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PROGRAM NOTES

Danish String Quartet
January 25, 2022 – 7:30 p.m.
Plymouth Church, UCC

String Quartet in E-flat major, K. 428

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Born: Salzburg, 1756

Died: Vienna, 1791

Composed: 1783

What happens when a genius consciously tries to outdo himself and works twice as hard as usual, making a concerted effort to impress an esteemed older colleague and friend? The result may well be a set of extraordinary masterpieces like the six string quartets that Mozart dedicated to Franz Joseph Haydn.

Mozart composed these quartets over a period of three years, between 1782 and 1785. The quartet in E-flat came third in the set, after a G-major work (K. 387) that combined grace and rigor in a most original way, and the intensely tragic D-minor quartet (K. 421). In the present work, the tone is set by a most unusual opening melody, played in unison by the four instruments. Three times in the course of this brief theme, Mozart uses chromatic notes (ones outside the main key) in stressed downbeat positions, creating a certain tension which the rest of the movement will

have to resolve. Tension and release is what the magical second-movement *Andante con moto* is all about as well: its opening melody is of irregular length, filled with rhythmic and harmonic ambiguity. Then the melody finds a temporary resting point, followed by new adventures.

The third-movement minuet was directly modelled on a work by Haydn, the minuet in the same key of E-flat major from the string quartet op. 33, No. 2 (known as “The Joke” on account of the unusual ending of its finale). Haydn himself had said of his op. 33, published in 1781, that it was written in a “very new and unusual manner”—referring, among other things, to the equality of the four instruments, a new technique of motivic development and, with regard to minuets, a more elaborate treatment of the form and even an anticipation of the Beethovenian scherzo. What Mozart took from Haydn in this particular instance were

the heavy, folk-like accents, the complex phrases and, in the central trio, a very Haydnesque musical “joke”: a long drone in what turns out to be a “wrong” key, after which matters are straightened out by a sudden shift to the “right” key. The finale is Mozart’s take on another of Haydn’s favorite movement types: a fast contradanse with plenty of virtuoso runs as well as various harmonic and melodic surprises.

Mozart’s “Haydn” quartets did not fail to produce the desired effect on their dedicatee. When Haydn heard these works, he said the following immortal words to Mozart’s father Leopold: “Before God and as an honest man, I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name. He has taste, and, what is more, the most profound knowledge of composition.”

-Peter Laki

'An Alleged Suite', A Curated Suite of Dances

Prelude, CHARPENTIER: Prelude
Allemande, JOHN ADAMS: Pavane: She’s so fine
Courante Polska (traditional)
Sarabande, BLUMENFELD: Sarabande
Gavotte, JOHN ADAMS: Stubble Crotchet
Gigue 1, CHARPENTIER: Gigue française
Gigue 2, JOHN ADAMS: Toot Nipple

“An Alleged Suite” borrows its name—as well as its freewheeling, eclectic spirit—from a suite-like work John Adams composed in 1994 for the Kronos String Quartet. John’s Book of Alleged Dances is a set of ten idiosyncratic takes on traditional dance genres, ranging from jitterbug to bluegrass to habanera. “The dances were ‘alleged’ because the steps for them had yet to be invented,” Adams explains, adding that “the general tone is dry, droll, sardonic.” The Danish String Quartet have interlarded three of Adams’ quintessentially postmodern pieces with stylized dances from the late 17th and late 19th centuries, as well as a traditional polska, a Scandinavian folk dance in $\frac{3}{4}$ time characterized by strong accents on the first and third beats of each measure. The resulting temporal and stylistic juxtapositions are refreshingly offbeat, occasionally jarring, and always ear-opening.

