

The University of Chicago Presents | Performance Hall | Logan Center
Sunday, January 12, 2014, 3:00 PM

Pacifica Quartet

Don Michael Randel Ensemble-in-Residence

Simin Ganatra, violin
Sibbi Bernhardsson, violin
Masumi Per Rostad, viola
Brandon Vamos, cello

2:00 PM pre-concert lecture with Steven Rings, Associate Professor of Music

MOZART String Quartet in F Major, K. 590
Allegro moderato
Andante (Allegretto)
Menuetto: Allegretto
Allegro

SHOSTAKOVICH String Quartet No. 7 in F sharp minor, Op. 108
Allegretto
Lento
Allegro – Allegretto – [Adagio]

Intermission

BRAHMS String Quartet in C minor, Op. 51, no. 1
Allegro
Romanze: Poco Adagio
Allegretto molto moderato e comodo – Un poco più
animato
Allegro

Photography is prohibited.

The Pacifica Quartet is the Don Michael Randel ensemble-in-residence at the University of Chicago. The residency program is made possible by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in recognition of noted musicologist and UChicago President Emeritus Randel, to provide a permanent home for world class musicians at the University. As the inaugural Randel Ensemble-in-Residence, the Pacifica Quartet is involved in activities that allow for deep engagement between these exceptional musicians and UChicago faculty, students and staff.

String Quartet in F major, K. 590 (1790)

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

b. January 27, 1756, Salzburg

d. December 5, 1791, Vienna

In the spring of 1789 Mozart travelled to Berlin in hopes of obtaining a commission from the music-loving King of Prussia, an accomplished amateur cellist. Mozart was desperately in need of funds. He wrote to his wife Constanze that he was bringing home a gift of money and a commission for six string quartets, but this is unlikely; there is no record of a gift or commission in Prussian court archives. Mozart continued to send pitiful letter to friends pleading for more loans. In the 18 months following his journey to Berlin, the pace of Mozart's composing faltered. Biographer Maynard Solomon sees this as a period of "partial creative paralysis" and speculates that he was deeply depressed by his financial circumstances and concerns for his wife's bouts of ill health. Only three of the six quartets were completed, and he sold them to a publisher. He later complained that he had to "give away my quartets for a mockery of a fee, only to lay my hands on some money..."

The Quartet K. 590 was composed in 1790, the last of the three "Prussian" quartets and the last quartet Mozart composed. The first movement is written in the early Classical *concertante* style still popular in Berlin. Unlike his *Haydn* quartets that give each voice an equal role in the musical discourse, the *concertante* style gives solo lines to one voice at a time, while the other voices provide accompaniment. The movement opens with a simple rising arpeggio and descending scale played by all voices together and proceeds as a dialog between the first violin and the cello, with the viola doing a solo turn late in the movement. Mozart creates a charming if somewhat austere texture from an interrelated pattern of arpeggios and scales. The movement ends with a witty surprise as the music quietly vanishes.

The second movement is built on the gently rhythmic, sighing gesture played in its first two measures. This sequence of notes motif runs through the entire movement and is embellished by ascending and descending solo lines that pass around the instruments. As in the first movement, the musical texture is not elaborate, but here the mood is wistful and tinged with sadness.

Like the first two movements, the *Menuetto* is composed with limited means and has an open texture, but it has an unsettled quality. The boundary between melody and accompaniment is indistinct, and long oscillating lines shift harmonically, occasionally to the point of dissonance. The middle *Trio* section, by contrast, is sunnier.

The swift *moto perpetuo* finale begins in *concertante* style, with echoing solo lines in the first violin and viola. This is quickly abandoned, however, and the music becomes more complex. Dramatic pauses, intricate part-writing, and *fugato* passages provide a rich texture as musical lines fly between the players. In the middle of the movement, the buoyant mood is disturbed when twisting solo lines

descend into jarring dissonance against chords in the other voices. It is hard not to hear Mozart's distressed state of mind in this strange outburst, but the movement recovers itself and dances lightly to a happy finish.

String Quartet No. 7 in F sharp minor, Op. 108 (1960)

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

b. September 25, 1906, Saint Petersburg

d. August 9, 1975, Moscow

By 1960 Shostakovich no longer had to fear persecution by the Soviet state. His main problem now, beyond bouts of poor health, was the regime's fond embrace and attendant obligations. As the country's star composer, he felt smothered by his honors and official duties. He told a friend, "I am frightened that I will choke in an ocean of awards." Appointed to government posts, he was put forward as a cultural figurehead and expected to attend plenary sessions, congresses, and peace conferences. He gave speeches and published articles using officially prepared texts. He was also requested to compose a steady stream of patriotic songs and film scores. In 1960 he was elected First Secretary of the Russian Composers' Union, and later that year he was pressured to join the Communist Party.

The Seventh Quartet was composed in memory of Nina Vazar, the mother of his children whom he married twice and who died in 1954. As music historian Judith Kuhn has observed, in addition to the formal dedication to her, the first and third movements of Seventh Quartet end in the key of F sharp major, the key of the 'love theme' in the composer's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, which is also dedicated to Nina Vazar. The shortest of Shostakovich's fifteen string quartets, the Seventh is written without pause between movements. Its brevity and the reappearance in the last movement of musical motifs from the first and second movements suggest a view of the entire quartet as a single movement in sonata form, with the first movement Allegretto as primary theme; the second movement Lento as contrasting theme; and the last movement as development of the themes followed by recapitulation. This view is supported by the gradually increasing presence of Shostakovich's personal four-note "DSCH" pattern across the three movements as a unifying element. (The up-down pattern of the notes D E-flat C B spell DSCH for Dmitri SHostakowitsch in German musical notation.)

Two themes alternate in the first-movement Allegretto, a short, twisting three-note gallop and a contrasting rhythmic line in the cello. Unusually for Shostakovich, both themes are harmonically resolved when they reappear later in the movement. The grieving second-movement Lento is unsettled by a restless, weaving accompaniment and a startling *glissando* slide in the viola and cello. The third movement explodes with a violent fugue based on the DSCH note pattern. The music builds to a frantic climax, and the quartet's opening theme returns, forcefully at first, then in the grieving voice of the second movement. The music gradually fades to a quiet *pizzicato*, and the quartet ends with a gentle cadence.

String Quartet in C minor, Op. 51, no. 1 (1873)

JOHANNES BRAHMS

b. May 7, 1833, Hamburg

d. April 3, 1897, Vienna

Brahms' career as a composer took flight after Robert Schumann famously introduced the young pianist to the public—and publishers— in 1853 as one of the musical “elect” who would “give ideal expression of his times.” Brahms' composing style reflects his love of the great Classical tradition, and he quickly became known as the musical heir of Beethoven. This proved to be a burden for the cautious, self-critical Brahms. He had difficulty composing his first symphony and string quartets, the two forms in which Beethoven's achievements were supreme. Pressed by critics and publishers to compose a symphony, he asked for “more time,” and he wrote despairingly to a friend, “You have no idea what it is like to hear [Beethoven's] footsteps constantly behind me.”

For fourteen years Brahms struggled to create a string quartet that met his exacting standards. By his own count he destroyed 20 different versions in the process. In 1873 he was finally satisfied and published his two Op. 51 string quartets. He was 40 years old. A third and final string quartet was published three years later as Op. 67. The long delay was beneficial. Brahms was at the height of his creative powers in the 1870s and fully capable of composing powerful, large-scale works. Each of his quartets displays a superb blend of rich melodic texture, rhythmic and harmonic freedom, and well-crafted technique.

The forceful first movement of Op. 51, no. 1 quickly presents its dominant musical idea—a rising dotted-rhythm figure in the violins over an agitated accompaniment in the lower instruments. This driving seven-bar passage shapes the character of the entire first movement. The contrasting second theme is gentle but dark, and it provides little relief from the movement's restless intensity.

In the second movement the rising dotted-rhythm motif is transformed into a slow accompaniment beneath the first violin's calm, lyrical melody. Here Brahms marks the score “expressive” and “sweet.” The music darkens somewhat in its middle section with a halting, unstable rhythm that conveys a sense of anxiety. The movement returns to its opening calm and closes with orchestral sonorities.

Following the second movement's lyrical beauty, the *Allegretto* brings back the restless quality of the first movement, although without its fierce concentration. Contrasting melody lines are joined together uneasily in the first violin and viola when the movement opens. The movement's harmonic ambiguity, steady rhythmic pulse in the cello, and prominent descending lines impart a melancholy mood. The middle section is a naive little dance tune in the first violin over a sustained *unison*

bariolage—the same note played alternately on two different strings—in the second violin.

The passionate finale returns to the driving energy of the first movement, and its themes are modified versions of the first movement's rising dotted-rhythm figure. Brahms creates a dramatic musical texture with intricate part-writing and many quick exchanges between the players. The movement's intensity rarely flags, and it accelerates to an exciting conclusion.

—*Program notes by Robert Strong © 2013*