



Presents

THE AVIV STRING QUARTET

Benjamin Bowman, Violin
Evgenia Epshtein, Violin
Shuli Waterman, Viola
Rachel Mercer, Cello

Thursday, March 12, 2009

7:00 p.m.

-PROGRAM-

String Quartet in F minor op. 95 "Serioso" Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Allegro con brio
Allegretto ma non troppo
Allegro assai vivace ma serio
Larghetto espressivo-Allegretto agitato

String Quartet no. 2 in A major op 68 Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Overture (Moderato con moto)
Recitative and Romance (Adagio)
Waltz (Allegro)
Theme with Variations (Adagio)

-Intermission-

String Quartet No. 14 in D minor— Death and the Maiden, D810 Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Allegro
Andante con moto
Scherzo-Allegro molto
Presto

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String Quartet in F Minor, Opus 95, "Quartetto Serioso"

The composition of the F minor quartet was begun in late summer of 1810. The date of completion remains uncertain, but the premiere took place in May of 1814, in Vienna. Beethoven himself provided the "Quartetto Serioso" subtitle, evidently inventing a pseudo-Italian word for "quartet" in the process. That Beethoven was turning from the lengthy tradition of patronage by the nobility is seen in the fact that it is dedicated to a member of the middle class, Nicholas Zmeskall, his friend. In many respects, the work is strikingly different from the style employed by other composers of the time, and even from the style of Beethoven's other works up to this point. In fact, the composer himself said that it was "written for a small circle of connoisseurs and . . . never to be performed in public." The author Joseph Kerman has said that "it is not a pretty piece, but it is terribly strong . . ." The unusual (for the time) shifts in tonality employed, the high level of tension and the emotional extremes found within its pages, as well as its briefness, all contribute to its individuality.

The first movement (Beethoven's shortest) begins with a five-note motive, a pause and angry-sounding octaves which comprise the elements of a first theme, which is followed by two quieter ones. There is no repetition of the exposition of these themes (a break with tradition), a furious recapitulation, shortened, and a coda featuring further repeated statements of the opening motive as it dies away. It lasts barely over four minutes.

The second movement begins with an introduction in the cello that matches the quiet of the end of the first movement. The violin enters in measure five with other lyrical material but the viola then presents a fugal subject which is taken up by other instruments. A cello passage precedes a repetition of the fugal material. A recapitulation includes the fugal theme which gives way to a quiet close and harmony that links the movement immediately to the next.

The next movement (note that the term *serioso* is used again in the tempo marking) sees a return of violence and rapidity of motion. The form has been described as Scherzo-Trio-Scherzo-Trio-Scherzo. The trio material has been described as "chorale-like" with decorations added by the first violin.

A prefatory Larghetto of a darker character is heard before the main portion of the last movement. Some have related its style to other works of the period, such as the overture to Egmont. The *Allegretto agitato* uses "sonata rondo" form (ABACABA) but, possibly following the example of Mozart, the "A" is missing after the "C." A sudden appearance of radically different material occurs at the end of the movement—an *Allegro* described as "unpredictable" and "sunny."

String Quartet No. 2 in A Major, Opus 68

Shostakovich wrote fifteen string quartets, the first appearing in 1938. Quartet writing was not a persistent interest for him until the premiere of this second quartet, which was given by the Beethoven Quartet in Moscow on November 14, 1944. It had been written the previous September, in 19 days, at a composer's retreat in the forest of Ivanovo maintained by the Soviet government, and was dedicated to the then leading Soviet quartet composer, Vissarion Shebalin. Although it did not appear until the composer's life was half over, it was something of an opening of a door as far as his interest in the medium, and he composed a quartet every thirty months or so until his death.

The quartet chronologically and stylistically belongs to a group of works that reflect Shostakovich's wartime experiences. The group includes choruses and marches, the lengthy and extravagant "Leningrad" Symphony (1941), the darkly stressful Eighth Symphony (1943), and the Piano Trio No. 2 (summer, 1944). The latter work reflects the brutalities suffered by Russian Jews at the hands of the Nazis, including a theme that draws on Jewish tradition. This second quartet is long (40 minutes), and has been described as a "chamber symphony."

The first movement, called "Overture," is in traditional sonata-allegro form (two themes, repeated, developed and recapitulated), and is noted for its straightforward use of traditional harmony. One writer has found that the first theme reflects the 1944 confidence of the Russian populace and that a two-note motive found in the second theme is derived from the composer's Seventh Symphony and represent Stalin, no favorite of Shostakovich. This theme has been eliminated in the recapitulation.