Like the instrumental dance suites of the Baroque era, “An Alleged Suite” is based on a conventional sequence of courtly dances consisting of a stately allemande, a vivacious courante, a broadly lyrical sarabande, and a bouncy gigue. To these the modern compilers have added an expository Prelude and a lively peasant-style dance (Adams’ phantasmagorical Stubble Crotchet, masquerading as an 18th-century gavotte). The two movements by French composer Marc-Antoine Charpentier are extracted from his Concert in D minor for four viols, composed in the 1680s. The Prélude illustrates Charpentier’s mastery of the “learned” contrapuntal style, while the Gigue française exudes folksy swagger. Russian composer Felix Blumenfeld wrote his warmly Romantic Sarabande in G minor for one of the legendary musical soirées held at the St. Petersburg home of the music publisher Mitrofan Belaiev in the late 1800s. Adams, often pegged as a “post-minimalist”

composer, has given a new and richly expressive twist to the repetitive harmonies, melodies, and rhythmic patterns of first-generation minimalists like Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Pavane: She's so fine alludes both to the historical dance and to the 1960s rock hit by Stevie Wright and George Young. Its limpid, free-floating melodies, set against an ever-changing rhythmic pulse,

contrast with the manic intensity of Toot Nipple.

-Harry Haskell

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String Quartet in G major, D. 887

Franz Schubert

Born: Himmelpfortgrund [now part of Vienna], 1797

Died: Vienna, 1828

Composed: 1826

Schubert's final quartet is a truly visionary work. Just like the late Beethoven quartets, written at about the same time, it opens doors to the 20th century—but different ones. Whereas Beethoven experimented with structure, changing the number and the character of movements, Schubert's boldest innovations in this work lay in the area of harmony and texture—his famously abrupt juxtapositions of major and minor chords and an almost obsessive use of tremolo. Together, these innovations produced one of the most gripping works in the classic quartet literature.

The quite unprecedented G major - G minor sequence at the opening of the quartet establishes the half step between B natural and B flat as one of the work's generating ideas. These two tones, that normally would not be expected to appear in such close succession, are combined in a startling fashion, and from this initial move follow many other surprising instances where Schubert simply "jumps" from key to key without the intermediary "pivot" chords that harmony textbooks call for. And the tremolos invest these revolutionary harmonic practices with an added sense of urgency.

Yet there are some islands of calm and stability amidst all the turmoil. The lilting second theme is based on the repetitions of a single rhythm and is repeated in its entirety no fewer than four times, resulting in a true "theme-and-variations" embedded in the movement. Even here, however, two of the variations involve sharp accents and melodic imitation, again raising the level of excitement. The development section is a study in extremes; soft and eerie at first, the music becomes highly dramatic without any warning. In the recapitulation, the themes are completely "re-orchestrated." The first theme is embellished in the first violin and provided with a new accompaniment figure that invests it with an entirely new character, and the second theme, likewise, introduces new variations on its theme. In the astonishing coda, the cello descends an octave and a half in chromatic half-steps as the other instruments add harmonies touching on many different keys. The duality between major and minor persists to the very end.

The second movement begins with a wistful cello melody that has some harmonic peculiarities of its own. As in many Schubertian slow movements from the

Unfinished Symphony to the Cello Quintet, a quiet opening statement is followed by a turbulent B section. The form of the quartet movement is ABABA; the “turbulence” involves fast upward scales in the first violin, wild tremolos in all four instruments, as well as bald juxtapositions of completely unrelated key areas. It is a frighteningly “modern” moment whose violence cannot be entirely assuaged even when the opening melody returns.

The third-movement scherzo has been said to anticipate Mendelssohn’s “elfin” scherzo movements; the minor key, the soft dynamics, and the fast repeated eighth-notes all contribute to this impression. But the trio section, where the melody is once again in the cello part, is a quintessentially Schubertian “Ländler” dance with a bold “jump” into a new key in its second half.

Schubert wrote several finales in the fast 6/8 meter of the tarantella, such as the closing

movements of the D-minor Quartet (“Death and the Maiden”) or the C-minor piano sonata. The finale of the G-major Quartet is the longest and most complex of these tarantellas, both harmonically (with major and minor alternating again in close succession) and structurally: there are many themes in this sonata-rondo, all varied and developed in rather unusual ways. The fast eighth-notes of the tarantella are present throughout *almost* without interruption; the only respite is a majestic, chordal episode that is heard twice. Both times, it is quickly brushed aside by the returning tarantella. The final return of the opening theme is followed by a gigantic crescendo in which the harmonic ambiguities underlying the entire work are restated one last time. Yet the concluding measures of the work are fashioned from one of the movement’s gentler, more graceful themes.

-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.