

Reflections on Life

featuring the 504 String Quartet

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Adagio and Fugue in C minor, K. 546

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart composed his *Adagio and Fugue* in C minor, K. 546 after his great *Haydn Quartets* but before his final contributions to the string quartet genre, the three *Prussian Quartets*. Specifically, Mozart logged the completion date as June 26, 1788, although he also noted that



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

his new composition was in some respects an arrangement of older material. While the *Adagio* first movement was wholly new, the second movement *Fugue* began life in a form for two pianos which Mozart had composed a few years prior, namely the work now listed as K. 426. This piece dates to December 29, 1783, a time when Mozart was actively exploring fugal writing and contrapuntal devices under the guidance of the arts patron Gottfried van Swieten. “I go every Sunday at twelve o’clock

to the Baron van Swieten,” Mozart reported to his father Leopold on April 10, 1782, “where nothing is played but Handel and Bach. I am collecting at the moment the fugues of Bach – not only of Sebastian, but also of Emanuel and Friedemann.” Mozart was quite taken with the fugal workings of the past age, and apparently so was his wife Constanze: he wrote to his sister Nannerl, that Constanze loved hearing him play the Bach fugues but “scolded him roundly for not recording some of his own compositions in this most artistic and beautiful of all musical forms.” With her encouragement, Mozart finally did write down some of his own fugues, including K. 426 which within a few years became the basis of K. 546.

Set in the mysterious key of C minor, the *Adagio and Fugue* is one of the darker pieces Mozart wrote. The opening *Adagio* is gripping and dramatic, setting the tone for the *Fugue* movement in the same way the *Preludes* of Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* set the tone for their *Fugue* partners.

The cellist announces the *Fugue*, giving the first statement of the fugal subject. He is followed in succession by the viola, second violin, and finally first violin until all four musicians are active at once. Much like the fugues of Bach, Mozart’s *Fugue* passes through various moods as the subject is continuously spun-out and transformed. The dramatic ending comes as a final release to a work which – unusually for Mozart – abounds in aggression. Amazingly potent in the brief *Adagio and Fugue*, this same contrapuntal vigor would sound again in many of the masterpieces of Mozart’s late years, including the grand *Jupiter Symphony* and his celebrated *Requiem*.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 7 in F# minor, Op. 108

Music critics frequently rank the cycle of fifteen string quartets by Soviet composer Dmitri Shostakovich as one of the most significant cycles of quartets in the twentieth-century literature. Like the equally praised set of six by Béla Bartók, the Shostakovich cycle demonstrates how its creator grew as an artist and responded to his turbulent age with successive quartets composed throughout his career. In fact, the cycle spans nearly four decades from 1938 to 1974. The First String Quartet came as a much needed *tabula rasa* (clean slate) after the condemnation by Soviet officialdom of his radical opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* in January 1936. Shostakovich had previously composed little chamber music and, although he warned, “Don’t expect to find special depth in this, my first quartet opus,” the composer soon realized that chamber music – and particularly the string quartet – could serve as an area for private thought away from the sometimes overbearing public demands of the symphony hall. The Piano Quintet of 1940 was, nonetheless, more representative than the First String Quartet of the intensely personal and deadly serious atmosphere the upcoming string quartets would attain. This Quintet also established the precedent of having the Beethoven Quartet premiere the composer’s new chamber works: while Shostakovich would join them as pianist for the Quintet’s premiere, the Beethoven ensemble would give the premieres of each new quartet except for the very last.

A difficult twenty years, however, separate the creation of the Piano Quintet in 1940 and the Seventh String Quartet in 1960. When World War II came to Russia in June 1941, Shostakovich elected to stay in the besieged Leningrad for several months until finally evacuating in October of that year. The resulting *Leningrad Symphony* saw him declared a

war hero but by 1948 he was once again denounced by Party officials, this time for failing to properly celebrate through music the victory over Germany. The composer's personal life presented its own challenges, including the death of his first wife Nina Vasilevna in 1954, the death of his mother the next year, and a hasty second marriage a year after that; after just three years, this second marriage ended in divorce. The composer also faced health issues, some of which had plagued him since the war years. Reluctantly – and as if finally exhausted by these continuous struggles – Shostakovich agreed to join the Communist Party in 1960, hoping he might at least find some acceptance among his colleagues who had been pressuring him to join for many years. Almost immediately ashamed of this decision, Shostakovich composed his Eighth String Quartet, regarding it as a sort of obituary for a once courageous composer who had ultimately sold out to political pressure.



