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PROGRAM NOTES

Jerusalem Quartet
May 2, 2023 – 7:30 p.m.
Disciples Christian Church

String Quartet No. 2 in F major, Op. 92 **Sergei Prokofiev**

Born: Sontsovka, Ukraine, 1891

Died: Nikolina Gora, nr. Moscow, 1953

Composed: 1941

In 1941, following Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, Prokofiev, along with a group of artists, was evacuated from Moscow. The group, which included Prokofiev's best friend, composer Nikolai Miaskovsky, relocated to the town of Nalchik in a part of the Northern Caucasus called Kabardino-Balkaria. This republic within the Russian Federation boasts the highest mountain in Europe—Mount Elbrus. Here Prokofiev and Miaskovsky were encouraged by a local arts administrator to study the folk music of the region and to make use of it in original compositions. The Soviet government always strove to showcase the culture of the country's numerous ethnic minorities even as it suppressed them politically.

Answering the call (what choice did they have?), Miaskovsky and Prokofiev both began their ethnomusicological studies. The former composed his Symphony No. 23 on folkloric themes, and the latter his second string quartet, which was also to remain his last. But Prokofiev, always able to make a virtue out of necessity, became intrigued by the challenge of reconciling the non-Western features of Kabardian

(Circassian) folk music with the medium of the string quartet, and produced one of his rare essays in musical exoticism. As commentators have frequently pointed out, he did not “glamorize” the exotic material the way older Russian composers, from Rimsky-Korsakov to Ippolitov-Ivanov, had done. He did not hesitate to present the folk songs in their original roughness and angularity—at least in the first of the quartet's three movements. The second movement is based on an intensely emotional melody first introduced by the cello in its high register. Here, as well as in the movement's livelier middle section, the synthesis of the Eastern melodies and the Western medium is more complete. In the last movement Prokofiev reconnected with the genre of the playful, folk-based rondo, whose history goes back all the way to Haydn. The main theme is one that Miaskovsky also used in his symphony; this sparkling movement includes a cello cadenza and a passionate central episode.

While Prokofiev was working on this quartet, he was ordered to move on to Tbilisi in the Republic of Georgia. It was there that the

work was completed, along with one of his most important compositions from the war years: the

magnificent Piano Sonata No. 7.

String Quartet No. 10 in A-flat major, Op. 118

by Dmitri Shostakovich

Born: St. Petersburg, 1906

Died: Moscow, 1975

Composed: 1964

On July 21, 1964, Shostakovich wrote to his friend Isaak Glikman from the Armenian hill resort of Dilizhan, where he and his wife Irina had spent a few weeks in the guest house of the Soviet Composers' Union:

Dear Isaak Davidovich,

I finished another quartet yesterday, my tenth. It is dedicated to M. S. Weinberg.* He had beat me because he had written nine quartets (and I had only eight).

My goal was to catch up with Weinberg and to get ahead of him, and I've done just that.

Last night, to celebrate this occasion and also the second anniversary of the 13th Symphony, we had a drink.

This account is quintessential Shostakovich: with his typical self-deprecating sarcasm, he seems to reduce the act of writing quartets to some sort of competitive game. Of course, if anyone in the second half of the 20th century knew what quartet-writing really meant, it was Shostakovich, who made the genre into a vehicle for a very special kind of self-expression. He composed a total of 15 quartets, in which he developed a "private" voice as opposed to the more "public" symphonic genre (his symphonies also number fifteen). At the time of his death in 1975, Shostakovich was clearly ahead of Weinberg in the quartet-writing contest, but the latter, who lived until 1996, eventually finished first, with *seventeen* completed quartets.

The Tenth Quartet was written immediately after the Ninth, a highly dramatic work that ended with a ferocious *danse macabre*. The Tenth contains emotional contrasts that are

no less extreme, yet the ending this time, as we shall see, is calm and peaceful. Perhaps for that reason, at least one commentator has seen this work as the starting point for the series of "late quartets," culminating in the astounding group of three works (Nos. 13-15) that constitute Shostakovich's musical testament.

