



CLEVELAND
CHAMBER
MUSIC
SOCIETY

PROGRAM NOTES

Danish String Quartet

November 14, 2023 – 7:30 p.m.

Disciples Christian Church

Divertimento in B-flat major, K. 138

Wolfgang Amadè Mozart

Born: Salzburg, 1756

Died: Vienna, 1791

Composed: 1772

Most Mozart connoisseurs would agree that this delightful work for strings and its two companions, the Divertimentos in D and F (K. 136 and 137), written when Mozart was sixteen, are among the composer's first works where the transition from child prodigy to adult prodigy becomes palpable.

Unlike most Mozart divertimentos, which are in six movements, K. 136-38 have only three and follow the fast-slow-fast outline of the Italian *sinfonia*. They were written soon after Mozart and his father returned to Salzburg after the second of three trips to Italy.

It is not altogether clear whether these works were originally intended for a solo string quartet or a string ensemble. Although more often performed orchestally, a quartet performance will reveal new interpretive possibilities in these delightful compositions.

Each of K. 138's three movements abounds in exquisite melodies, presented in a simple and graceful way. The verve of the first movement, the lyricism of the second, and the playfulness of the third show different sides of the young Mozart, all developed to perfection.

Three Divertimenti

Benjamin Britten

Born: Lowestoft, Suffolk, England [U. K.], 1913

Died: Aldeburgh, Suffolk, 1976)

Composed: 1933-36

These three short pieces are Britten's earliest works of chamber music. First written in 1933, when the 20-year-old Britten was still a student at the Royal College of Music in London, the work was originally titled "Alla Quartetto Serioso: Go play, boy, play." The first half of this curious title could well be a tongue-in-cheek reference to Beethoven's Op. 95; the second half—actually a quote from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*—refers to some friends from school who were involved in sports. (One shouldn't forget that in Britten's case, there was no clear boundary between friendship and love.) When an early version was performed in 1933, Britten considered the piece unfinished; he sketched two more movements but never finished them. Instead, he revised the three existing movements—"March," "Waltz," and "Burlesque"—in 1936 and had them performed under the new title *Three Divertimenti* in Wigmore Hall on February 25 of that year.

The young Britten's deliciously irreverent harmonic and rhythmic surprises occasionally call to mind Prokofiev, whose music he demonstrably knew already in the 1930s. But Britten went beyond his older Russian contemporary in the wild repeated-note

figures and bold glissandos with which the first movement begins—startling gestures that introduce a grotesque march melody. This melody is developed using some eerie harmonics and *pizzicatos* (plucked notes), before it recaptures its original high energy. The movement closes with the repeated notes and glissandos with which it began.

The second-movement "Waltz" has an innocent-looking melody with some unexpected twists. Its middle section suddenly becomes quite agitated, but then a full recapitulation brings back the initial serenity.

The "Burlesque" lives up to its name by more humorous glissandos, abrupt rhythmic changes and other comical touches (for instance, at one point the violist is instructed to hold his instrument like a guitar). After a dramatic pause, the piece ends with a vigorous *Prestissimo*.

The 1936 performance of the *Three Divertimenti* was rather coldly received by the critics, causing Britten to withdraw the work. It wasn't published until 1983—seven years after the composer's death.

The Four Quarters, Op. 28

Thomas Adès

Born: London, 1971

Composed: 2010

Thomas Adès has developed a unique personal voice, while at the same time maintaining vital links to his roots (which include practically the entire history of music). *The Four Quarters* is his second string quartet, following *Arcadiana*

(1994), which has entered the repertoire of many quartets on the international scene.

The Four Quarters was premiered by the Emerson Quartet at Carnegie Hall on March

12, 2011. The “four quarters” of the title are different times of day, but we shouldn’t expect a typical night-and-day sequence: after a slow nocturne (“Nightfalls”) and a wild scherzo (“Morning Dew”), we move into more symbolic realms with “Days,” and especially with “The Twenty-Fifth Hour,” which is not on anyone’s regular schedule...

Throughout the first movement, a persistent short-short-long rhythmic figure is repeated, on different pitches, by the two violins to the slow accompaniment of the viola and cello. Eventually, the texture becomes more unified as the basic figure is transformed into a homophonic melody shared by all four instruments. In one way or another, this figure dominates the entire movement, with powerful crescendos leading to ethereal pianissimos, and ending inconclusively.

In the vigorous second movement, all four instruments start by playing *pizzicato* in complex irregular rhythms. Then they pick up their bows, one after the other, to play excited melodic fragments scurrying up and down. The final portion of the movement is once again

pizzicato, but this time everyone plays the same rhythms, all in unison (except for the final chords).

“Days” is a slow movement. Over a stubbornly repeated single note in the second violin, the other instruments play *legato* (connected) melodic fragment whose dynamics gradually rise to *fortissimo*, before all four players unite in a section of loud repeated chords in ever-changing long-short patterns. The volume decreases again, and the movement ends on a tender, lyrical note.

The final movement similarly proceeds from soft to loud to soft again. But the musical material is quite different this time. The score contains instructions like *dolcissimo* (“very sweet”), *alla marcia* (“march-like”) and *ballabile* (“dance”), but the rhythms are trickier than ever. The essence of the movement seems to lie precisely in the tension between the lightness of the sound and the complexity of the structure. After a more intense middle section, the music returns to its initial, ethereal state and ends, astonishingly, on two pure, otherworldly D-major chords.

-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.