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THIRTY-NINTH SEASON

STUDE CONCERT HALL * ALICE PRATT BROWN HALL * RICE UNIVERSITY

TUESDAY, MAY 11, 1999, 8:00 P.M.

VERMEER QUARTET

Shmuel Ashkenasi, Violin • Mathias Tacke, Violin

Richard Young, Viola • Marc Johnson, Cello

Guest Artist: Ueli Wiget, Piano

PROGRAM

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)

Quartet in F Major, K. 590

Allegro moderato • Allegretto

Minuetto: Allegretto • Allegro

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1775)

Piano Quintet in G Minor, Op. 57

Prelude: Lento • Fugue: Adagio

Scherzo: Allegretto • Intermezzo: Lento • Finale: Allegretto

...Intermission...

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)

Quartet in D Major, Op. 44, No. 1

Molto allegro vivace • Minuetto: Un poco allegretto

Andante espressivo ma con moto • Presto con brio

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QUARTET IN F MAJOR, K. 590

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Mozart's Quartet in F Major, composed in 1790, was the third in a series of six quartets which he intended to write. As Mozart mentioned in a letter to Michael Puchberg, a wealthy Viennese merchant an musical amateur, these six quartets were to be dedicated to King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia, who himself played the cello. Only three of the quartets were ever written. As evident in further correspondence with Puchberg during the years of 1789-90, Mozart's worsening financial situation caused him to sell the first three quartets before the completion of the intended series. This quartet was the last string quartet that Mozart ever wrote—making a total of twenty-three.

The opening passage of the *Allegro moderato* consists of a unison ascending arpeggio, followed by a descending scale. Beginning softly, with a sudden change to *forte* on the descending scale, this motive serves to attract the listener's attention. The second theme is offered by the cello, the instrument that is often highlighted in the "Prussian" quartets. Beginning once again with an arpeggio, this theme spans a full two octaves. The movement ends with a light witty flourish in the first violin.

The *Allegretto* is based on a rhythmic figure, rather than on a melody. This figure, initially played together by all four instruments, is then varied and set forth in many different guises. Alfred Einstein, the noted Mozart scholar, said of this *Allegretto*: "One of the most sensitive movements in the whole literature of chamber music, it seems to mingle the bliss and sorrow of a farewell to life. How beautiful life has been! How sad! How brief!"

In the *Minuetto* and even more so in the *Trio*, there is frequent use of appoggiaturas, which are quick ornamental notes played right before, and joined to, the main note. In the *Minuetto* these are first found in the second and third measures and are played right before dotted half-notes. In the *Trio* the appoggiaturas are much more numerous and precede eighth-notes. Rather than writing typical four-measure phrases, Mozart uses seven-measure phrases in the *Minuetto*, and five-measure phrases in the *Trio*. These devices give the entire movement an eccentric quality.

The final movement makes use of fugal and contrapuntal techniques, as well as some surprise harmonies. There are sudden unexpected pauses and silences. Twelve bars before the end of the quartet, one can even hear a brief imitation of a bagpipe in the second violin and viola. The movement then builds to a somewhat abrupt ending.

This is the fourth performance of this work on a Friends of Music program; it was last played in September 1988.

Program notes by Margaret Gates Bragg.

PIANO QUINTET IN G MINOR, OP. 57

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

The Piano Quintet in G minor Op. 59 of Dimitri Shostakovich is a work on two levels—a technically masterful composition including an impressive display of Bachian counterpoint (the first two movements) and an overarching tribute to the human spirit. It was written in the second half of 1940. At the time of its writing Shostakovich was a professor of composition at the Leningrad Conservatory, teaching a curriculum extending from the Baroque to the 20th Century. He had recently premiered his controversial 6th Symphony, not at all the grandiose paean Stalin might have expected for his 60th birthday. The Great Terror—which saw hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens disappear, his wife's parents imprisoned, his sister sent into internal exile, and several of his artistic associates as well as his protector (one of Stalin's most brilliant generals) executed—was winding down as the threat of war in Europe grew. Shostakovich found inspiration and solace in Mussorgsky. Almost simultaneously with the

creation of his piano quintet he was re-orchestrating *Boris Godenov* "as a poultice for a wound. The times were difficult and mean, unbelievably mean and hard...." Mussorgsky provided "an entire academy of human relations, politics and art"—and a reaffirmation of his belief that "there should always be two layers in music." Mussorgsky had written: "music is a means of communication with people, not an aim in itself...the aim of art is to reproduce in musical sounds not merely feelings, but first and foremost, human speech" (and thus ideas). Of great significance for the Quintet was the Yurodivy—the Holy Fool—in Mussorgsky's opera. This essential literary character, akin to the Fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, had for centuries provided the means by which one could speak the truth to despots under the guise and protection of madness. This concept would have been very much on Shostakovich's mind as he was composing the Quintet.

