

Program Notes

Piano Quintet in G minor, Op. 57

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born: 1906

Died: 1975

Composed: 1940

- I. Prelude. Lento
- II. Fugue. Adagio
- III. Scherzo. Allegretto
- IV. Intermezzo. Lento — Appassionato
- V. Finale. Allegretto

Shostakovich's Piano Quintet, one of his most appealing and straightforward works, has come in for a hard time from certain critics, and perhaps for strange reasons. Written in 1940, several years after the Pravda attack on Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*—an attack that nearly destroyed his career—the Piano Quintet received the Stalin Prize. That fact alone has been enough to destroy it for some Western critics, who feel that any music associated—however remotely—with Stalin's name and the approval of the Soviet government must be without merit, and must represent a capitulation to inferior artistic ideals.

A very different sort of criticism came from another source. Sergei Prokofiev said of Shostakovich's Piano Quintet: "What astonishes me about the Quintet is that so young a composer, at the height of his powers, should be so very much on his guard, and so carefully calculate every note. He never takes a single risk. One looks in vain for an impetus, a venture." One might note here that a composer who regarded the young Shostakovich as a rival may not be the most impartial of critics and also that a composer whose career had nearly been iced by the Soviet government might well be "very much on his guard."

Whatever the critical reactions to it, the Piano Quintet has proven quite popular with one important faction of musical life: audiences. While it is true that the Piano Quintet is conservative in its musical language, it is also unfailingly melodic, fresh, and good-natured, and—despite the

reaction of some of its critics—remains one of Shostakovich's most frequently performed and recorded works.

Some have claimed to hear the influence of Bach in the first two movements: a Prelude and a Fugue. The piano alone plays the broad-ranging Prelude theme and is soon joined by the strings. The *Poco più mosso* second theme is also first heard in the piano, which has a very prominent role throughout the Quintet (Shostakovich himself played the piano at the first performance, on November 23, 1940, in Moscow). The beginning of the Fugue, however, belongs to the strings, which introduce the muted and somber main subject. The music rises to a great climax, then falls back to end very quietly. By contrast, the Scherzo explodes with life. In a hard-driving 3/4, this music powers furiously ahead, its rhythm pounding into one's consciousness. The movement is also full of brilliant color: glissandos, pizzicatos, left-hand pizzicatos, instruments playing in their highest registers. Particularly effective is the ending, which rushes ahead without the slightest relaxation of tempo to the sudden, surprising cadence.

The final two movements are connected. The Intermezzo opens with a pizzicato line over which the first violin sings a long cantilena of unusual beauty. Gradually the other instruments enter, the music rises to a dramatic climax, then subsides, and out of that calm emerges the Finale. The last movement is the gentlest of the five. Far from storming the heavens, this music remains sunlit and rhapsodic. It is based on two themes—the piano's gentle opening melody and an angular second theme first heard in the piano over the strings' powerful triplets. Shostakovich develops both these ideas before bringing the Quintet to a conclusion that is pleasing precisely for its understatement: the music grows quiet and suddenly vanishes on three quiet strokes of sound derived from the Finale's opening theme.

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Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 34

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born: 1833

Died: 1897

Composed: 1864

- I. Allegro non troppo
- II. Andante, un poco adagio
- III. Scherzo. Allegro
- IV. Finale. Poco sostenuto —
Allegro non troppo

Brahms began work on the music that would eventually become his Piano Quintet in F minor during the summer of 1862, when he was 29 years old and still living in Hamburg. As first conceived, however, this music was not a piano quintet. Brahms originally composed it as a string quintet—string quartet plus an extra cello—and almost surely he took as a model the great String Quintet in C Major of Schubert, a composer he very much admired. But when Joseph Joachim and colleagues played through the string quintet for the composer, all who heard it felt it unsatisfactory: an ensemble of strings alone could not satisfactorily project the power of this music. So Brahms set out to remedy this—he returned to the score during the winter of 1863–64 and recast it as a sonata for two pianos. Once again the work was judged not wholly successful—it had all the power the music called for, but this version lacked the sustained sonority possible with strings that much of this music seemed to demand. Among those confused by the two-piano version was Clara Schumann, who offered the young composer a completely different suggestion: “Its skillful combinations are interesting throughout, it is masterly from every point of view, but—it is not a sonata, but a work whose ideas you might—and must—scatter, as from a horn of plenty, over an entire orchestra . . . Please, dear Johannes, for this once take my advice and recast it.”

Recast it Brahms did, but not for orchestra. Instead, during the summer and fall of 1864 he arranged it for piano and string quartet, combining the dramatic impact of the two-piano version with the string sonority of the original quintet. In this form it has come down to us today, one

of the masterpieces of Brahms’ early years, and it remains a source of wonder that music that sounds so right in its final version could have been conceived for any other combination of instruments. Clara Schumann, who had so much admired her husband’s piano quintet, found Brahms’ example a worthy successor, describing it as “a very special joy to me” (Brahms published the two-piano version as his Opus 34b, and it is occasionally heard in this form, but he destroyed all the parts of the string quintet version).

The Piano Quintet shows the many virtues of the young Brahms—strength, lyricism, ingenuity, nobility—and presents them in music of unusual breadth and power. This is big music: if all the repeats are taken, the Quintet can stretch out to nearly three-quarters of an hour, and there are moments when the sheer sonic heft of a piano and string quartet together makes one understand why Clara thought this music might be most effectively presented by a symphony orchestra.

The Quintet is also remarkable for young Brahms’ skillful evolution of his themes: several of the movements derive much of their material from the simplest of figures, which are then developed ingeniously. The very beginning of the Allegro non troppo is a perfect illustration. In octaves, first violin, cello, and piano present the opening theme, which ranges dramatically across four measures and then comes to a brief pause. Instantly the music seems to explode with vitality above an agitated piano figure. But the piano’s rushing sixteenth-notes are simply a restatement of the opening theme at a much faster tempo, and this compression of material marks the entire movement—that opening theme will reappear in many different forms. A second subject in E Major, marked dolce and sung jointly by viola and cello, also spins off a wealth of secondary material, and the extended development leads to a quiet coda, marked poco sostenuto. The tempo quickens as the music powers its way to the resounding chordal close.

In sharp contrast, the Andante, un poco Adagio sings with a quiet charm. The piano’s gently-rocking opening theme, lightly echoed

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by the strings, gives way to a more animated and flowing middle section before the opening material reappears, now subtly varied. Matters change sharply once again with the C minor Scherzo, which returns to the dramatic mood of the first movement. The cello's ominous pizzicato C hammers insistently throughout, and once again Brahms wrings surprising wealth from the simplest of materials: a nervous, stuttering sixteenth-note figure is transformed within seconds into a heroic chorale for massed strings, and later Brahms generates a brief fugal section from this same theme. The trio section breaks free of the darkness of the scherzo and slips into C Major sunlight for an all-too-brief moment of quiet nobility before the music returns to C minor and a da capo repeat.

The finale opens with strings alone, reaching upward in chromatic uncertainty before the Allegro non troppo main theme steps out firmly in the cello. The movement seems at first to be a rondo, but this is a rondo with unexpected features: it offers a second theme, sets the rondo

theme in unexpected keys, and transforms the cello's healthy little opening tune in music of toughness and turbulence.

Clara Schumann, who had received the dedication of her husband's quintet, was instrumental in the dedication of Brahms' Princess Anna of Hesse had heard Brahms and Clara perform this music in its version for two pianos and was so taken with it that Brahms dedicated not only that version to the princess but the Piano Quintet as well. When the princess asked Clara what she might send Brahms as a measure of her gratitude, Clara had a ready suggestion. And so Princess Anna sent Brahms a treasure that would remain his prized possession for the rest of his life: Mozart's manuscript of the Symphony No. 40 in G minor.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger