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PROGRAM NOTES

Takács Quartet
April 9, 2019 – 7:30 p.m.
Plymouth Church, UCC

String Quartet in D minor, Op. 76, No. 2

Franz Joseph Haydn

Born: Rohrau, Lower Austria, 1732

Died: Vienna, 1809

Composed: 1797

After returning from his second and last London sojourn, Haydn composed no more symphonies. Before embarking on the two great oratorios, *The Creation* and *The Seasons*, he completed what would remain his last full set of string quartets in 1796-97, and dedicated them to a Hungarian aristocrat, Johann Georg von Erdódy. This opus contains several of Haydn's most celebrated quartets including the C-major work with the variations on the Imperial Hymn and the B-flat major quartet nicknamed "The Sunrise."

The present work, whose dark dramatic quality is consistent with the usual connotations of the D-minor tonality, is known as the "Fifths" because the main theme of the first movement features that interval prominently, in long-held half-notes. The simple motif of a pair of descending fifths was enough for Haydn to construct a movement of great complexity and diversity. In the course of the movement, he would change the interval, reverse the direction of

the leap and even speed up the rhythm from half-notes to quarters, but the idea of repeated leaps remains and, together with some faster-moving countersubjects, dominates the entire movement.

The second movement is an Andante, but Haydn added the words *o più tosto allegretto* ("or rather Allegretto") to the tempo marking, to make sure the tempo did not drag. The gentle D-major melody, played by the first violin, is, at first, accompanied *pizzicato* (with plucked strings) by the other instruments. What happens afterwards is extremely ingenious, because Haydn combines two different formal patterns: theme-and-variation and ternary design. The central section, where the tonality changes to minor, could be construed as contrasting with the principal theme like a "trio," except for the fact that its motivic material is closely related to the opening music. Closely related, that is, but not identical—which is why the return of the D-major feels like a recapitulation, but it is

at the same time a lavishly decorated variation on the theme. Haydn manages to have it both ways to the end.

In another most unusual move, the minuet is written as a rather austere two-part canon, with the viola and cello imitating the two violins at the distance of a measure. This somewhat stiff minuet is followed by a trio that would resemble a folk-dance over a

drone bass, were it not for the odd repeated chords that precede each one of the dance strains. The recapitulation of the minuet only reinforces the uneasy feeling, which is only resolved in the final movement—a “Vivace assai” that begins in a rather agitated manner in D minor before the key changes to a bright and exuberant D major.

String Quartet No. 4, Op. 83

Dmitri Shostakovich

Born: St. Petersburg, 1906

Died: Moscow, 1975

Composed: 1949

There was a time, not so long ago, when composition could be an extremely risky activity, one that could earn a composer high accolades but could also threaten his (or her) very existence. After defeating Nazi Germany in World War II, Stalin turned increasingly against the perceived internal enemy, and his paranoia was particularly strong in the cultural area. Any writing, painting or musical composition that did not explicitly sing his praises could be a target for censure, and any work of art that failed to deliver the officially mandated “hurrah optimism” had to be suppressed and its author punished.

At forty-three, Dmitri Shostakovich had already suffered far too much to be a “hurrah optimist.” He had been the subject of two devastating attacks from the Communist Party, one back in 1936 and one just recently in 1948. He had endured wartime privations and evacuation along with millions of his fellow citizens. He had seen close friends and colleagues disappear in Stalin's purges or in the “Great Patriotic War,” which cost the country a staggering 27 million lives. Shostakovich could write patriotic cantatas on commission, like *The Song of the Forest* (Op. 81, 1949), but he was ever more strongly drawn to the intimate genre of the string quartet, in which

he could speak in a very different voice—even if those works sometimes had to remain in his desk drawer for years.

Shostakovich composed his fourth string quartet soon after a trip to the United States he had undertaken much against his will. He had been sent there by the government to represent the Soviet Union at the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace, held at the Waldorf Hotel in New York City. The composer had to give a prepared speech along the ideological lines of the Communist Party. There was little about this trip that could possibly be enjoyable, though Shostakovich did have the opportunity to hear some new music. He got to hear the Juilliard String Quartet performing Bartók, including the Hungarian composer's Sixth Quartet (1939), which ends with a deeply tragic slow movement and which Shostakovich liked very much—if we can believe an article that was published under his name after his return to the Soviet Union. The juxtaposition of grotesque and tragic characters in Bartók's last quartet must have held great appeal for Shostakovich, in whose music such juxtapositions occur with great frequency.

All four movements of Shostakovich's Fourth Quartet end softly, and in three cases out of four, Shostakovich

used the marking *morendo*, “dying.” No “hurrah optimism” for him: each movement represents a new start, an attempt to advance in a certain direction. Each time, the music invariably erupts in powerful climactic passages, only to be reduced to silence soon afterwards. The first movement introduces a quietly meandering melody in a bright D major over a drone played by the viola and cello. But the drone stays on much longer than one would expect, while the melody ceases to meander quietly and is whipped up into a frenzy as the first violin ascends to a stratospheric register, only to subside again. Throughout the movement, the mood remains somewhat uneasy and one feels that a great deal has been left unresolved at the end.