The work starts out with a bleak, contrapuntal *Prelude* somewhat benumbed and devoid of sentiment. The second movement, a dark *Adagio* in the form of a classic fugue, raises the level of musical expression to one of sorrow, slipping towards the end into a long passage of deep grief. Hidden within this movement is the germ of several motifs in the last movement. The contrasting crudeness of the *Scherzo* which follows is *echt* Shostakovich, burlesquing the music for the masses demanded by Soviet cultural bureaucrats. Its opening phrase, an almost note-perfect quotation of an English folk tune to the words "hi ho, hi ho, we're off to the fair," sets the stage for a rural scene of vulgar stomping, crude modulations, empty repetitions, scratchy country fiddling and comical mistakes written into the piano part. The fourth movement, *Intermezzo-Lento,* is an impassioned, albeit dignified lament reminiscent in mood and harmonic economy of the scene in *Boris Godenov* outside the palace gates in which the Fool weeps for the unending calamity endured by the Russian people under the tyranny of its leaders. With this movement, the Quintet reaches an emotional level of grief now soaring outward into the public realm.

It is in the *Finale-Allegretto* that the influence of Mussorgsky's *Boris* is most discernible: the movement is dominated by two ideas—an innocent-sounding, sometimes light-hearted, sometimes naive, sometimes bucolic complex of short themes (the spirit fully revived and occasionally swelling to strident protest), interposed with circus music in gloomy disguise—the *Billboard March* of John Philip Sousa, a theme played all over the world to herald the Entry of the Clowns. The march is first heard in the strings soon after the opening bars, starting in the lower register, accent displaced onto the second note, creeping from below upside down, and tinted a menacing, even sinister hue by virtue of its setting in chromatic minor thirds and sixths. It reappears at intervals throughout the movement (interestingly, almost never right-side up) becoming louder and harsher each time, suggesting a world turned on its head by the menace of clowns—those in power and otherwise. Towards the movement's end the busy dialogue between the two forces is interrupted by an impassioned outburst from the Intermezzo. This quickly dies down, followed by a gentle spinning out of all the other motifs. The movement ends quite abruptly with the light-hearted theme skipping away without a backwards glance—the Fool teasing the Tyrant.

One needn't know anything about the composer's intent to respond to this music. Its greatness stands on its own. But how much more powerful it is to understand what Shostakovich was really about!

This is the Second performance of the Shostakovich Piano Quintet. The last performance was in 1972 by the Warsaw Quintet.

Program notes © by Nora Avins Klein with special thanks to Ian MacDonald (*The New Shostakovich* and other writings), April, 1999.

QUARTET IN D MAJOR, OP. 44 NO. 1

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Mendelssohn had married Cécile Jeanrenaud in March, 1837, and during their extended honeymoon composed the second and third of his Opus 44 quartets; but the D-major quartet was not completed until July of 1838, soon after the birth of his first son. This was a happy time for Mendelssohn, for his professional life was flourishing as well as personal life. He wrote the violinist Ferdinand David: "I have just finished my third Quartet, in D major, and like it much. I hope it may please you as well. I rather think it will, since it is more spirited and seems to me likely to be more grateful to the players than the others." This may explain why he placed the quartet first in the set when it was published.

The outer movements of this quartet are certainly "spirited." A rapid upward arpeggio over a busy accompaniment begins the first movement, and the energy lets up only enough for a little variety and contrast. The second subject is a quiet march-like theme played by all the instruments together. A canonic closing section leads to the development, which uses mostly material from the first theme.

As a contrast to the energetic first movement, the second is a flowing, melodious minuet. The minor key trio contains rapidly-moving eighth notes over sustained chords that reappear briefly after the minuet is repeated.

The third movement, marked *Andante espressivo ma con moto,* combines smooth melody with restless motion in the middle voices. Instead of the usual development section, the material from the exposition is developed in the recapitulation: the viola adds another countermelody to the first theme, and the second theme is in the minor. A long pedal-point trill in the first violin points to a brief coda that ends the movement quietly.

Like the finale of his Fourth Symphony, the "Italian," the *Presto con brio* is flavored with the rapid triplets of the Italian dance, the *saltarello*. A second more relaxed theme, highly characteristic of Mendelssohn's melody and harmony, gives some relief from the bustle of the rest of the movement. After some development in which the fast tempos are maintained but at a very soft dynamic, the movement ends with dramatic brilliance.

This is the fourth performance of this work on a Friends of Music Program; it was last played by the Brentano Quartet in December 1995.

Program notes by Edward Doughtie.

VERMEER QUARTET

Formed in 1969 at Marlboro, the Vermeer Quartet has performed in nearly every major city in North America, Europe, and Australia, and at the most prestigious music festivals, acquiring an international reputation as one of the world's finest ensembles. This season, in addition to playing throughout the United States, the Quartet will make three tours of Europe. The members of the Quartet have been on the Resident Artist Faculty of Northern Illinois University at DeKalb since 1970; and since 1984 they have been the resident quartet for Performing Arts Chicago. Their extensive repertoire includes many new works written especially for them as well as the standard classics. They have recorded the entire Beethoven cycle, as well as works by Schubert, Dvořák, Mendelssohn, Verdi, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky. Their recording of Haydn's "Seven Last Words of Christ" was nominated for a Grammy award, and was broadcast to over 60 million people throughout the world.