In the second movement, "Recitative and Romance," more than one commentator has found the use of solo violin in cantorial style over sustained chords to reflect again the wartime agonies of the Jewish population. After a central episode, the return includes the "Stalin" motive in a lower register.

The third movement, "Waltz," has been described as an expression of "delicate melancholy." Another writer, who found "a sort of enticing and exciting mystery" and an "elevated inspiration and

femininity" was corrected by the composer himself, who, in dismissing the use of the term "femininity," said "More than anything else this is a *valse macabre*."

The fourth movement, "Theme with Variations," opens with a grave announcement followed by a set of fifteen variations on a theme found in his second trio. The theme has been described as being quite Russian-sounding. There are four lengthy variations at the onset. The seventh variation looks back to the style of the first movement and tension builds to the twelfth variation, described as "near-hysterical" in character. A resolute statement of the theme of the variations follows. One writer says of this statement: "Little doubt remains as to what this closing message is: the People will overcome, will be avenged." A stabilizing A-minor chord ends the work.

Quartet No. 14 in D Minor, D 810, "Death and the Maiden"

Schubert did not provide the subtitle "Death and the Maiden" for his quartet, but it has acquired this sobriquet because he borrowed the theme for its second movement from his 1817 song of that title. Dedicated to Ignaz Schuppanzigh, a Viennese quartet leader and friend of Beethoven, it is one of three late quartets of Schubert that are highly regarded for their depth of feeling and expressive power. Although in declining health in February and March of 1824, it was during this period that Schubert completed not only this quartet, but also his well-known Octet, and Quartet No. 13 in A minor, the first of the three late works mentioned above. "Death and the Maiden" has been described as "profound," "pure," and of a commanding nature. The long-standing approach of writers suggesting that the entire work is concerned with subject of death is less frequently assumed today and is weakened by the fact that Schubert drew on one of his own dances, from a set he wrote in 1823, for the themes of the scherzo movement.

The first movement is in expanded sonata form, and begins with a brief but compelling figure involving descending triplets, followed by silence, then heard again. It continually pushes other ideas forward, even turning up under the more lyric second theme. An energetic development follows, and an emotional climax is reached in the coda. The triplets persist in the quiet ending.

The second movement is a series of five variations, described as being "of the strictest construction," based on Schubert's 1817 song, in which he used the text by Matthias Claudius. Here he uses not the frightened exclamations of the girl, but the calming statements of Death, (" . . . You will sleep softly in my arms.") found in the piano accompaniment of the song. The final variation is both climactic and somber. In the coda, the viola has been said to depict the slowing of the girl's heartbeat.

The third movement is in ABA form, and uses one of his own dances (No. 6) from his set of twelve German Dances (D 790), written the previous year. The vigorous and forcible first section, in minor mode, and featuring syncopations, is a marked contrast to the peaceful flow of the trio. Section "A" is repeated without change.

The fourth movement has been described by one writer as being derived from the Italian dance, the tarantella, and by another as being a different Italian dance, the saltarello. The first involved manic dancing to cure a spider's bite and the second involved the violent execution of leaps. One writer has suggested that if this movement is concerned with death, one must conclude that the quick and the dead are one and the same. In sonata rondo form, the second theme is chordal in nature. There is a rather brief development, and the recapitulation starts with the second (chordal) theme. A driving coda, marked *prestissimo* is concluded by subject is concluded by the four performers each playing quadruple stops, yielding sixteen sounding pitches.

-Notes by H. Bruce Lobaugh

Original German

Das Mädchen:
Vorüber! Ach, vorüber!
Geh, wilder Knochenmann!
Ich bin noch jung, geh Lieber!
Und rühre mich nicht an.

Der Tod:
Gib deine Hand, du schön und zart
Gebild!
Bin Freund, und komme nicht, zu
strafen.
Sei gutes Muts! ich bin nicht wild,
Sollst sanft in meinen Armen schlafen!

English Translation

The Maiden:
Stay away! Oh, stay away!
Go, fierce Death!
I am still young, please go!
And do not touch me.

Death:
Give me your hand, you beautiful and tender vision!
I am a friend, and come not to hurt you.
Be of good cheer! I am not cruel,
You will sleep softly in my arms!