

Pacifica Quartet Program Notes

Quartet in D Minor, K. 421

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

b. January 27, 1756, Salzburg

d. December 5, 1791, Vienna

Performance Time

approximately 28 minutes

Premiere

Completed in 1783. Premiere unknown.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)

String Quartet in D Minor, K. 421

Allegro

Andante

Menuetto: Allegretto

Allegro ma non troppo

Vienna had an appreciative audience for chamber music when the young Mozart traveled there to seek his musical fortune, and no composer for small ensembles was more popular than Franz Joseph Haydn. Mozart heard the premier of Haydn's new Op. 33 string quartets shortly after he arrived, and they made a profound impression on him. He recognized that Haydn had elevated the string quartet to a level of great art. Inspired to assimilate Haydn's advances, Mozart began work on string quartets of his own and completed a set of six quartets in early 1785. That he found their composition difficult is evident in the time it took him to complete them and the unusual number of cross-outs and changes on the manuscripts. Mozart gave the quartets to Haydn with an elegant printed letter of dedication: "I send my six sons to you, most celebrated and very dear friend. They are, indeed, the fruit of a long and arduous labor...Please receive them kindly...I entreat you to be indulgent to those faults that may have escaped a father's partial eye." After hearing the quartets Haydn famously told Mozart's father, "Before God and as an honest man, I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me."

The D minor quartet is the second of the six 'Haydn' quartets and the only one in a minor key. Mozart composed relatively few works in a minor key during his career, and he reserved D minor for those that were the darkest and most intense. The quartet opens with a sighing melodic line in the first violin, a gesture with the profound sadness of an opera aria. The other instruments exclaim in a series of increasingly agitated chords. Mozart pulls these elements apart and reunites them over the course of the movement without dispelling the dark atmosphere.

The *Andante* begins in a mood of wistful tenderness, but the key of D minor reasserts itself and the music darkens. According to biographers, Mozart worked on parts of the quartet in the room where his wife Constanza was in labor with their first child. After Mozart's death, Constanza told visitors that she believed the two loud outbursts in the middle of this movement were her cries of pain.

The *Menuetto*, also in D minor, is strident and march-like rather than Mozart's usual lighthearted style in minuets. A contrasting moment of brightness is provided by the amusing trio section with its playful, heavily accented little tune in the first violin over plucked string accompaniment.

The final movement, still in D minor, is a set of four variations on a 6/8 *Siciliano* theme. Rhythmically and harmonically intricate, it demands virtuoso playing from all the players. Its shifting harmonies moderate but do not drive away the quarter's clouds of melancholy. Only in the fourth variation does the sun finally begin to shine, but the brisk closing coda offers a hurried restatement of the theme, and the clouds return.

Quartet No. 3 in F Major, Op. 73

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

b. September 25, 1906, Saint Petersburg

d. August 9, 1975, Moscow

Performance Time

approximately 33 minutes

Premiere

December 1946, performed by the Beethoven Quartet in Moscow

String Quartet No. 3 in F major, Op. 73 (1946)

Allegretto

Moderato con moto

Allegro non troppo

Adagio –

Moderato

Shostakovich began his five-movement Third Quartet in January 1946, the year following the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. According to Valentin Berlinsky, cellist of the Borodin Quartet, Shostakovich originally planned to give its movements programmatic titles with reference to the war: "Peaceful Soviet life"; "Beginning of distant war"; "Invasion of Russia"; "Requiem for the dead"; "Reflection on the fate of man." No explanation exists for their absence from the quartet's final design, although Shostakovich may have decided not to risk even patriotic-sounding written statements in the score. He had survived the purges of the 1930s, but with war over, Stalin was again finding 'enemies of the people' in the artistic community.

The Third Quartet opens with a simple, almost comic little tune, but after an off-kilter restatement, a dark double fugue emerges before being banished by the little tune's reappearance. The tempo accelerates, and a strong descending line from the fugue grows in volume to an abrupt ending. A heavy, joyless waltz opens the second movement in the jarring key of E minor. This is followed by a contrasting section of tiny strokes interrupted occasionally by melancholy melodic lines.

Brutal chords open the third movement, introducing a demonic march that is symphonic in scope and written in a musical language far removed from the quartet's opening. The movement rushes headlong with sustained intensity to a cascading ending.

The fourth movement Adagio opens with two contrasting statements, one a low funereal unison and the other a high, delicate grieving recitative in the first violin. After they alternate with some variation, the serious opening theme evolves into a longer melodic line that rises in intensity before falling, dissolving into fragments, and fading away.

Without pause, the last movement begins quietly with a rambling, lyrical theme in the cello that seems to be searching for a new beginning after the violence and grief of the two previous movements. Two more themes emerge in the first violin over rhythmic backgrounds, but without much development a Jewish folk dance abruptly intervenes. These musical elements are brought back in unstable harmonies and are interrupted by a shrill canon using the first theme from the fourth movement. The music slows to a dying ending with an eerie rising phrase as the first violin tries without success to restate the movement's opening theme.

Beethoven Quartet violist Fyodor Druzhinin told of the powerful effect String Quartet No. 3 had on the composer. "Only once did we see Shostakovich visibly moved by his own music. We were rehearsing his Third

Quartet...When we finished playing he sat quite still in silence like a wounded bird, tears streaming down his face. This was the only time I saw Shostakovich so open and defenseless.”

Quartet in C Major, Op. 59, No. 3 “Razumovsky”

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

b. December 16, 1770, Bonn

d. March 26, 1827, Vienna

Performance Time

approximately 33 minutes

Premiere

The three “Razumovsky” quartets were written in 1806. They were premiered all together by the Schuppanzigh Quartet in Count Razumovsky’s palace. The exact premiere date is unknown.

String Quartet in C Major, Op. 59, No. 3 (“Razumovsky”) ***Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)***

Introduzione (Andante con moto) – Allegro vivace

Andante con moto quasi allegretto

Menuetto (Grazioso)

Allegro molto

Count Andrey Razumovsky, Russian ambassador to the Imperial Court at Vienna in 1800, was a flamboyant and widely admired figure who entertained the cream of Viennese society in a magnificent neoclassical mansion. Today, however, he is remembered only for the three string quartets he commissioned from Beethoven that bear his name. Composed in 1806, the three Opus 59 “Razumovsky” quartets join the other ambitious masterpieces Beethoven completed between 1804 and 1806, notably the Eroica Symphony, Violin Concerto, and “Waldstein” and “Appassionata” Piano Sonatas. These large, path-breaking works revolutionized their genres. The many convention-defying features and technical difficulties of the Opus 59 quartets baffled contemporary performers and critics. Members of the string quartet engaged to premiere Op. 59 are reported to have laughed when they began to play Op. 59, No. 1 believing it was Beethoven’s joke on them and not one of the commissioned quartets. Op. 59 gave rise to a famous Beethoven anecdote. After perusing the score of Op. 59, No. 1, Italian violinist Felix Radicati remarked sarcastically, “Surely you do not consider this music.” Beethoven replied, “Not for you, but for a later age.”

Op. 59, No.3 glances backward in a way that its two companions in Op. 59 do not. The first movement recalls Mozart’s “Dissonance” Quartet, K. 465 with its slow, harmonically ambiguous introduction giving way to an exuberant major-key Allegro. The third movement is thoroughly classical in the spirit of Haydn and Mozart—a gracefully balanced minuet rather than Beethoven’s usual muscular scherzo. The brilliant fourth movement weaves together an amalgam of counterpoint and sonata form in the manner of Mozart’s K. 365 quartet and some of Haydn’s quartets.

Despite these references to the past, there is much in Op. 59, No. 3 that is new and strange. As Beethoven scholar Joseph Kerman observed, the restless, brooding second movement “is quite unlike anything else Beethoven ever wrote.” The cello opens the movement with low pizzicato notes and is joined by the other voices in a sad lament. Repeated pizzicato notes, evenly spaced and at times heavily accented, continue throughout much of the movement, sometimes on a single note and sometimes mournfully rising and falling. The shifting harmonic lines make frequent use of close intervals and harmonies that sound vaguely Slavic. The effect is bleak and mysterious. Kerman and others speculate that this was Beethoven’s attempt to fulfill Count Razumovsky’s request for “Russian melodies.”

The fourth movement emerges abruptly at the end of the Menuetto as the viola races off in the first line of a fugue. In an astonishing display of Beethoven's ability to create large blocks of sound out of tiny bits of music, the entire movement is built with two short note sequences—a turning gesture of five running notes and two pairs of notes that rise and fall together in agitated 4-note blocks. Played at great speed in long perpetual motion lines, these note figures propel the movement forward with great energy and permit much playful back and forth between the players. Joseph Kerman faults the movement as insubstantial and harrumphs that it “stretches [its] material...unscrupulously” with “piled-up repetitions and noise.” Even if this is true, it is irrelevant. In Beethoven's hands the most humble materials are enough to create a thrilling musical ride.

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