The road that leads there begins, in the Tenth Quartet, with a meditative opening Andante whose main motive, first introduced by the unaccompanied first violin, gives way to a more agitated middle section dominated by the mysterious *sul ponticello* timbre (played with the bow near the fingerboard). The second movement is one of Shostakovich's "furious" scherzos, based on a simple, folklike theme but filled with powerful, almost brutal accents, and reaching a state of paroxysm at the end. The quartet continues with an Adagio in the form of the *passacaglia* that was so dear to Shostakovich. Here the Baroque idea of a set of continuous variations over an unchanging bass line takes on an entirely new meaning. The bass is not simply a harmonic idea but an expressive melody that develops its full potential as it acquires successive countermelodies that place it in a new light each time. Unlike some of Shostakovich's great symphonic passacaglias (the most famous being those of the Eighth Symphony and the First Violin Concerto), this one stays soft and subdued throughout, only rarely reaching *forte* dynamics. The finale follows without a break, with a simple melody in the viola against sustained notes in the violin and cello. The expressive second theme is also played by the viola. Seemingly innocuous, this melodic material undergoes an extensive development and finally erupts in a massive climax, at which point the passacaglia theme from the third

movement reappears in triple *forte*, bringing about the transformation that was withheld earlier. Relief arrives with the unexpected switch to a slower tempo, in which the first movement's opening melody returns, ushering in the gentle and delicate conclusion.

String Quartet No. 6 **by Béla Bartók**

Born: Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary [now Sînnicolau Mare, Romania], 1881

Died: New York, 1945

Composed: 1939

The Sixth Quartet was the last work Bartók completed before his emigration from Hungary to the United States. The first three movements were written in Saanen, Switzerland, during the summer of 1939. From the surviving sketches, scholars have been able to trace how Bartók's ideas about the unique form of this work took shape. Originally he had planned a four-movement string quartet with a dance finale preceded by a slow introduction. Then it occurred to him to use that slow introduction as a motto, appearing before the other movements as well. The compositional work had to be interrupted in September when, after the outbreak of World War II, Bartók had to return to Budapest. He had also received news of his mother's grave illness. At some point during this time, Bartók dropped his plans for the dance finale, and fashioned the material of the slow introductions into an entire movement to conclude the work. This "Mesto" ('sad') finale was finished in Budapest in November 1939. (Bartók's mother died a few weeks later.)

In the final form of the work, each of the first three movements is introduced by the same "Mesto" motto, presented in a different form each time. The motto then provides the entire material of the finale. In the first movement, the motto, a lyrical, intensely chromatic melody, is played by the viola alone. After a short transition section (where the unison of the four instruments anticipate the main theme of the movement), the "Vivace" tempo begins with more instrumental solos (unaccompanied first and then second violin). This suggests a certain

* The Polish-born composer and pianist Moisei (Mieczysław) Weinberg (1919-1996) was another close friend of Shostakovich; they frequently collaborated as piano-duo partners.

lightness of the tone that remains constant throughout this predominantly lyrical and lively movement.

Two character pieces follow: a "Marcia" (March) and a "Burletta" (Burlesque), both in ABA form and, as mentioned before, preceded by an ever-intensifying "Mesto" motto. In each case, Bartók created subtle motivic links to connect the "Mesto" sections to the subsequent scherzos. The characteristic dotted rhythms of the "Marcia" are related to the verbunkos, a 19th-century Hungarian instrumental tradition which had inspired Bartók at the beginning of his career and again during the last decade of his life. (One commentator, however, has drawn attention to the "Scherzando" movement in Beethoven's String Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 127, as another possible model.) At times, the march takes on a decidedly parodistic tone, which makes the beginning of the middle section all the more shocking. For here the cello bursts out in a passionate, declamatory outcry, accompanied by dramatic tremolos in the violins and strumming pizzicato chords in the viola. It is a traumatic interlude after which the March melody returns transfigured, played piano instead of forte, with delicate harmonics in the first violin.

The "Burletta" is one of Bartók's most sarcastic movements. The crude puppet from his ballet *The Wooden Prince* comes back to life, even more grotesque than in his first incarnation more than twenty years earlier. Strong rhythmic accents and the "out-of-tune" effect produced by the second violin playing a

quarter-tone lower than the first leave no doubt as to the character Bartók had in mind. The middle section this time recalls the gentle lyricism of the first movement, but then the merciless satire returns with a vengeance.

Expanding upon the opening motto, the fourth-movement *Mesto* is full of nostalgia and

resignation. Bartók's instruction in the score, *senza colore* ("without color"), is extremely revealing. The two themes of the first-movement "Vivace" return, in a slow tempo this time, as faint reminders of a happiness long past before the music unmistakably says farewell.

-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.