Dmitri Shostakovich

Slightly predating the Eighth Quartet, tonight's String Quartet No. 7 in F# minor, Op. 108, is no less grim. If the Eighth is Shostakovich's own imagined obituary, then perhaps its immediate predecessor stands as an obituary for his first wife, a last attempt on the part of the composer to cope with her untimely death. The Seventh is dedicated to the memory of Nina, and much of the composing was done in the months following the divorce from his second wife when Shostakovich likely would have missed Nina most. She and the composer had not always had the happiest of marriages – early on, they had agreed their marriage would be open – but her sudden death from cancer proved quite a shock for Shostakovich. The composer's choice to set his quartet in the key of F# minor is revealing, for this key traditionally has connotations of suffering and anguish: Gustav Mahler, for example, had utilized F# minor in his unfinished Tenth Symphony after his own marriage had fallen apart. Scholar David Fanning – an expert on Shostakovich – has further suggested that the light scoring we sometimes hear in this quartet symbolizes Nina's absence: instruments occasionally go missing as Nina is now likewise missing from the composer's life. Especially in the first two movements, as William Hussey proposes, the melodic material is largely carried by the first violin and cello – possibly representative of the female and male voices and specifically Nina and the composer.

The Seventh Quartet is set in three brief movements which are not only connected in their ideas but also laid out structurally so that one movement can flow directly into the next. So concise is the Seventh Quartet, these movements could almost be seen as sections in a larger one-movement format – a recurring suggestion in many of Shostakovich's later quartets, including the aforementioned Eighth. Also worth noting is the anapest (short-short-long) rhythmic

motive that unites – or *haunts* – all three movements: this motive is introduced in the opening of the quartet as an accompaniment to the solo violin and ultimately ends the piece as an accompaniment to the solo cello line. The third movement *Moderato – Allegretto – Andante* is also notable for its furious fugue, initiated interestingly enough by the viola and second violin who had previously been relegated to less significant roles compared to the first violin and cello. In this fugue, the first violin and cello are forced to conform to the other instruments' decisions; if we extend our earlier analogy, perhaps they must suffer the same unfortunate twists of fate as the real-life composer and his wife. A fascinating work, the Seventh Quartet was premiered by the Beethoven Quartet on May 15, 1960 at Leningrad's Glinka Concert Hall.

Alexander Borodin (1833-1887)

String Quartet No. 2 in D major

Professionally the Russian composer Alexander Borodin was known as a chemist: in this role, he held influential teaching positions in Saint Petersburg throughout his lifetime, published important scientific articles, and significantly was one of the co-founders of that city's first medical school for women. Borodin wrote music only in his spare time which in retrospect severely limited his output. His interest in music was a lifelong passion, however, and as a child he had studied both flute and cello, largely through his own persistence rather than formal training.

Scientific mentors had nearly convinced Borodin that music should only be a pastime for him when in 1862 he met the composer and pianist Mily Balakirev. Although Balakirev himself had received formal training in music, he felt Russia's emerging music conservatories were misleading their students: the music of these so-called professionals, he thought, was too tempered by Western theory and, therefore, could not be true to the spirit of Russian life or its folk



Alexander Borodin

culture. Balakirev instead was interested in developing musical amateurs, and – by the time he and Borodin had met – Balakirev had already recruited to his side a professor of military fortification (César Cui), a civil servant (Modest Mussorgsky), and a naval officer (Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov), although each had a distinct interest in music and composition. Dubbed “The Mighty Handful” in 1867 by critic Vladimir Stasov, Balakirev and his associates were

convinced that the new Russian concert music they sought to create must stand apart from the Western tradition – otherwise, how could it represent the Russian people, their culture, and their ideals?

Under Balakirev's guidance, Borodin worked on his First Symphony from 1862 to 1867, and soon afterwards began two works now regarded as among his masterpieces: his Second Symphony and the opera *Prince Igor*. All three of these works have strong ties to Russian culture and folk music, yet there was some concern among his colleagues that Borodin would soon forgo their unified cause when he announced his plans to begin writing string quartets. When Borodin showed sketches for his First String Quartet to Mussorgsky and Stasov in April 1875, the two could not understand why Borodin would choose to write in a genre they thought was obsolete – let alone one in which the major precedents were all German.

Neither chamber music nor absolute music had ever been foreign to Borodin, however, and, during postdoctoral work in the German city of Heidelberg from 1859 to 1862, he had grown to love the music of many Western composers. Felix Mendelssohn became a particular favorite, and his future wife pianist Ekaterina Protopopova who he met in Heidelberg exposed him to the piano music of Robert Schumann, Frédéric Chopin, and Franz Liszt; the couple also travelled to Mannheim to hear the operas of Richard Wagner. Before ever returning to Russia or meeting Balakirev, Borodin had composed a sonata for cello and piano, a piano trio, a piano quintet, and a string sextet – all examples of chamber music written before the two string quartets he turned his attention to in the late 1870s and early 1880s.

Although the two string quartets can be seen as furthering this line of chamber music by Borodin, the composer's abilities had matured significantly under Balakirev's guidance. Borodin now finds a balance between the German tradition of chamber music and the new Russian Nationalism of Balakirev and his circle. Rather than quote or imitate Russian folk melodies – perhaps the most direct route for establishing a Russian feel – Borodin instead applies the formal, harmonic, and timbral concerns of the Russian symphonic style to the smaller ensemble of the string quartet; amazingly, he does this without sacrificing the grace of either German structural integrity or contrapuntal procedure. While Borodin's earlier chamber works were not only somewhat derivative of German practices, some works had also borrowed melodic content from specific German models: Borodin's Cello Sonata, for example, had taken its main theme from the First Cello Suite of Johann Sebastian Bach (to be heard at *Nachtmusik* this October). Albeit Borodin's First String Quartet likewise borrows a theme from Ludwig van Beethoven's Quartet in Bb major, Op. 130; this later composition though is significantly better developed and has been called an "intellectual *tour de force*" by scholar Edward Garden.

If the First Quartet is intellectual, the String Quartet No. 2 in D major displays, however, a more personal and emotional side to Borodin's character, one which considered musically abounds in lyricism. The sweetness of its first movement *Allegro moderato*, the gaiety of its second *Scherzo*, the deep beauty of its third *Notturmo*, as well as the contentment of the fourth *Finale. Andante – Vicace* all contribute to the unyielding beauty of this quartet. After the First Quartet which had taken a grueling five years to compose, Borodin's second essay in the genre found itself emerging relatively quickly over the summer months of 1881. Borodin dedicated

the new quartet to his wife – in fact, some scholars maintain it served as his present to her upon the twentieth anniversary of their wedding. Its emotional charm and beauty certainly speak to this hypothesis. Also, the cello – Borodin's own instrument – is given special prominence throughout: in addition to introducing the main theme of the first movement, the cello also announces the especially tender and loving melody of the third movement *Notturmo*.

Alexander Borodin's Second String Quartet was premiered in Saint Petersburg in January 1882 at a concert of the Russian Musical Society. Although only published posthumously, the Second Quartet has retained a prominent place in the string quartet repertoire ever since, popular with performers as well as their audiences. Unsurprisingly, when Robert Wright and George Forrest went about setting the melodies of Borodin to words for their 1953 musical *Kismet*, they chose this same sensuous theme from *Notturmo* for their now famous song "This Is My Beloved."

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About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer is a composer, music scholar, and advocate of music. Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars' College located in Natchitoches, Louisiana in May 2013 after completing his undergraduate thesis "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers."



As series director of the successful *Abendmusik Alexandria* chamber music series from May 2014 to April 2016, Jackson played a vital role in the renewal of interest in chamber music across Central Louisiana. This interest has encouraged the creation of the annual Sugarmill Music Festival and the new series *Nachtmusik von BrainSurge*, both of which Jackson will remain active in as concert annotator and creative consultant. Jackson has in fact written program notes for many of Central Louisiana's key music presenters, including the Rapides Symphony Orchestra, Arts Council of Central Louisiana, and Northwestern State University. He also blogs at *MusicCentral* where he shares concert experiences, gives listening recommendations, posts interviews with contemporary composers, and offers insights into his own compositions. Jackson has followed classical music around the world, including trips to Colorado's Aspen Music Festival and the *BachFest Leipzig* in Germany. As a composer, he has worked to integrate a modern vocabulary into established classical forms in ways that are not only innovative but also engaging to the general listener. His four-movement Suite for solo guitar, Op. 21 received its world premiere on November 5, 2015 and has also been aired on public radio. In fall 2016, Jackson will begin graduate studies at the University of Louisville with the ultimate goal of earning his doctorate in musicology.

Read additional program notes by Jackson at www.JacksonHarmeyer.com.