

Program Notes: The Russian Quartet

Notes on the program by Dr. Richard E. Rodda

SERGEI RACHMANINOV

(Born March 20/April 1, 1873, Oneg, Russia; died March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills, California)

Two Movements for String Quartet

Composed: 1889

Other works from this period: Two Pieces for Piano, Six Hands (1890–1891); *Aleko (The Gypsies)* (opera) (1892); *Capriccio on Gypsy Themes*, op. 12 (1892, 1894)

Approximate duration: 13 minutes

Rachmaninov was born of noble blood, but his father, Vasily, squandered the family fortune (David Mason Greene, in his useful *Greene's Biographical Encyclopedia of Composers*, described him as “a wastrel, a compulsive gambler, a pathological liar, and a skirt chaser”), and by 1882 he had had to sell off all of the estates to settle his debts. The family moved into a flat in St. Petersburg, where Sergei received a scholarship to study piano and composition at the city’s conservatory. The death of his sister in a diphtheria epidemic later that year and the family’s continuing financial strains eventually caused his parents to separate, and his studies at the conservatory suffered so severely that he failed all of his examinations in general subjects in 1885. His mother consulted about her gifted but troubled son with the budding conductor and pianist (a pupil of Liszt’s) Aleksandr Siloti, her husband’s nephew, who arranged for the boy to study at the Moscow Conservatory with his own early piano teacher, the rigorous disciplinarian Nikolai Zverev.

In the summer of 1890, Rachmaninov went to stay with his aunt Varvara Satina and her four children at their isolated country home at Ivanovka, 250 miles southeast of Moscow; he returned there frequently to compose until leaving the country in the wake of the 1917 Revolution. It was at Ivanovka that he completed two movements—*Romance* and *Scherzo*—of a string quartet that he had sketched the year before, perhaps as an assignment for fellow composer Anton Arensky; it was his first attempt (and one of his few) at a chamber piece. The *Romance* embodies the pervasive sadness then prevalent in upper-class Russian life, which was summarized by Soviet musicologist Leonid Sabaneyev: “Music there was a terrible narcosis, a sort of intoxication and oblivion, a going-off into irrational places...It was not form or harmoniousness or Apollonic vision that was demanded of music, but passion, feeling, languor, heartache.” The drooping main theme of the *Romance* finds an emotional and formal counter in a brighter strain, urged on by a gently opposed accompanimental rhythm, at the movement’s center. The *Scherzo*, vigorous and dance-like, is balanced by a wistful central trio.

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

(Born April 11/23, 1891, Sontsovska, Ukraine; died March 5, 1953, Moscow)

String Quartet no. 2 in F Major, op. 92, Kabardinian

Composed: 1941

Published: 1944

First performance: September 5, 1942, Moscow

Other works from this period: Suite from *Semyon Kotko*, op. 81 bis (1941); *Betrothal in a Monastery (The Duenna)*, op. 86 (opera) (1940–1941); *Cinderella*, op. 87 (ballet) (1940–1944); *Ivan the Terrible*, op. 116 (film score) (1942–1945)

Approximate duration: 23 minutes

When the Germans invaded Soviet Russia in June 1941, Prokofiev and several other composers were evacuated from Moscow to Nalchik, the capital of the Kabardino-Balkaria Republic, in the northern Caucasus Mountains. Prokofiev recalled in his autobiography, “The Chairman of the Arts Committee in Nalchik said to us, ‘Look here...you have a gold mine of folk music in this region that has practically been untapped.’ He went to his files and brought out some songs collected by earlier musical visitors to Nalchik. The material proved to be very fresh and original, and I settled on writing a string quartet, thinking that the combination of new, untouched Oriental folklore with the most classical of classic forms, the string quartet, ought to produce interesting and unexpected results.” Prokofiev began the Quartet no. 2 on November 2, finishing the score early the following month. Though some critics faulted Prokofiev for overemphasizing the primitive qualities of his folk materials with “barbaric” harmonies and “strident” sonorities, the quartet’s premiere, given in Moscow by the Beethoven Quartet on April 7, 1942, was a fine success.

