Flowers and Sunshine

featuring the Pineywoods String Quartet

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)
Crisantemi for string quartet


Giacomo Puccini

Giacomo Puccini is by most accounts regarded as one of the foremost composers of Italian opera with such masterpieces as *La bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly* all to his credit. Puccini, however, is not someone we often associate with chamber music. Yet, not unlike other masters of Italian opera including Giuseppe Verdi, Gaetano Donizetti, and Gioachino Rossini, Puccini also made a contribution to chamber music, if rather limited in his case. This afternoon we hear his piece *Crisantemi* (*Chrysanthemums*) for string quartet, one of only a handful of chamber works this composer wrote; others include an unpublished String Quartet in D major he created while still a student, three brief minuets for quartet, and an unpublished work for violin and piano called *La sconsolata*. Even *Crisantemi*, created as a standalone piece, could not remain separate from Puccini's larger career as a composer of opera: within a few years, its two principal themes were incorporated into the opera *Manon Lescaut*, first staged in 1893.

Puccini composed *Crisantemi* in 1890 in memory of his friend Amedeo of Savoy, the Duke of Aosta, who died that year. In Italy, as elsewhere, the chrysanthemum is a flower typically associated with death. Just as we might place chrysanthemums at the grave of a departed friend or relative, Puccini has offered musical chrysanthemums to honor his friend. *Crisantemi* is in one movement and lasts little longer than five minutes. Its first theme is brief and fragmentary, its motive shared equally by all the players although often initiated by the cello. The motive takes a cold turn towards its center where the sense of despair seems to be strongest. Unlike so many laments, however, the motive is primarily ascending rather than descending. The second theme, in contrast, is flowing and lyrical. It gives predominance to the first violin while the other instruments often take more of an accompaniment role. Its tenderness speaks to Puccini and the Duke's friendship, although it never loses the sense of grief possessed by the first theme. After the second theme concludes, the first theme returns for several additional iterations in order to close the piece.

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)
String Quartet in B-flat major, Op. 76 No. 4 *Sunrise*

Austrian composer Joseph Haydn is often regarded as the "Father of the String Quartet." Haydn was the composer who near single-handedly cultivated the string quartet from its most rudimentary form into a defining genre of classical music. His sixty-eight works for string quartet not only standardized such practices as the interdependency of all four instruments and a four-movement layout framed by a fast movement to either side, but they also demonstrated an impressively wide array of novel moods and characters which have spoken to every composer who has engaged with the string quartet genre since. In short, Haydn's quartets established the precedents for the genre without limiting the potential for future contributions.

Chamber music in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries most often consisted of one or more soloists with accompaniment – a formula still familiar today from the many sonatas for violin, cello, or another melody instrument with

harmonic support provided by a piano accompaniment. In the Baroque era, however, harmonic support was generated by the *basso continuo*, a bass-clef melody line with special markings indicating implied harmonies which could be semi-improvised by its players. This *basso continuo* line was typically given to the keyboard (or another instrument capable of playing chords such as the guitar or lute) with the original bass line doubled by cello, bassoon, or another low-pitched melody instrument. The most common form of chamber music, therefore, was what was known as the trio sonata: a work for two soloists who would exchange and emulate each other's melodies while receiving harmonic support from the instruments realizing the *basso continuo* line.

Haydn's revolutionary accomplishment was to eliminate the need for the *basso continuo* by writing music for four equal partners who could rotate between melodic soloist and harmonic accompaniment. His first quartets, written with the encouragement of Baron Carl Joseph von Fürnberg in the late 1750s, already allow more room for dialogue between all four instruments even if the first violin still tends to dominate the texture at times. Haydn would continue to balance the four instruments as his career progressed: as Franz Bellinger has remarked, "He recognized the fact that in the quartet, each individual part must not be treated as a solo, nor yet should the others be made to supply a mere accompaniment to the remainder. Each must have its role, according to the capacity of the instrument and the balance of the part." Although the quartets written for Fürnberg still follow an older five-movement pattern, Haydn would implement the standard four-movement layout of the symphony when he returned to writing quartets around 1770.

Joseph Haydn leading a string quartet, before 1790

The String Quartet in B-flat major heard this afternoon is the fourth in a set of six quartets Haydn completed in 1797 and published as his Opus 76 two years later. With the other quartets Haydn composed in the 1790s, they are grander and more expansive than anything else Haydn had previously written in the quartet genre, all without losing the grace or balance he had brought to the genre over the years. By the time Haydn had begun on the Opus 76 quartets, he was back in Vienna after his two hugely-successful visits to London. Haydn would often joke that he only became famous in Austria thanks to the fame he had won in London; previously, he had apparently felt somewhat isolated with his decades-long employment at the country palace of Eszterháza. After his return from London, he was able to spend more time in Vienna where he benefited from the patronage of several noblemen and even the emperor himself, composing for him a birthday tune that would become the national anthem. A set of variations on this tune also forms the second movement of the Third Quartet of Opus 76.

The Opus 76 quartets are dedicated to the nobleman Count Joseph Georg von Erdödy, and therefore are sometimes called the *Erdödy Quartets*. The Fourth Quartet has gained the nickname *Sunrise* thanks to its opening measures in which the first violin introduces an ascending motive over a sustained chord played by the other instruments. The succeeding fast material is no less sunny, radiating in a brilliance of its own. Marked *Allegro con spirito*, the first movement follows sonata form as had become conventional. We might recognize the second theme, introduced by the solo cello, as the answer to the violin's sunrise motive: a descending melody with the same conviction and warmth as the violin had offered earlier. Following the repeat of the exposition, the development begins in a frightening minor key. The recapitulation, however, restores the pleasant warmth of the opening.

The second movement marked *Adagio* gives the impression of contentment, even though there are moments of sadder reflection. It comes across as a slow, morning walk among nature in which all that interrupts one's solitude is their own

occasionally remorseful thoughts. The cheery third movement *Menuetto. Allegretto*, if imagined in these same pastoral surroundings, might be heard as a chorus of joyful birds. That same energy is maintained in the fourth movement; marked *Finale. Allegro ma non troppo*, it could be heard as a return home to the bustle of everyday life.

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 misguiding 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 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?

Alexander Borodin

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 the group's 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 found 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 applied the formal, harmonic, and timbral concerns of the Russian symphonic style to the smaller ensemble of the string quartet; amazingly, he did 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. Albeit Borodin's First String Quartet likewise borrowed a theme from Ludwig van Beethoven's Quartet in B-flat major, Op. 130; this later composition though was significantly better developed and has been called an "intellectual *tour de force*" by scholar Edward Garden.

If the First Quartet is intellectual, however, the String Quartet No. 2 in D major displays a more personal and emotional side to Borodin's character, one which when 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 *Notturno*, 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 was presented to her upon the twentieth anniversary of their wedding, a gift as beautiful and heartfelt as a specially-selected bouquet of flowers. Its emotional charm and loveliness 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 affectionate melody of the third movement *Notturno*.

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 *Notturno* for their now famous song "This Is My Beloved."

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 remains active in as concert annotator and creative consultant. 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. As a composer, Jackson has worked to integrate the vocabulary and grammar of modern music into pieces which are not only innovative but also engaging to the general listener. In fall 2016, Jackson began graduate studies in musicology at the University of Louisville where he has recently been awarded the Gerhard Herz Scholarship in recognition of his accomplishments. His current research interests include French spectral music and the compositions of Kaija Saariaho. He also sings with the University of Louisville Chorus and participates in the School of Music Composition Seminar. Learn more about Jackson Harmeyer, his scholarship, and his compositions at www.JacksonHarmeyer.com.