousness and drama, the work strongly suggests that for Shostakovich in 1946, happiness was a very fragile emotion. Even though the war was over, the memory of past suffering was not about to go away easily, and laughter could turn into tears at any moment.

-Peter Laki

Mr. Laki is a musicologist and Visiting Associate Professor of Music at Bard College. He has been the annotator for the Society's program booklet since 2012, having previously served as annotator for the Cleveland Orchestra from 1990 to 2007. He is a native of Budapest and holds a Ph.D. in music from the University of Pennsylvania.