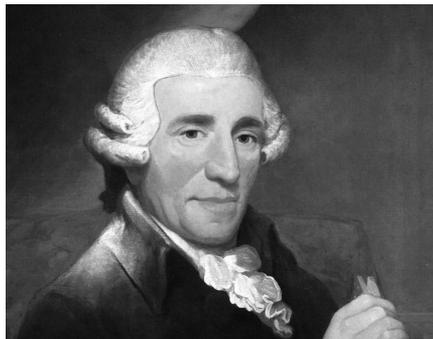


## PROGRAM NOTES



### **String Quartet in D Major, Op. 20, No. 4**

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN

*b. March 31, 1732, Rohrau*

*d. May 31, 1809, Vienna*

#### **Premiere**

circa 1772

#### **Performance Time**

30 minutes

Haydn completed the six quartets that make up his Opus 20 in 1772, about a decade into his tenure as kapellmeister for Prince Esterhazy. Though these quartets are relatively early (they are contemporaneous with his Symphonies 43-47), they have already left the old multi-movement divertimento form far behind and show the characteristics of Haydn's great quartets: virtuosity, balance and interplay of four equal voices (this quartet has a distinguished cello part), and an expressive musical substance.

Though almost consciously non-dramatic, the opening Allegro di molto of the Quartet in D Major is striking in many ways. It is in 3/4, rather than the duple meter expected in opening movements, and its smooth first theme extends over an unusually long span. In various forms and tonalities, this theme will dominate the first movement — there is no true “contrasting” second theme. The restrained quality of the main theme is set in high relief by the vigorous triplets of the first violin part; after an extensive development in unexpected keys, the movement comes to an understated close.

The glory of this quartet is its second movement, a set of variations marked “Somewhat slow and affectionate, tender.” The first violin lays out the long main theme in D minor, and there follow three extended variations: the second violin dominates the first, the cello the second, and the first violin the third. Haydn repeatedly reminds his performers to play dolce throughout this movement, which brings back the main theme after the third variation and treats it to a long coda full of dramatic outbursts before the quiet close.

Haydn's marking for the third movement is important as well. This is the expected minuet, but Haydn specifies that it should be alla zingarese, which means “à la gypsy.” It is full of accents and stinging attacks, and the minuet theme is syncopated in a way that gives it the effect of being in 2/4, though the movement is in the standard minuet meter of 3/4. By complete contrast, the trio section, smooth and flowing, belongs to the cello. This entire movement rushes past in 100 seconds.

Almost exotic in its manic energy, the sparkling Presto e scherzando seems to be made up of many quite different components: a virtuoso first violin part, huge dotted cadences and a great deal of unison writing, sizzling runs, and fortissimo attacks set off by Haydn's deft use of silences. It forms a brilliant conclusion to a very pleasing piece of music, and the very ending — where all the energy evaporates and the piece just winks out — is particularly effective.



### **String Quartet No. 4 in D Major, Op. 83**

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

*b. September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg*

*d. August 9, 1975, Moscow*

#### **Premiere**

December 3, 1953, Moscow

#### **Performance Time**

25 minutes

The Soviet crackdown on composers in February 1948 remains, over half a century later, one of the most devastating examples of government interference and censorship in history. Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Khachaturian, Miaskovsky, and others were excoriated for their “formalistic distortions and anti-democratic tendencies” and for writing “confused, neuropathological combinations which transform music into cacophony.” These composers were forced to make public apologies, and — in those frosty early days of the Cold War — they promised to write more “progressive” music, in tune with the ideals of the Revolution.

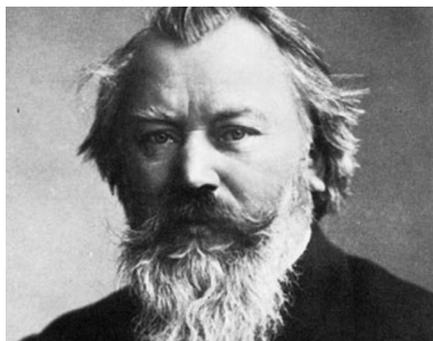
Shostakovich, who had met with government disfavor in 1936 during the period of Stalin's “Great Terror,” began to write two kinds of music. The “public” Shostakovich wrote what would now be described as politically-correct scores, intended to satisfy Soviet officials with their ideological purity: the oratorio *Song of the Forests*, the cantata *The Sun Shines over Our Motherland*, the film score *The Fall of Berlin*, and a choral cycle with the numbing title *Ten Poems on Texts by Revolutionary Poets*. The “private” Shostakovich, however, wrote the music he wanted to, but held it back, waiting for a more receptive climate. The death of Stalin in March 1953 brought a slight political and artistic thaw, and Shostakovich could bring out these scores: the First Violin Concerto, composed in 1947, but not premiered until 1955; the song cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, written in 1948 and first performed in 1955; and the Fourth and Fifth String Quartets, written respectively in 1949 and 1952, but not played until 1953.

Shostakovich's Fourth String Quartet is almost as interesting for what it is not as for what it actually is. This music is remarkable for its restraint. All four movements are at a moderate tempo (three Allegrettos and one Andantino), and the work is marked by an emotional reserve as well. There are no dramatic extremes here — this music is spare, understated, lean, at times almost bleak. Harmonically, it varies moments of simple diatonic melodies (even unisons) with episodes of grinding dissonance. And at the end it fades into silence on the same note of emotional restraint that has marked the entire quartet.

The opening Allegretto is quite brief (only three minutes), just long enough to lay out two themes but not long enough to develop them in a significant way. The music moves from the quiet beginning, built on constantly-changing meters, to a full-throated restatement; more lyric secondary material leads to a quiet close on a unison D three octaves deep. The Andantino at first feels somewhat more settled. Its wistful opening, which belongs largely to the first violin, is in straightforward F minor, but again the music grows more turbulent as the movement proceeds; it closes with a quiet reprise of the opening material, now played muted.

The third movement, muted throughout, is scherzo-like in its fusion of quick-paced themes, from the cello's propulsive opening to a more animated second subject; in the course of the movement, each of the four instruments takes a turn with this second melody. Unmuted solo viola leads the way into the finale over pizzicato accompaniment from the other voices. The first violin's main theme here has a pronounced "Jewish" character — it is a lamenting tune, built on tight intervals, sharp accents, and fleeting dissonances. This movement, longest in the quartet, rises to an almost orchestral climax full of tremolos, unisons, and huge chords, then fades away on a haunting coda as the two violins in fourths restate the main theme. Over a sustained cello harmonic the upper voices lapse into silence on quiet pizzicatos.

Small wonder that Shostakovich kept this music hidden during the Stalin years. It is far from the "progressive" and popular music the Soviet government wanted, and while this quartet has been admired for its lucidity, it is nevertheless troubling music, remarkable for its leanness, its restraint — and its bleakness.



## **String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 51, No. 2**

JOHANNES BRAHMS

*b. May 7, 1833, Hamburg*

*d. April 3, 1897, Vienna*

### **Premiere**

circa 1873

### **Performance Time**

30 minutes

In one of the most famous remarks in the history of music, Brahms complained to a friend about the strain of having to compose within the shadow of Beethoven: “You have no idea how the likes of us feel when we hear the tramp of a giant like him behind us.” This comment is usually taken to refer to the overpowering example of Beethoven’s symphonies, for Brahms put off writing his first symphony until he was 43. But it applies just as accurately to Beethoven’s cycle of sixteen string quartets, because Brahms waited nearly as long to publish string quartets — he did not publish his first quartets until he was 40. It was not a case of his being uninterested in writing them. On the contrary, Brahms had been trying to write quartets for years, but he was the most self-critical of composers: he said that he had written and destroyed at least twenty quartets before he wrote two he liked well enough to publish in 1873 as his Opus 51. One of his friends reported seeing sketches for these quartets as early as 1859, which means that Brahms had worked on them for fourteen years before he felt they were finished.

After his long delay in writing a symphony, Brahms wrote a first symphony in C minor that is stormy and impassioned, then quickly followed it with a second that is lyric and expansive. The situation is somewhat similar with the string quartets: after long delay, his first effort was the dark and driving Quartet in C Minor, while the second was the more lyric and genial Quartet in A Minor, which was — like its companion — completed in the summer of 1873. It was as if Brahms’ opening work in the new form needed to be a clenched confrontation in which he could attack the form and make it his own; only then could he relax and write a sunnier work in the same form.

That said, however, it must be noted that the Quartet in A Minor is marked by the same fierce concentration of materials and motivic development that animated its predecessor, and much of this quartet grows directly out of the first violin’s opening theme. Brahms intended this quartet for his friend Joseph Joachim, and he incorporated Joachim’s personal motto “Frei aber einsam” (“Free but lonely”) in the notes F-A-E that shape the opening theme. In addition, the three rising eighth-notes that appear innocently in the fourth measure of this theme will return in various forms here and in subsequent movements. But the quartet is not an exercise in crabbed

motivic manipulation, and Brahms supplies a second subject that simply glows: it is a long duet for the violins, and he marks it *dolce* (“sweet”), *lusingando* (“charming, coaxing”), and *grazioso* (“graceful”). From these contrasted materials, he builds an extended sonata-form movement that concludes on evocations of Joachim’s motto. The *Andante moderato* takes the shape of its main theme from that innocent figure from the very beginning. Most striking here is the duet of first violin and cello at the center: over buzzing tremolos from the middle voices they sing a “Hungarian duet” in close canon before the movement closes on a return of the opening material.

In the third movement, Brahms bends traditional minuet form for his own purposes. He calls this movement a “quasi-minuet” and rather than building it on the standard minuet-and-trio form Brahms presents a lilting, ghostly minuet, then contrasts it with two sections — marked *Allegretto vivace* — where the music suddenly flashes ahead on a steady patter of sixteenth-notes, only to rein back to resume the more stately minuet tempo. Many have heard the influence of Hungarian music in the finale: the first violin’s vigorous, strongly-inflected dance at the very beginning seems to have its origins in gypsy fiddling. This movement is in sonata-rondo form: that “gypsy” theme, full of energy and snap, recurs throughout but subtly evolves on each return. Brahms speeds this wild dance to its close on a *Più vivace* coda.

– Program notes by Eric Bromberger