

# JANUARY 28, 2024

## PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

### **String Quartet in D Major, Op. 20, No. 4** **FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN**

Born: 1732

Died: 1809

Composed: 1772

- I. Allegro di molto
- II. Un poco adagio affettuoso
- III. Menuetto. Allegretto alla zingarese – Trio
- IV. Presto scherzando

Haydn completed the six quartets that make up his Opus 20 in 1772, about a decade into his tenure as kapellmeister for Prince Esterhazy. Though these quartets are relatively early (they are contemporaneous with his Symphonies 43-47), they have already left the old multi-movement divertimento form far behind and show the characteristics of Haydn's great quartets: virtuosity, balance and interplay of four equal voices (this quartet has a distinguished cello part), and an expressive musical substance.

Though almost consciously non-dramatic, the opening Allegro di molto of the Quartet in D Major is striking in many ways. It is in 3/4, rather than the duple meter expected in opening movements, and its smooth first theme extends over an unusually long span. In various forms and tonalities, this theme will dominate the first movement—there is no true “contrasting” second theme. The restrained quality of the main theme is set in high relief by the vigorous triplets of the first violin part, and after an extensive development in unexpected keys the movement comes to an understated close.

The glory of this quartet is its second movement, a set of variations marked “Somewhat slow and affectionate, tender.” The first violin lays out the long main theme in D minor, and there follow three extended variations: the second violin dominates the first, the cello the second, and the first violin the third. Haydn repeatedly reminds his performers to play dolce throughout this movement, which brings back the main theme after the third variation and treats it to a long coda full of dramatic outbursts before the quiet close.

Haydn's marking for the third movement is important as well. This is the expected minuet, but Haydn specifies that it should be alla zingarese, which means “à la gypsy.” It is full of accents and stinging attacks, and the minuet theme is syncopated in a way that gives it the effect of being in 2/4, though the movement is in the standard minuet meter of 3/4. By complete contrast, the trio section, smooth and flowing, belongs to the cello. This entire movement rushes past in 100 seconds.

Almost exotic in its manic energy, the sparkling Presto e scherzando seems to be made up of many quite different components: a virtuoso first violin part, huge dotted cadences and a great deal of unison writing, sizzling runs, and fortissimo attacks set off by Haydn's deft use of silences. It forms a brilliant conclusion to a very pleasing piece of music, and the very ending—where all the energy evaporates and the piece just winks out—is particularly effective.

## CONCERT

### **Piano Trio in C Major, K. 548** **WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART**

Born: 1756

Died: 1791

Composed: 1788

- I. Allegro
- II. Andante cantabile
- III. Allegro

The summer of 1788 was that miraculous, tortured period in Mozart's brief life when—working at white heat—he completed his final three symphonies in the space of six weeks. But what is just as remarkable is the fact that he was writing other music at this time as well. He completed the Symphony No. 39 on June 26, 1788, and over the next several weeks wrote two piano sonatas, a violin sonata, and the Trio in C Major (written in one day: July 14) before turning to his Symphony No. 40, which he completed on July 25. Making this achievement even more remarkable were the wretched conditions of Mozart's life at this time: his infant daughter Theresia died on June 27, and he was reduced to begging for financial aid from his friends.

Given these circumstances, one might expect the Trio in C Major to be a profound human statement on the level of the late symphonies. But this accomplished music has come in for a hard time from critics, perhaps for no other reason than that it is not like the final three symphonies. In *The New Grove Dictionary* Stanley Sadie sniffs that it "is polished but somewhat routine in its materials and its procedures," while Alfred Einstein suggests that "one has the impression that Mozart was saving all his powers in the key of C for the 'Jupiter' Symphony." Such reactions are much too harsh.

The opening of the first movement curiously anticipates the opening movement of Beethoven's First Symphony, which would not be written until twelve years later, but the real glory of this movement comes in its development, which is full of harmonic surprises. It makes a sudden excursion into dark C minor, and the plaintive fall of the melodic line here foreshadows the intense chromaticism of the Symphony No. 40, which Mozart would compose the following week. This uncertain tonality continues until almost the final measures, when the movement concludes in resplendent C major.

The broad-spanned Andante cantabile does indeed sing, and its flowing lines and elaborate decoration have led some to sense the influence of the French rococo here. This movement also features something unusual in Mozart's chamber music: a prominent melodic role for the cello. The concluding Allegro is a good-natured rondo that has, in the development of its nimble main theme, some of the ornate decoration that marked the second movement.

## String Quartet No. 2 in C Major, Op. 36

### BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Born: 1913

Died: 1976

Composed: 1945

- I. Allegro calmo senza rigore
- II. Vivace
- III. Chacony. Sostenuto

On November 21, 1945, an unusual concert took place in London's Wigmore Hall. That day was the 250th anniversary of the death of Henry Purcell, universally acclaimed England's first great composer, and one of those represented on the program was Benjamin Britten. Britten, whose opera *Peter Grimes* had been triumphantly premiered six months earlier, had a lifelong passion for Purcell's music. The following

year he would write his *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, based on a great Purcell theme, and he would make arrangements of Purcell's vocal music throughout his career, as well as a string orchestra version of Purcell's Chaconne in G Minor. That anniversary concert saw the premiere of an original work by Britten that paid tribute to the earlier master, the String Quartet No. 2. Britten's tribute to Purcell in this quartet is oblique: he quotes no music of Purcell, but the last movement—which dominates the structure—makes use of a technique that Britten associated with the earlier composer.

The quartet is in three movements, and it is original from its first instant. Rather than adopting a standard sonata form, which opposes and contrasts material, Britten builds the opening Allegro calmo senza rigore on three themes, all of which are announced in the first few measures and all of which are similar: all three themes begin with the upward leap of a tenth. The movement is centered around the key of C major, and the first statement of the theme begins on middle C, with each successive statement rising higher in the quartet's register. The exposition of these three themes becomes so complex that a clear division of the movement into development and recapitulation is lost, and at the climax Britten is able to make all three themes coalesce into one simultaneous statement before the music falls away to a quiet close.

The Vivace is a blistering—and very brief—scherzo in ternary form. Britten mutes the instruments throughout and moves to C minor for the outer sections; the music feels consciously nervous, skittering and driving constantly ahead. The central section, in F major and based on a variant of the scherzo theme, brings little relaxation—the sense of nervous energy continues even in the major tonality.

The massive final movement—nearly as long as the first two movements combined—brings the tribute to Purcell. Britten calls this movement Chacony, the English name for the chaconne. This is a variation form: a ground bass in triple time repeats constantly, while a composer spins out variations above each repetition. As noted, Britten very much admired Purcell's Chaconne in G Minor, and in tribute to the older composer he writes a chaconne as his finale. It is built on 21 repetitions of the nine-bar ground bass, which is presented in unison (in B-flat major) at the start of the movement. Britten groups his variations imaginatively: the first six are followed by a cello cadenza, the next six by a viola cadenza, the next six by a violin cadenza, and the final three drive to a conclusion that ringingly affirms C major.

## Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor, Op. 49

### FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Born: 1809

Died: 1847

Composed: 1839

- I. Molto allegro agitato
- II. Andante con moto tranquillo
- III. Scherzo. Leggiero e vivace
- IV. Finale. Allegro assai appassionato

From 1835 until 1846 Mendelssohn was conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. Not only were these the happiest and most productive years of the composer's life, but they also marked one of the most distinguished associations ever between a conductor and an orchestra. During his tenure in Leipzig, Mendelssohn raised both performance standards and the salaries of the players, lengthened the season, and worked hard to introduce unfamiliar music to new audiences, seeking out the music of both contemporary and forgotten composers. Once the busy concert season was over, Mendelssohn would use the summer to rest and compose. In the summer of 1839—shortly after he had conducted the premiere of Schubert's "Great" Symphony in C Major—Mendelssohn took his wife and young children to Frankfurt for a rest. He had long intended to write chamber music that would include piano, and on June 6 he set to work on the Trio in D Minor. The score was finished on July 18, but Mendelssohn continued to tinker with it until the end of the summer, and he was the pianist at the trio's premiere in Leipzig on February 1, 1840.

Impassioned, full of good tunes, and beautifully written for the three instruments, the Trio in D Minor has always been an audience favorite. Both the trio and its composer were extravagantly praised in Robert Schumann's review of the premiere:

*It is the master trio of today, as in their day were those of Beethoven in B flat and D, as was that of Schubert in E flat; a wholly fine composition, that, when years have passed away, will delight grandchildren. Mendelssohn is the Mozart of the nineteenth century, the brightest among musicians, the one who looks most clearly of all through the contradictions of time, and reconciles us to them.*

What Schumann meant by that final line has been open to some debate—Mendelssohn's music hardly seems to admit the existence of contradictions, let alone resolve them—but there is no denying this trio's appeal.

The opening *Molto allegro ed agitato* is dramatic music, and Mendelssohn's performance markings suggest the kind of performance he wanted—in the score continually admonishes the performers that their playing should be *animato*, *agitato*, and *marcato*. An unusual feature of this movement is that it is the cello that introduces both principal themes: the dramatic opening subject and the flowing second theme, which Mendelssohn marks *cantabile*.

The *Andante con molto tranquillo* brings sharp contrast. Piano alone has the serene opening melody, a continuous flow of song, and the violin and cello are frequently cast in supporting roles here, decorating and embellishing the piano's music. The *Scherzo—Leggiero e vivace*—is one of those fleet and graceful fast movements that only Mendelssohn could write (and which he could apparently write at will). It sounds very much like the scampering fairyland scenes from his incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but it also brings some surprises: this *Scherzo* is in 6/8 rather than the expected 3/4, and it has no trio section.

The finale returns to the mood and manner of the dramatic opening movement. Mendelssohn marks it "Very fast and impassioned," and the music sometimes drives to moments of an almost orchestral intensity. The second theme-group arrives on a big, soaring cello tune, and Mendelssohn alternates these quite different kinds of music before a superheated coda drives the trio to its emphatic conclusion, now firmly in D major.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger