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PROGRAM NOTES

Jerusalem Quartet
October 22, 2019 – 7:30 p.m.
Plymouth Church, UCC

String Quartet in D minor, K. 421
Wolfgang Amadè Mozart
Born: Salzburg, 1756
Died: Vienna, 1791
Composed: 1783

Mozart did not always compose with the ease and speed one usually associates with his name: even he had to struggle sometimes. The six string quartets dedicated to Franz Joseph Haydn are a case in point. In paying homage to his older colleague and friend, Mozart subjected himself to an enormous challenge. Haydn had turned the string quartet into one of the most highly developed instrumental genres of his time and, especially after his epoch-making set of six quartets, op. 33 (1781), he became the undisputed master of the form with an international reputation. Mozart, eager to live up to these high standards, took three years to complete *his* set of six quartets which constitute his response to Haydn's op. 33. Here was music for the connoisseur, sophisticated in technique and complex in elaboration—the work of a genius making a conscious effort to outdo himself. For the publication of these quartets, Mozart wrote a

beautiful dedicatory letter to Haydn (in Italian, the international language of music) in which he acknowledged the “long and hard work” the quartets had cost him, and asked Haydn to be a loving “father, guide and friend” to these “children” which the composer was sending out into the world to live their own lives.

The D-minor quartet was the second in the set of six. Mozart followed Haydn's custom of including one quartet in a minor key in the group; such works were usually darker, more tragic in tone and more innovative in harmonic language than their “siblings” in major tonalities. The D-minor quartet is no exception: its mood is agitated almost from beginning to end. One area of relative calm is the second theme of the first movement, in which the tonality switches to major, in accordance with custom. Yet when this theme returns in the recapitulation in the minor key as the rules demanded (after a

rather stormy development), it undergoes some striking transformations that effectively change its character from lyrical to dramatic.

The second movement is a (mostly) calm Andante in F major. The third is a minuet, but without the usual graceful character of the dance; this *minuetto serio* (serious minuet) in the tragic key of D minor is filled with chromatic harmonies and complex imitative textures. Its stern atmosphere is relieved by the Trio, in which the first violin plays a tune reminiscent of

yodeling (a kind of folk singing from the mountainous regions of Austria, characterized by wide melodic leaps).

The last movement is a set of variations on a theme in which the rhythm of the siciliano dance is imbued with a strong proto-Romantic feeling. Contrary to what happens in many minor-key works where the tensions are eased by a final modulation to the major, in this movement the variation in the major remains a passing episode and the work ends in minor on a rather disconsolate note.

String Quartet No. 2 in E-flat major, Op. 26

Erich Wolfgang Korngold

Born: Brünn, Austro-Hungarian Monarchy [now Brno, Czech Republic], 1756

Died: Los Angeles, 1957

Composed: 1933

In 1933, the year when the present quartet was written, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, age 36, could look back on a full quarter of a century in the limelight. It was exactly twenty-five years since he had signed a contract with Universal Editions in Vienna for the publication of his earliest works—or rather, his father had signed for him, since the signature of an 11-year-old would not have had the required legal force. His father, Dr. Julius Korngold, by the way, happened to be Vienna's most influential music critic, which no doubt helped the young prodigy's spectacular rise to fame, but also proved to be a mixed blessing in the years to come.

As prodigies go, Korngold was really unique in that he not only displayed exceptional talent but had mastered all the intricacies of a late Romantic musical idiom before he entered his teens. (He had a much more complex language to absorb than Mozart had to do in the 18th century.) Within a few years, he was celebrated all over Germany, and his opera *Die tote Stadt* (“The Dead City”) reached the Metropolitan

Opera in New York in 1921 (when the composer was still only 24).

Yet it wasn't long before professional challenges began to appear on Korngold's horizon. Some of them came from a composer who was old enough to be his father. Arnold Schoenberg's latest compositions, using the twelve-tone method, divided musical opinion in Vienna, dividing musicians into two camps, with Korngold one of the most prominent anti-serialists. In many of his works from the 1920s and '30s, Korngold set out to prove that one could still say something new and meaningful without giving up on tonality.

The Second Quartet was premiered in 1933 by Vienna's premier quartet group, the Rosé Quartet, which had celebrated the 50th anniversary of its concert debut the year before. (The founder and first violinist Arnold Rosé, who had worked with Brahms and had been Mahler's brother-in-law, was the only member who remained in the group for the entire 55 years of its existence.)

Although the quartet begins and ends firmly in E-flat major and the C-major

tonality of the second movement is also quite clear, the slow third movement is mainly in C-sharp major but moves freely and unpredictably from key to key throughout. Korngold, while rejecting the most radical innovations of his time, still stretched the boundaries of tonality in his own way, and if his language is traditional, the quartet could never be mistaken for a 19th-century composer's work. Classical chords are liberally sprinkled with extra notes that make them dissonant, and Korngold particularly enjoyed juxtaposing post-Wagnerian chromatic harmonies with deliberately simple, popular-sounding moments, especially in the second-movement intermezzo and the gorgeous waltz-fantasy that serves as the finale. (It should be remembered that Korngold was a noted authority on Johann Strauss, Jr.,

String Quartet No. 9, Op. 117

Dmitri Shostakovich

Born: St. Petersburg, 1906

Died: Moscow, 1975

Composed: 1964

Shostakovich wrote ten of his fifteen string quartets after he turned fifty (in comparison, ten of his fifteen symphonies were written *before* he reached that age). Since the late works of Beethoven, chamber music had often been a medium of introspection and personal communication, but never to the extent seen in Shostakovich, who, in his later years, increasingly withdrew from large-scale orchestral works (and the political expectations bound up with them) into the more intimate world of the string quartet.

The Eighth (1960) was the most overtly autobiographical of Shostakovich's quartets, with its many self-quotes and the prominent use of the D - E-flat - C - B motif, which translates the composer's Germanized initials (D. Sch.) into musical tones. Four

whose works he frequently arranged and conducted.) The greatest surprises await us in the slow movement, which stands in third place: this "Larghetto" opens with a series of otherworldly harmonic chords introducing the movement's lush principal melody.

Soon after the premiere of the Second Quartet, Korngold departed for the United States for his first Hollywood job, an arrangement of Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* music for the great director Max Reinhardt. And although this was not yet the final emigration (which didn't take place until 1938), it was clearly the beginning of a new life for the composer. The Second Quartet is, therefore, one of Korngold's last European works and, in a way, a summation of the first half of his brilliant career.

years after that landmark work, Shostakovich composed his Ninth and Tenth Quartets, and it is evident that the intense soul-searching of the Eighth Quartet continues here. (Significantly, Shostakovich destroyed another quartet he had written between the Eighth and the present Ninth.)

The five movements of the Ninth Quartet are played without a pause; moreover, they are connected by either long-held notes in one of the instruments that carry over from one movement into the next or by identical motifs that serve as bridges between movements. The overall form—a central scherzo flanked by two slow movements, all placed between an opening Moderato and a final Allegro—is symmetrical, yet the overall feeling is hardly one of perfect emotional balance. In fact,

our sense of restlessness grows as the piece wears on: between the *tranquillo* opening and the ferocious ending, the music passes through stages of despair, sarcasm, and violent drama, in typical Shostakovichian fashion.

The opening movement exemplifies that “philosophical lyricism” that Alfred Schnittke saw in Shostakovich’s later works. A meandering violin melody, taken through many keys and harmonic contexts, is followed by a more rhythmical second idea, and both are woven together, rather than “developed” in a traditional way, to create a somewhat neutral background, offsetting the wrenching lament of the second movement. The third movement is one of several Shostakovich scherzos where a theme, intentionally kept simple almost to the point of vulgarity, reaches extraordinary heights of emotional intensity. The trio section provides some relief, but is still characteristically ambivalent: is it an idyll,

or a parody of one? The recapitulation of the first section certainly does not answer the question. Instead, we are soon plunged into new depths of despair with the Adagio, where dramatic pizzicato chords, played by one instrument while the others are silent as if stunned, ultimately lead to a powerful outburst. The finale is a ferocious *danse macabre* which, at its climax, recalls the most passionate moment of the previous Adagio. At the end, the theme of the scherzo also returns, and the work ends with a restatement of this pithy but extremely expressive material.

The quartet is dedicated to Shostakovich’s third wife Irina, whom the composer had married in 1962. After the death of his first wife and a short-lived, unsuccessful second marriage, Shostakovich had just found the companion who would be at his side during years of increasing world celebrity and declining health.

-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.