

**JULY 5, 2024**

## PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

### **String Quartet in A minor, Op. 13** **FELIX MENDELSSOHN**

Born: 1809  
Died: 1847  
Composed: 1827

- I. Adagio – Allegro Vivace
- II. Adagio non lento
- III. Intermezzo. Allegretto con moto – Allegro di molto
- IV. Presto – Adagio non lento

Mendelssohn never met Beethoven, but he regarded Beethoven as a god. In 1827, only months after Beethoven's death, Mendelssohn wrote his String Quartet in A minor. This quartet seems obsessed by the Beethoven quartets, both in theme-shape and musical gesture, and countless listeners have wondered about the significance of these many references.

The Quartet in A minor opens with a slow introduction that evokes memories of Beethoven's Quartet in A minor, Opus 132. The second movement also begins with a slow introduction, an Adagio that has reminded some of the Cavatina movement of Beethoven's String Quartet in B-flat Major, Opus 130. The main body of the movement is fugal, based on a subject that appears to be derived from Beethoven's String Quartet in F minor, Opus 95.

The charming Intermezzo is the one "non-Beethoven" movement in the quartet. In ABA form, it opens with a lovely violin melody over pizzicato accompaniment from the other voices. The sonata-form finale opens with a stormy recitative for first violin that was clearly inspired by the recitative that prefaces the finale of Beethoven's String Quartet in E-flat Major, Opus 127.

What are we to make of the many references to Beethoven's late quartets in this quartet by the teenaged Mendelssohn? Are they imitation? The effort of a young man to take on the manner of an older master? An act of homage? There may be no satisfactory answers to these questions, but Mendelssohn's Quartet in A minor—the work of an extremely talented young man still finding his way as a composer—is accomplished music in its own right: graceful, skillfully made, and finally very pleasing.

## CONCERT

### **Duo for Viola and Cello in E-flat Major,** **WoO 32, "Eyeglasses"**

### **LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN**

Born: 1770  
Died: 1827  
Composed: 1795-96

- I. Allegro
- II. Minuet. Allegretto – Trio

Soon after he arrived in Vienna in November 1792, Beethoven became friends with Baron Nikolaus Zmeskall von Domanowecz (1759-1833). Zmeskall was an interesting figure. An official in the Hungarian chancellery in Vienna, he was a good amateur cellist who hosted chamber music evenings in his own home; he also cut the quill pens that Beethoven liked and used. Many of Beethoven's friendships ended badly, but he and Zmeskall remained good friends throughout the composer's life. Beethoven and Zmeskall corresponded regularly (Beethoven's final letter to Zmeskall came from his deathbed), and Zmeskall saved all of the composer's letters—they remain one of the best sources of Beethoven's private thinking.

Early in their friendship—about 1795-96—Beethoven wrote a little piece for viola and cello that the two could play together. Both he and Zmeskall wore glasses when they played, and Beethoven gave the piece a light-hearted name: Duett mit zwei obligaten Augengläsern ("Duet Requiring Two Pair of Eyeglasses"). The Duet is a little sonata-form movement in E-flat Major. This is very genial music, and it is not particularly difficult for the performers. Many have noted that the opening theme of the Duet bears a strong resemblance to the second theme of the first movement of Beethoven's String Quartet in C minor, which he was composing at this same time. But the Duet is without the violence of that quartet movement—it remains an excellent example of Hausmusik: music to be played at home just for fun.

## Bagatelles for String Trio and Harmonium, Op. 47

### ANTONÍN DVORÁK

Born: 1841

Died: 1904

Composed: 1878

- I. Allegretto scherzando
- II. Tempo di minuetto. Grazioso
- III. Allegretto scherzando
- IV. Canon. Andante con moto
- V. Poco allegro

Dvořák's Bagatelles come from a very specific moment in his life and were scored for an ensemble that includes a very specific instrument. The year 1878 was crucial to Dvořák's success as a composer. After decades of obscurity and struggle, that year he composed the first set of his Slavonic Dances, the music that would send his name around the world. He was 37 years old, and success—however late it came—would be sweet. He finished the Slavonic Dances in March 1878, and during the first twelve days of May he composed a much more modest work, written for the pleasure of amateur musicians and scored for a quartet made up of two violins, cello, and harmonium. Dvořák called this piece *Maličkosti*, Czech for “bagatelles.” He felt no reservations about writing lighter music for amateur musicians—a few years later, while writing a different work, he said: “I am now writing some small Bagatelles for two violins and viola, and this work gives me just as much pleasure as if I were composing a great symphony.”

