



CLEVELAND
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PROGRAM NOTES

Jerusalem Quartet
October 31, 2021 – 3 p.m.
Maltz Performing Arts Center

String Quartet in D major, K. 575
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Born: Salzburg, 1756
Died: Vienna, 1791
Composed: 1789

On April 26, 1789, a Prussian court official sent the following note to King Friedrich Wilhelm II:

A certain Mozart here (who declared himself upon entry to be a Kapellmeister from Vienna) states that...he desires to lay his talents at Your Majesty's feet, and that he awaits Your command, to know whether he may hope that Your Majesty will be graciously pleased to receive him.

Actually, we don't know whether Mozart was ever received by the King. It used to be assumed that he was, but there is really no evidence to back up this claim. In his letters to his wife, Mozart mentioned a forthcoming commission from Friedrich Wilhelm, but he may have made that up in order to justify a long, expensive and

professionally unproductive journey (during which, moreover, he might even have had an affair).

In his own catalog of works, Mozart did note that he had written the string quartet in D major (now known as K. 575) for the King of Prussia. Yet he wouldn't have been able to send a single quartet even as an unsolicited gift: quartets had to come in sets of six in those days. And Mozart wrote only two more quartets after the present one...

In spite of all that, Mozart must have been at least thinking about the King of Prussia, who played the cello. Mozart gave that instrument a much more soloistic part than we find in most string quartets of the period, where the cello is mainly used to provide harmonic support.

The first movement of the D-Major quartet opens with a singing melody for the first violin, repeated by the viola. The cello gets its first great moment in the second

theme. Throughout the movement, the four “conversation partners” sometimes hear one another out and sometimes interrupt one another impatiently.

The second-movement “Andante” is an extended instrumental aria whose first phrase is played by the first violin and the second phrase divided among the four instruments. At the repeat, the cello takes the melody of the first violin and the second phrase is replaced by a shorter coda.

The third-movement “Minuetto” completes an eventful musical journey in the space of just a few measures: its simple theme is developed in manifold ways with a

brief dramatic episode in the middle. In the “Trio,” the cello takes center stage again with a folk-like ländler melody.

The rather innocent-looking rondo theme of the last movement is subjected to an elaborate development, touching on several keys. A second theme, left in its “natural” state as an eight-measure melody, serves as a contrast. The extensive transformations of the theme distinguish this movement from most classical rondos. Musicologist Alfred Einstein, who wrote about Mozart more eloquently than anyone, called it “a triumph of art and the soul.”

String Quartet No. 7 in F-sharp minor, Op. 108

Dmitri Shostakovich

Born: St. Petersburg, 1906

Died: Moscow, 1975

Composed: 1959-60

Shostakovich made the string quartet his medium of choice at a time when the genre had 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, cultivated the quartet with any regularity. In the 20th century, there was a further reason for the dearth of Russian string quartets: the Soviet regime was demanding large-scale works for extensive performing forces and showed little interest for the quartet, which, after all, had been associated with “bourgeois” music-making. Maybe these reasons explain why Shostakovich didn’t turn to quartet-writing until he was well established as a symphonic composer. (His First Quartet was written shortly after the resounding success of his Fifth Symphony.) On the other hand, the lack of official interest could also be a good thing; since string quartets were, as one

commentator put it, “under the radar screen,” the composer could feel free to be himself. In later years, Shostakovich increasingly came to regard the quartet as his most personal way of expression, and composed no fewer than fifteen of them, a series forming a private counterpart to the fifteen very public symphonies.

The Seventh Quartet, the shortest of the fifteen Shostakovich quartets, is the first written in a minor key. It was dedicated to the memory of Nina Varzar, Shostakovich’s first wife, who had died at a in 1954 at the age of 45. (The composer had remarried in 1956, but this marriage was unsuccessful and ended in 1959. He married his third wife, with whom he would spend the rest of his life, in 1962.) Everyone who has ever heard this quartet feels that it tells a story of some kind, but there is no consensus about what exactly that story might be. One might well ask how it is possible for music to tell stories at all. Shostakovich’s answer

lies in the ingenious transformation of a small number of simple themes. In his works we often find simple and unassuming little tunes that appear playful and innocent at first sight, yet there is always an element of irony, if not outright sarcasm, lurking underneath. In the course of the work, remarkable and unexpected things happen to these little tunes, suggesting processes whereby an idea is being examined from different points of view, called into question, mocked, distorted, and so on.

The quartet is in three movements (fast-slow-fast), played without a pause. After the feigned insouciance of the first movement and the expansive lyricism of the brief central Lento, the final Allegro is the

longest and the most complex part of the piece. We are first reminded of the main rhythmic idea of the first movement; then we hear an enigmatic viola solo consisting of only four descending notes before a furious fugue erupts, using those same four notes in a completely different way. The tensions and dissonances keep piling up until they are suddenly brushed aside by a gentle waltz (or almost-waltz) that takes us to the end of the piece. The closing measures are almost identical to the conclusion of the first movement: the notes are the same but they are played *pizzicato* (with plucked strings) and stretched rhythmically, enhancing the mysterious effect.

String Quartet No. 9 in C major, Op. 59, No. 3 **Ludwig van Beethoven**

Born: Bonn, 1770

Died: Vienna, 1827

Composed: 1806

Prince Andrey Razumovsky, the Russian Ambassador in Vienna, and the Princes Lichnowsky and Lobkowitz, two Viennese aristocrats to whom he was related by marriage, together received the dedications of more than a dozen major works by Beethoven. One might almost say that their “clan” underwrote a great part of what later became known as Beethoven’s “heroic” or middle period.

In the three quartets dedicated to Razumovsky, Beethoven made a bold leap into the future. Music had never expressed such intense emotions before, nor had the formal conventions of music had been changed so radically in such a short time.

The third “Razumovsky” quartet is a lively and dynamic work that is definitely “heroic” in the boldness of its themes. The first movement begins with a slow introduction consisting of a mysterious sequence of chords that do not define any

particular tonality and do not arrive at the home key of C major until the very end. (It was evidently influenced by the famous opening of Mozart’s “Dissonant” quartet [K. 465], also in C major.) Even the “Allegro vivace” gets off to a somewhat tentative start, with an unaccompanied flourish for the first violin, punctuated by brief chords in the other instruments. Despite the obvious allusions to Mozart, there is a fierce intensity here that we never find in earlier music. The principal generating idea of the movement is to make amorphous material gradually more organized. By the development section, the loose textures of the exposition are solidified into a strict canon based on a two-note pattern. The violin flourish that serves as the movement’s first theme is lavishly ornamented when it returns to announce the recapitulation.

The second movement, “Andante con moto quasi Allegretto,” has “an aura of

remote, almost mythical melancholy and remoteness,” in the words of musicologist William Kinderman. Unlike the first two “Razumovsky” quartets, the C-major does not contain an original Russian melody, identified as such in the score. Yet, in a 2014 study, musicologist Mark Ferraguto traced the theme of this Andante to a Russian song published in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, which Beethoven read regularly. But Beethoven did not quote the tune in its original form and only used a characteristic melodic turn from it, making the melody even more exotic by adding an augmented second that was not present in the original. This mysterious first theme is followed by a second idea, which evokes a graceful dance. A haunting new melody is heard at the end of the movement, in a coda that seems to vanish in a Romantic mist.

The graceful third-movement minuet is a nostalgic evocation of the past. The

choice of a minuet is significant, for by 1806 Beethoven was much more likely to write fast-paced, surprise-filled scherzos in both chamber and symphonic music. In the trio section Beethoven strikes a more modern note, with some characteristic offbeat accents (a device he was particularly fond of) and an unusually high first violin part. The recapitulation of the minuet is followed by an extensive coda, introducing a sad, minor-key variation of the minuet theme that leads directly into the last movement—a perpetual motion that begins as a fugue, its lengthy subject introduced by the viola. By the time all four instruments have entered, fugal counterpoint gives way to chordal writing; the two kinds of texture alternate throughout the movement. The extremely fast tempo generates a high level of excitement that culminates in a surprise rest just before the end, after which the mad rush continues with even more fire than before.

-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.