The quartet’s opening movement follows conventional sonata form, though Prokofiev’s craggy, open-interval harmonies and virile, stamping rhythms bring a bracing peasant vitality to the old city-bred structure. Three themes make up the exposition: a string of tiny, one-measure phrases with snapping rhythms, a melody of hammered notes that moves within a tightly restricted range, and a **motive** of broad gestures. The themes are aggressively worked out in the development section before being recapitulated in compressed versions to round out the movement. The second movement is music of double purpose. Its opening paragraph, the quartet’s “slow movement,” is a nocturne based on a Kabardinian love song; the center of the movement, the “scherzo,” gradually increases in speed and becomes more dance-like as the music suggests the strumming of a traditional Caucasian string instrument known as the *kemange*. The finale revives Haydn’s old sonata-rondo form with some modern twists, the chief of which is the quotation of a joyous Kabardinian folk dance as the main theme. The cello and viola then take up a fast, agitated figure that becomes the accompaniment to the movement’s formal second subject, an anxious melody in longer notes given by the muted violin. The opening dance theme returns, rondo-fashion, before a cello cadenza leads into a ferocious development section. The recapitulation brings back the earlier materials as expected, but in reverse order, so that the dashing dance melody is held in reserve to bring the quartet to a brilliant conclusion.

IGOR STRAVINSKY

(Born June 5/17, 1882, Oranienbaum [now Lomonosov], Russia; died April 6, 1971, New York City)

Three Pieces for String Quartet

Composed: 1914

Published: 1922

Dedication: Ernest Ansermet

Other works from this period: *Three Japanese Lyrics* (song cycle) (1912–1914); *Three Easy Pieces for Piano, Four Hands* (1914–1915); *Renard or Fable of the Fox, the Cock, the Tomcat, and the Ram* (burlesque in song and dance) (1915–1916)

Approximate duration: 7 minutes

In April 1914, to recover from the rigors of supervising the premiere in Paris of his opera *Le rossignol (The Nightingale)*, Stravinsky sketched a tiny piece for string quartet, his first composition for chamber ensemble, in the style of a Russian folk dance. Ever since he had taken the musical world by storm with *The Rite of Spring* the year before, his creative work had been closely monitored, and even this little *morceau* for quartet did not escape

*Bolted terms are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 90.

notice. Alfred Pochon, second violinist of the Flonzaley Quartet, wrote to the composer asking about the veracity of the Parisian rumor that he had just written a “scherzo” for quartet and expressing an interest in taking such a piece on the quartet’s American tour the following year. The composer’s friend and champion the conductor Ernest Ansermet was assigned the task of negotiating the commission with the Flonzaley (the score was dedicated to him in appreciation), and Stravinsky added two more short movements in July to round out this set of Three Pieces for String Quartet. The Flonzaley played the premiere in Chicago on November 8, 1915. Stravinsky originally issued the Three Pieces as pure, abstract music, giving them no titles or even tempo markings, but when he arranged them as the first three of the Four Studies for Orchestra in 1914–1918, he called them *Dance*, *Eccentric*, and *Canticle*.

The small scale of the Three Pieces belies the crucial juncture they occupy in Stravinsky’s stylistic evolution, since they were his first works to move away from the opulence and enormous performing forces of the early ballets toward the economical, emotionally detached “neoclassical” language of his later works. This forward-looking quality is most evident in the second movement, which is in a brittle, modern, pointillistic idiom usually associated with Anton Webern’s compositions, though Stravinsky claimed that he knew none of that composer’s music at the time. He later explained the movement’s inspiration in an interview with Robert Craft: “I had been fascinated by the movements of Little Tich, whom I had seen in London in 1914, and the jerky, spastic movement, the ups and downs, the rhythm—even the mood or joke of the music—which I later called *Eccentric*, was suggested by the art of this great clown.” In 1930, Stravinsky transformed a phrase from this piece into the subject for the instrumental fugue in the *Symphony of Psalms*. The opening *Dance*, while more conventional in its folk-based idiom, was also prophetic of several important Russia-inspired works of the following years, notably *The Soldier’s Tale* and *Les noces*. The third piece (later titled *Canticle*) is a solemn processional evocative of ancient church rites, whose almost static harmonic motion Stravinsky used in *Mass*, *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, *Symphony of Psalms*, and other compositions to create a sense of suspended time and rapt ecstasy.

DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH

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

String Quartet no. 2 in A Major, op. 68

Composed: 1944

Other works from this period: *Zoya*, op. 64 (film score) (1944); *Symphony no. 8* in c minor, op. 65 (1943); *Russian River* (incidental music) (1944); *Symphony no. 9* in E-flat Major, op. 70 (1945); *Simple People*, op. 71 (film score) (1945)

Approximate duration: 36 minutes

Vissarion Shebalin was a steadfast friend to Dmitry Shostakovich when he had precious few. “He was an extremely fine person,” Shostakovich said after Shebalin’s death in Moscow in 1963. “I always admired his goodness, honesty, and exceptional adherence to principle. How pleasant it was to share one’s joys and sorrows with him. In his company, joy became greater and grief less.”

Shebalin, four years Shostakovich’s senior, was born in Omsk in 1902 and studied under the Russian symphonist Miaskovsky at the Moscow Conservatory. He was appointed to the conservatory’s faculty upon his graduation in 1928 and occupied increasingly important positions there during the next decade; he became the school’s Director in 1942. Despite his heavy teaching and administrative duties during those years, he composed steadily, trying to forge a style that would satisfy the Communist Party’s demands for music that promoted its social and political agendas without sacrificing completely his own creative identity. His work was recognized with such official honors as two Stalin Prizes and the title of People’s Artist. None of this service to Soviet music, however, allowed

Shebalin to escape censure in 1936 and 1948, along with Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Khachaturian, Miaskovsky, and other leading musicians, for creating works of “decadent formalism.” In 1936, he was suspended from the conservatory faculty for a time; in 1948, he was stripped of his Director’s position and assigned to teach beginning theory at a bandmaster’s school; and performances of his music were all but banned. “He suffered deeply and painfully under this highly unjustified dismissal,” Shostakovich recalled. By the time Shebalin was reinstated at the conservatory in 1951, his health had deteriorated badly, and he suffered a stroke two years later that left him paralyzed on his right side. He taught himself to write with his left hand and continued to teach and compose, winning one of his greatest successes in 1957 with an opera based on *The Taming of the Shrew*. His rehabilitated position in the nation’s musical life was confirmed the following year through an official proclamation “restoring the dignity and integrity of Soviet composers.” During his six remaining years, Shebalin composed a ballet, his Eighth and Ninth String Quartets, his Symphony no. 5, and several vocal and instrumental works.

Shebalin and Shostakovich first met in 1923, when both were students—Shebalin in Moscow, Shostakovich in Leningrad—and aspiring composers. Friendship and mutual professional regard blossomed promptly and firmly. They corresponded regularly, followed each other’s work closely, and stayed at each other’s flats when visiting Moscow and Leningrad. Shebalin tried to get Shostakovich to move to Moscow for years, but he was not successful until 1943, when he gave his friend refuge from the German siege of Leningrad by making a place for him on the Moscow Conservatory faculty. In 1936, when Shostakovich was publicly denounced for writing “Muddle Instead of Music” (the title of an article in *Pravda*) in his lurid opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* and other modernistic pieces, Shebalin spoke in his defense. Shebalin’s wife, Alisa, recounted the chilling scene:

Shostakovich was criticized, purged, disciplined, and scolded by one and all on every count. Only Shebalin maintained silence throughout the meeting. But then he, too, was asked to speak; it was hardly a request but a demand. He refused all the same. A short while elapsed and again it was “suggested” that he should take the stand. Vissarion then stood up but, remaining where he was without going to the podium, announced in a loud and clear voice for all to hear: “I consider that Shostakovich is the greatest genius amongst composers of this epoch.” And with that statement he sat down.

Shebalin was censured for this audacity with suspension from his conservatory post and prohibition of performances and publication of his music, edicts that were not lifted until the start of World War II. Though he began tailoring his own compositions more closely to the realities of musical life in Stalinist Russia through their subject matter and by using folk melodies as thematic material, Shebalin’s devotion to Shostakovich continued undiminished, and he again stood by his colleague in 1948 with results that devastated his health and his career. Shebalin and Shostakovich remained close. In 1953, Dmitry, Shebalin’s son, became violist with the Borodin Quartet, which had championed Shostakovich’s music since its founding in 1946. A decade later, when Shebalin’s health was declining rapidly, Shostakovich paid tribute to him in *A Career*, the finale of his Symphony no. 13, *Babi Yar*, whose text, by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, praises those who courageously follow their visions and set an example for people of smaller faith. It was to Vissarion Shebalin that Shostakovich dedicated his String Quartet no. 2, composed in September 1944, a year after the war had thrown the two old friends together at the Moscow Conservatory.

In addition to being masterly revitalizations of hallowed Classical genres and forms, many of Shostakovich’s important compositions are richly layered with meaning and reference. The String Quartet no. 2 is no exception. The score’s dedication not only recognized the stalwart friendship of Vissarion Shebalin but also acknowledged his place as one of the leading Soviet composers of string quartets. Furthermore, though the

name of Shostakovich's friend the critic Ivan Sollertinsky is not explicitly associated with the Second Quartet, he is also evoked by its music. Sollertinsky died unexpectedly on February 11, 1944 (just five days after giving an introductory speech for a performance of Shostakovich's Eighth Symphony in Novosibirsk), and the Piano Trio no. 2 in e minor poured out of Shostakovich as a memorial tribute to him. The composer continued to vent his grief and loss in this quartet, composed immediately after the trio, most notably in the keening *Recitative* and in the melancholy descent from A major to a minor for the finale.

Any significant work written in the Soviet Union in 1944 could not be restricted to purely personal expression, however, but also had to address the broader issues of the war and the country's place in the international community. By September 1944, Allied victory was becoming increasingly assured, and Shostakovich mirrored the country's optimism and national spirit in the buoyant, folkish theme that opens the quartet. Lurking behind this public confidence, however, Shostakovich saw the menacing figure of Stalin, who was even then positioning himself to reassert his stifling power over the country when the war was over, and he may have intended that the movement's second theme—with its snapping dotted rhythms, hammered accents, and strange, squeezed *crescendos* on single notes (which Ian MacDonald, in his study *The New Shostakovich*, suggested may represent "some mannerism of Stalin's personality or style of speech")—portray the barbarous dictator. That such a range of references could be molded into a finely balanced and logically developed Classical first-movement sonata form marks Shostakovich as not only one of the most proficient but also one of the most subtle of modern artists.

MacDonald finds yet further associations in the second movement, a melancholy *Romance* framed at beginning and end by long violin recitatives: "Here, Shostakovich universalizes the predicament of persecuted Jewry [with whom he developed a deep sympathy during and after the war], mingling the voice of the cantor with that of the Bachian evangelist." The third movement is a spectral *Valse*, grown in its formal type from those of Tchaikovsky and Glazunov but in its expressive character from the tragedy and pathos of the early war years. The finale begins with a solemn unison phrase that serves as an introduction to the set of variations on a somber, folk-like theme (borrowed from the Piano Trio no. 2) that composes the main body of the movement. The variations grow increasingly more agitated until a kind of numbed calm is restored by the recall of the solemn introduction theme in long notes by the viola and cello. Both themes coexist for the remainder of the movement, perhaps indicating the sense of loss after five years of war, perhaps apprehensive of the fate of Russia when Stalin reclaimed his full authority, perhaps, according to MacDonald, prophesying that "the People will overcome, will be avenged," or—perhaps—just as the atmospheric close to a carefully crafted work of pure, abstract, "meaningless" music. Each listener must assess the delicate expressive balance that Shostakovich achieved here. Only great masterworks can be so personal, so universal, and so profoundly ambiguous.

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