CONCERT PROGRAM II:

Quartet Dimensions

JULY 21

Sunday, July 21, 6:00 p.m., The Center for Performing Arts at Menlo-Atherton

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The string quartet medium, arguably the spinal column of the chamber music literature, did not exist in Bach’s lifetime. Yet even here, Bach’s legacy is inescapable. The fugues of his seminal The Well-Tempered Clavier inspired no less a genius than Mozart, who arranged a set of them for string quartet. The influence of Bach’s architectural mastery permeates the ingenious Quinten Quartet of Joseph Haydn, the father of the modern string quartet, and even Dmitry Shostakovich’s Piano Quintet, composed nearly two hundred years after Bach’s death. The centerpiece of Beethoven’s Opus 132—the Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit (“A Convalescent’s Holy Song of Thanksgiving to the Divinity”)—recalls another Bachian signature: the Baroque master’s sacred chorales.

SPECIAL THANKS

Music@Menlo dedicates this performance to Iris and Paul Brest with gratitude for their generous support.

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756–1791)

Fugue in E-flat Major, BWV 876, and Fugue in d minor, BWV 877, from Das wohltemperierte Klavier; arr. String Quartets nos. 7 and 8, K. 405

JOSEPH HAYDN (1732–1809)

String Quartet in d minor, op. 76, no. 2, Quinten (1796)

Allegro
Andante o più tosto allegretto
Minuetto: Allegro ma non troppo
Finale: Vivace assai

Danish String Quartet: Frederik Øland, Rune Tønsgaard Sørensen, violins; Asbjørn Nørgaard, viola; Fredrik Schøyen Spålin, cello

DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975)

Piano Quintet in g minor, op. 57 (1940)

Prelude
Fugue
Scherzo
Intermezzo
Finale

Gilbert Kalish, piano; Danish String Quartet: Frederik Øland, Rune Tønsgaard Sørensen, violins; Asbjørn Nørgaard, viola; Fredrik Schøyen Spålin, cello

INTERMISSION

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

String Quartet no. 15 in a minor, op. 132 (1824–1825)

Assai sostenuto – Allegro
Allegro ma non tanto
Molto adagio (Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Ton)
Alla marcia, assai vivace
Allegro appassionato

Danish String Quartet: Frederik Øland, Rune Tønsgaard Sørensen, violins; Asbjørn Nørgaard, viola; Fredrik Schøyen Spålin, cello

Kai Rösler (b. 1957)

St. Thomas Church, Leipzig, 2010, where Bach was Music Director from 1723 to 1750

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Program Notes: Quartet Dimensions

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH
(Born March 21, 1685, Eisenach; died July 28, 1750, Leipzig)

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
(Born January 27, 1756, Salzburg; died December 5, 1791, Vienna)

Fugue in E-flat Major, BWV 876, and Fugue in d minor, BWV 877, from Das wohltemperierte Klavier; arr. String Quartets nos. 7 and 8, K. 405
Composed: ca. 1740
Arranged: 1782

Other works from this period: Symphony no. 34 in C Major, K. 338 (1780); Symphony no. 35 in D Major, K. 385 (1782); Symphony no. 36 in C Major, K. 425 (1785); String Quartet in G Major, K. 387 (1782); String Quartet in d minor, K. 421 (1783); Fantasy in d minor, K. 397 (1782); Piano Quartet in g minor, K. 478 (1785)
Approximate duration: 5 minutes

In the early 1780s, Mozart was a frequent visitor to the home of the Baron Gottfried van Swieten, an imperial official at the Viennese court as well as a great music lover and amateur composer. Van Swieten hosted Sunday salons, at which Mozart would play and study the fugues of Bach and Handel. By exploring these works, Mozart steadily developed his own facility at composing fugues, a musical form prevalent during the Baroque period in which multiple voices enter in turn, playing the same musical idea (called a subject), creating a polyphonic conversation. Mozart wrote in a letter to his father:

The Baron van Swieten, to whom I go every Sunday, gave me all the works of Handel and Sebastian Bach to take home with me after I had played them to him. When Constanze heard the fugues, she absolutely fell in love with them. Now she will listen to nothing but fugues and, particularly, the works of Handel and Bach. Well, as she often has heard me play fugues out of my head, she asked me if I had ever written any down, and when I said I had not, she scolded me roundly for not recording some of my compositions in this most artistic and beautiful of musical forms and never ceased to entreat me until I wrote down a fugue for her.

Mozart’s arrangements of five fugues from Bach’s The Well-Tempered Clavier, K. 405, are one of several experiments with this form. Other examples include another set of Bach fugue arrangements, K. 404a, and the Fugue in c minor for Two Pianos, K. 426, later rearranged for string quartet as the Adagio and Fugue, K. 546. (This is not to mention the untold number of improvised fugues played for the entertainment of audiences ranging from his wife to Emperor Joseph II. Some of these have been lost, but more were lamentably never written down.) In any event, Mozart’s fascination with fugal writing—and with the fugues of Bach in particular—formed an integral part of the development of his craft. Biographer Julian Rushton writes, “Perhaps no composer since the young Purcell had so fructified his own style by earnest wrestling with the practices of a bygone era.”
—Patrick Castillo

JOSEPH HAYDN
(Born March 31, 1732, Rohrau, Lower Austria; died May 31, 1809, Vienna)

String Quartet in d minor, op. 76, no. 2. Quinten
Composed: 1796
Published: June 1797
Other works from this period: String Quartet no. 66 in G Major and String Quartet no. 67 in F Major, op. 77, Lobkowitz (1799); String Quartet in C Major, op. 76, no. 3, Emperor (1797); Mass no. 12 in B-Flat Major, Theresienmesse (1799); The Seasons, Hob. XXI: 3 (1799–1801); Symphony no. 104 in D Major (1795)
Approximate duration: 23 minutes

Franz Joseph Haydn spent much of his career serving as Kapellmeister to the immensely wealthy Esterhazy family in Vienna. Hired by Prince Paul Anton (1711–1762) as Vice-Kapellmeister in 1761, Haydn was elevated to the prestigious position of Kapellmeister by Anton’s successor, Nicolaus, in 1766. Nicolaus, a baryton player, was Haydn’s most significant benefactor and a generous financial supporter; the fruits of this relationship included much of Haydn’s grand oeuvre of symphonic and chamber works. Prince Nicolaus died in 1790, leaving the estate to his son, Anton, who, caring decidedly less for music than did his father, immediately dismissed all of the musical staff of the Esterháza Palace in an effort to diminish expenses. With little work left to be done in Esterháza, Haydn accepted a lucrative opportunity in London from the prominent impresario Johann Peter Salomon, leading to two consequential visits, in the 1791–1792 and 1794–1795 concert seasons.

After the isolation of Esterháza, located nearly twenty-five miles south-east of Eisenstadt, the bustling and vibrant culture of London left Haydn both bewildered and artistically rejuvenated. The celebrity treatment he received, combined with the amount of public, demonstrative music making in London, opened the doors to what unquestionably became some of his greatest mature works, including the final twelve of his 104 symphonies (collectively known as the London symphonies), the Rider String Quartet, and other works. Of his arrival in London, Haydn wrote, “My arrival caused a great sensation…Everyone wants to know me…If I wanted, I could dine out every day.” By the time Haydn returned to Vienna in 1795, his fame brought him international recognition as the world’s foremost composer; Beethoven was still very early in his career, and Mozart had recently died. It was at this time that Haydn wrote some of his most ingenious string works, including the Opus 76 set of six quartets in 1796, commissioned by Count Joseph Erdody.

The second work of this collection, the Quartet in d minor, op. 76, no. 2, has become known as Die Quinten, or Fifths. The nickname derives from the motif of two descending fifths that opens the work and permeates much of the first movement Allegro. (Scholars often note that this motive, used episodically throughout the movement, evokes London’s Big Ben tower, which chimes the same four notes at the third quarter of every hour.) After launching the first theme, this motif serves as the basis of the entire exposition, spinning a series of melodic ideas, all closely related to the Quinten motif. Rather than introducing a second theme, Haydn deceptively broaches the Quinten motif again, modulating from d minor to the relative F major.

In contrast to the intensity of the Allegro, the slow movement offers a charming interlude before the minuetto, whose mildly demonic character has earned it the subtitle Hexen-Menuett, or “Witches’ Minuet.” The movement is structured in ternary form, beginning with a canon. The unison
two-voice melody in the violins is perfectly echoed by the viola and cello (set an octave lower), creating a sort of musical doppelgänger. The light and energetic trio section that follows gives lead to a captivating reprise of the canon. The rhythmically vibrant Vivace assai begins with a constrained theme in d minor. The movement steadily gains momentum, modulating to the bright key of D major for a joyous finale.

—Andrew Goldstein

DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH
(Born September 12/25, 1906, St. Petersburg; died August 9, 1975, Moscow)

Piano Quintet in g minor, op. 57
Composition: 1940

First performance: November 23, 1940, Moscow

Other works from this period: String Quartet no. 1 in C Major, op. 49 (1938); Symphony no. 7 in C Major, op. 60, Leningrad (1941); Piano Sonata no. 2 in b minor, op. 61 (1943); Piano Trio no. 2 in e minor, op. 67 (1944)

Approximate duration: 34 minutes

The Russian pianist and composer Dmitry Shostakovich produced some of the twentieth century’s most fiercely expressive music. His body of work is even more compelling when considered in the context of the difficult circumstances surrounding his life and career: Shostakovich’s name has become virtually synonymous with the intensity of his musical reaction to Stalinism. His work serves as a musical chronicle of the harsh social conditions that followed the 1917 October Revolution and life under Stalin’s regime. Shostakovich’s response to his sociopolitical climate is manifested in his oeuvre of fifteen symphonies, fifteen string quartets, and myriad other works, which collectively represent one of the twentieth century’s most significant artistic achievements.

Shostakovich composed his Opus 57 Piano Quintet in 1940, at the request of the Beethoven Quartet, one of Russia’s preeminent chamber ensembles. The Beethoven Quartet had recently performed Shostakovich’s String Quartet no. 1, op. 49, and was eager for more music from the thirty-four-year-old composer. They were particularly interested in having a piano quintet, which would allow them to perform with Shostakovich. This marked the beginning of a long and significant artistic relationship: the Beethoven Quartet would premiere the next thirteen of Shostakovich’s string quartets, and Shostakovich dedicated his Third and Fifth Quartets to the Beethoven Quartet and his Eleventh through Fourteenth to its individual members.

Though not a work that directly addresses the sociopolitical climate (except insofar as Shostakovich’s language in general might be heard as influenced by his circumstances), the Piano Quintet shares the range of expressive power that characterizes such works as his Eighth String Quartet, famously dedicated to “victims of fascism and war.” In fact, when the quintet was premiered, one Russian newspaper praised it as “a portrait of our age… the rich-toned, perfect voice of the present.” The following year, the quintet received the inaugural Stalin Prize, a newly established state prize recognizing excellence in the arts and sciences. The prize included a considerable cash award of 100,000 rubles, which Shostakovich contributed to charity benefitting Moscow’s poor.

The Piano Quintet begins with a nod to a Baroque convention especially associated with Johann Sebastian Bach: its first two movements are a prelude and fugue. (Nor is this the only time Shostakovich would echo this Bachian format: his Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues for Solo Piano, op. 87, which cover each major and minor key in the chromatic scale, are inspired by and make direct references to the forty-eight preludes and fugues of Bach’s The Well-Tempered Clavier.) The prelude begins and ends solemnly around a quicker, but more introspective, middle section. The slow g minor fugue that follows represents the quintet’s emotional center of gravity. Its deeply affecting subject, introduced by the first violin, captures the feeling of a melancholy Russian folk tune, whose tension Shostakovich draws out exquisitely.

Following the emotionally devastating fugue, Shostakovich offers the listener some measure of relief with the rambunctious scherzo. Against an exuberant string accompaniment, the piano issues a cheerful tune. The music’s seeming naïveté gives way in short order to knowingly mischievous dissonances. A central dance-like melody is sardonic, perhaps, but remains light on its feet, never probing the gravity of the fugue.

The quintet’s fourth movement, a slow, plaintive intermezzo, proceeds without pause to the gently optimistic finale: a brighter statement, in G major, bringing a palpable sense of relief. So decisive is the finale’s change in character that one of its themes actually quotes Russian circus music.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
(Born Bonn, baptized December 17, 1770; died March 26, 1827, Vienna)

String Quartet no. 15 in a minor, op. 132
Composition: 1824–1825

First performance: November 6, 1825

Dedication: Prince Golitsin

Other works from this period: String Quartet in E-flat Major, op. 127 (1825); String Quartet in B-flat Major, op. 130 (1825–1826); Symphony no. 9 in d minor, op. 125 (1824); Grosse Fuge in B-flat Major for String Quartet, op. 133 (1826)

Approximate duration: 45 minutes

Near the end of his life, after completing his last symphony and his last piano sonata, Ludwig van Beethoven turned once again, after a twelve-year hiatus, to the string quartet as the medium for his most deeply felt musical thoughts. The quartets to which Beethoven devoted his final years represent the pinnacle of the composer’s mighty creative powers and infinite imagination. In the five late quartets (opps. 127, 130, 131, 132, and 135), Beethoven surpassed all precedent for the expressive capabilities of music, as if transcending this world and composing for listeners of future generations.
The impetus for the late quartets was a commission from the Russian prince Nikolay Golitsin, himself an amateur cellist. Golitsin asked Beethoven for "one, two, or three quartets, for which labor I will be glad to pay you what you think proper." Karl Holz, the second violinist of the Schuppanzigh Quartet, who later worked as Beethoven's secretary, relates the following:

During the time when he was composing the three quartets commissioned by Prince Galitzin, opus 127, opus 130, [and] opus 132, such a wealth of new quartet ideas streamed forth from Beethoven's inexhaustible imagination that he felt almost involuntarily compelled to write the C-sharp minor and F Major Quartets [opp. 131 and 135]. "My dear friend, I have just had another new idea," he used to say, in a joking manner and with shining eyes, when we would go out for a walk; and he wrote down some notes in a little pocket sketchbook. "But that belongs to the quartet after the next one, since the next one already has too many movements."...When he had finished the B-flat Major Quartet [op. 130], I said that I thought it the best of the three. To which he replied, "Each in its own way! Art demands of us that we don't stand still...You will find here a new kind of voice leading, and, as to imagination, it will, God willing, be less lacking than ever before!"

Beethoven began the String Quartet in a minor, op. 132, in the winter of 1824 and completed it the following July. The Schuppanzigh Quartet gave Opus 132 its unofficial premiere on September 9, 1825, at a Viennese tavern for an audience of fourteen; the public premiere took place two months later, on November 6.

The first movement has a free-spirited quality. Though it essentially follows sonata form, the emergence of each new musical idea carries the feeling of the next logical thought, rather than something formulaically conceived for the sake of thematic contrast. Following the mercurial opening measures, a brief melodic phrase, marked by three repeated notes, comes to the surface and passes through all four instruments.

This blossoms effortlessly into a flowing theme in the second violin.

Beethoven proceeds in this fashion throughout the movement, expanding on the basic material presented at the outset of the work and exploiting it to craft a very rich movement indeed, whose psychological and emotional complexity cannot be simply or decisively articulated.

A lighter, lyrical second movement follows, as a preface to the quartet's emotional centerpiece.

The movement ends with a final utterance of the Heiliger Dankgesang, which Beethoven marks to be played "with the most intimate emotions."

Following the great spiritual magnitude of the Heiliger Dankgesang, Beethoven gives the listener a welcome respite with a good-humored march movement—understandable, perhaps, as an extension of the previous movement's celebration of newfound vigor. But lest the listener hear this brief march simply as a palate cleanser after the Heiliger Dankgesang, Beethoven rounds it off in striking fashion: above dramatic tremolando in the lower strings, the first violin issues a declamatory recitative. The recitative proceeds attacca to the spirited sonata-rondo finale, marked Allegro appassionato.

—Patrick Castillo