A heartfelt “Andantino” follows, dominated by a beautiful, song-like solo of the first violin that reaches its own climax before the original melody returns, played with even more tenderness than the first time. Shortly before the end, a brief fragment from a Russian Orthodox funeral chant is heard.

With its pulsating rhythms, the whimsical third movement promises some kind of relief from the dark mood of what we have heard so far. But the music remains oddly subdued for a long time, and a mysterious unison melody does little to clear the air. Even when the rhythm changes to a livelier pattern in the middle section, it only serves to make the music more agitated, not necessarily more light-hearted. (This passage is very similar in its rhythm to the Overture from Rossini's *William Tell*, which

Shostakovich quoted, many years later, in his Fifteenth Symphony.) A long-held note in the viola connects this movement to the finale, which is the most talked-about part of the piece on account of his overt allusions to Jewish folk music. Yet Shostakovich reduces the klezmer patterns to just a few basic motivic figures, never allowing a full-fledged tune to emerge. For the most part, what we hear is more like the shadow of a Jewish tune than the real thing, which is hardly surprising four years after the end of the Holocaust. Once again, the music increases in volume and dissonance level until it positively cries out in despair. The Russian chant motif returns for a fleeting moment, before the evanescent ending.

The quartet was dedicated to the memory of Shostakovich's friend, the painter and set designer Pyotr Vilyams (1902-47), one of whose paintings hung in Shostakovich's studio. In her beautiful book on the Shostakovich quartets, Wendy Lesser reminds us that Vilyams had created the sets for the Bolshoy Theater's 1942 production of *William Tell*, which might help explain the allusion in the third movement of the quartet.

The melancholy tone and the sacred quotations did not exactly endear the quartet to the powers-that-be. Although the Ministry of Culture gave an official commission for the quartet (and paid the composer a fee), the work was not allowed to be heard in public until after Stalin's death.

String Quartet in G minor, Op. 27

Edvard Grieg

Born: Bergen, 1843

Died: Bergen, 1907

Composed: 1877-78

We have only one completed string quartet by Edvard Grieg, Norway's national composer who was also one of the most original musical creators of his time in general. Another quartet, written when Grieg was still a student, was lost; a third work, begun late in life, remained unfinished. The G-minor work stands as a supreme achievement, one of only a handful of large-scale compositions by a master who often preferred to express himself in shorter piano pieces, songs and orchestral suites made up of relatively brief movements. With historical hindsight, one may say that the Grieg quartet is a bridge between earlier 19th-century Romanticism and the modernistic tendencies of Debussy, whose own quartet (1892) was noticeably influenced by the present work.

The quartet was written in Norway's Hardanger area where Grieg spent many summers. The area is known for one of the country's most spectacular fjords, as well as the Hardanger fiddle, the special Norwegian folk violin whose reflection may be heard in the third movement in particular.

One of the principal innovations of this quartet is the use of a motto theme which appears in all movements. This cyclic idea, which Debussy also adopted in his quartet, is present in several of César Franck's later works as well, but Grieg was there first.

The motto came from a song, titled "Spillemand" ("Minstrel"), that Grieg wrote on a poem by Henrik Ibsen in 1876. In the poem, which was inspired by Norwegian folk tales, the narrator wants to learn the art of singing from a mysterious water spirit, in order to woo a girl; he becomes a great artist but has to pay by losing the girl to his own brother.

Grieg presented his motto very clearly in the quartet, in the resounding unison of all four instruments, right at the beginning. It is a darkly dramatic theme that sets the tone for the entire piece. The highly agitated first movement is filled with bold dissonances and wild accents, only occasionally relieved by more lyrical episodes (although those are derived from the motto theme as well). In the development section, the main theme goes through many keys and some highly unusual modulations, followed by a recapitulation that is an almost exact repetition of the first portion of the movement. The coda includes a mysterious section where the cello plays the motto theme against the tremolo accompaniment of the other instruments; this lyrical moment is brushed aside by the vigorous closing measures.

The second-movement *Romanza* opens with a beguiling lyrical melody that has its own share of harmonic surprises in store. This contrast with an *agitato* section with a new intrusion of the ominous motto theme, after which the lyrical theme returns in a more heavily ornamented form. In the final section of the movement, fragments of the two themes alternate rather brusquely, before the peaceful first theme wins out and closes the movement on an idyllic note.

The third-movement *Intermezzo*, whose main theme is once again based on the motto, observes the form and general characteristics of the scherzo, but its tone is more austere than playful. As a complete contrast, the Trio sounds like an authentic Norwegian folk dance—at least at the beginning, before Grieg adds some highly personal commentary to the folk-like tune. The *Intermezzo serio* is then repeated in full, as tradition demands, with a short coda

that brings back a short reminiscence of the folk dance.

After a brief introduction of a rather dark character, In final movement, Grieg presents the motto theme in the form of a *saltarello* (an Italian folk dance whose name comes from the word *saltare*, to jump). True to the name, the movement skips along in a lively manner, aside from a few

moments when the music becomes more relaxed or, on the contrary, more forceful. Grieg concludes with a final dissonant explosion, followed by an emphatic return of the motto theme in a grand solemn style (somewhat like at the beginning of the first movement), and a few energetic closing measures.

-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.