The distinctive instrument in this quartet is the harmonium, a small (often portable) reed organ operated by a treadle pumped by the player's feet. Invented as recently as 1842, the harmonium became popular in the late-nineteenth century, particularly for the many transcriptions of orchestral music made for it. Curiously, Arnold Schoenberg was one of those most attracted to this instrument, and he arranged a number of orchestral works for it for performance in Vienna early in the twentieth century. The harmonium makes a rich but gentle sound, and that subdued sound is an important part of the character of the Bagatelles, for it nicely complements the sound of the strings above it.

The Bagatelles may have been written for amateur musicians to play at home but those amateurs had better be pretty good: the first violin part in particular is often set in the instrument's highest range, and it

demands an accomplished player. All five movements have considerable melodic charm, and music this attractive hardly requires detailed description. Perhaps a line or two will suffice. The opening movement, marked *Allegretto scherzando*, makes use of the Czech folk-tune *Hraly dudy*, and this melody will recur in various forms throughout the Bagatelles. This opening movement, with the two violins weaving effortlessly between unexpected keys as the cello offers pizzicato accompaniment, is particularly appealing. The second movement is a minuet, but the most distinctive thing about it is its fundamental pulse: the rhythm of a dotted quarter can be heard in every single measure of this piece. The third movement is based on a variant of the folk-tune heard in the first movement, while the fourth is a canon. This canon proceeds at first on a dialogue between first violin and cello (the second violin sits out the opening section of the piece), then grows more complex in the latter stages of the movement. Dvořák makes the concluding *Poco Allegro* a crisp polka; its middle section recalls the folk-tune from the first movement, then the polka returns to dance the Bagatelles to their graceful close.

## Piano Quintet in G minor, Op. 30

### SERGEI TANEYEV

Born: 1856

Died: 1915

Composed: 1801

- I. Introduzione. Adagio Mesto — Allegro patetico
- II. Scherzo. Presto
- III. Largo
- IV. Finale. Allegro vivace

Serge Taneyev was Tchaikovsky's most successful student. He studied composition with Tchaikovsky at the Moscow Conservatory, gave the Moscow premiere of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto in December 1875 when he was only 19, succeeded Tchaikovsky as professor of composition at the Conservatory, and remained a lifelong friend of the older composer. As a teacher at the Conservatory, Taneyev had a number of distinguished students, but—alarmed by the Conservatory's elitist standards and moved by the revolutionary sentiments in the air—Taneyev resigned from the faculty in 1905 and formed his own “People's Conservatory” in Moscow that would offer instruction even to those unable to pay. He died from the pneumonia he contracted at the funeral of one of his best students, Scriabin.

Taneyev occupies a unique position among turn-of-the-century Russian composers in that he rejected all

forms of nationalistic music, whether folk tunes or dance rhythms, in favor of the classical forms of Western music. Technically he was perhaps the best-equipped of any Russian composer, though some have regretted his insistence on cutting himself off from anything innately Russian in his own music. Among his compositions are four symphonies, nine quartets, three quintets, an opera, and numerous choral works.

Taneyev composed his Piano Quintet in G minor in the years 1908-10, just after leaving the Moscow Conservatory. This is big music: its four movements stretch out over three-quarters of an hour, and Taneyev generates a huge volume of sound from these five instruments. It is also well-integrated music: it opens with a slow introduction marked *mesto* ("sad"), and the piano's opening figure will become the fundamental theme-shape for the entire quintet. This shape evolves into the movement's main theme when the music leaps ahead at the *Allegro patetico*. In this case, *patetico* means not "pathetic" but "expressive" or "intense," and intense this movement certainly is. The flowing second subject (also built on the opening shape) brings some calm, but it is the gigantic scope of this movement that impresses most. Taneyev's markings range from triple *forte* and *drammaticamente* to frequent admonitions to keep the music *cantabile*, *dolce*, *espressivo*. Despite these interludes of calm, the movement drives with unremitting force through the tense G-minor cadence.

The pleasing Scherzo is much lighter, sparkling along on the piano's staccato triplets and the strings' ricochet bowing. There is unusual metric variety here: into a fundamental pulse of 6/8(2/4), Taneyev alters the meter in such ways that the same meter can feel completely different—these subtle shifts of pulse are part of the music's charm. Another part is its good spirits: Taneyev at one point marks the score *con allegrezza*: "with mirth." The theme-shape from the very beginning returns here in the trio and in the coda, which drives to a sudden ending.

The remarkable Largo is built around an ostinato-like theme stamped out by all five players and then repeated in some form throughout the movement. Above this, Taneyev spins out a variety of expressive music, alternating passages for strings alone with extended writing for solo piano. The movement rises to a *passionato* climax before falling away to the effective ending, where the ostinato theme—so powerful throughout—dissolves quietly at the close. The tumultuous finale is built on material from earlier movements—in fact, when the main theme takes wing, Taneyev marks it *pateticamente*. This is a dramatic movement, full-throated in its rhetoric, and it drives to an extraordinarily sonorous close.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger