

UChicago Presents | Performance Hall | Logan Center

January 17, 2016, 3:00 PM

Pacifica Quartet

Don Michael Randel Ensemble-in-Residence

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

2 PM lecture with Pacifica Quartet

SCHNITTKE

String Quartet No. 3
Andante
Agitato
Pesante

SHOSTAKOVICH

String Quartet No. 13 in B-flat Minor, Op. 138
Adagio – Doppio movimento – Tempo primo

Intermission

MENDELSSOHN

String Quartet in E Minor, Op. 44, No. 2
Allegro assai appassionato
Scherzo. Allegro di molto
Andante
Presto agitato

PROGRAM NOTES

String Quartet No. 3

ALFRED SCHNITTKE

Born November 24, 1934, Engels on the Volga River, Soviet Union

Died August 3, 1998, Hamburg, Germany

Performance Time

approximately 21 minutes

Premiere

Written in 1983, first performance in May 1984 by the Eder Quartett (Budapest) in the Kunsthalle Mannheim, Germany

As a young music student, Russian composer Alfred Schnittke formed the view that he was “a link to the historical chain” of past composers and that the past “was multi-dimensional [and]...represented a world of ever-present spirits.” This view guided his creative output throughout his life. He attended the Moscow Conservatory and taught there from 1962 to 1972. Subsequently he earned his living by composing film scores because his determination to be creatively independent placed him frequently at odds with the official USSR music establishment.

Schnittke worked in a variety of styles over his career. His early music was strongly influenced by Dmitri Shostakovich, but in 1962 he adopted the serial technique of Schoenberg after a visit to Moscow by modernist composer Luigi Nono. Schnittke quickly tired of what he called serialism’s “puberty rites of self-denial,” and he created his own compositional framework in the late 1960s. Termed poly-stylism, it is a colorful synthesis of music in the styles of past composers, often using direct quotation, reworked into a contemporary musical language. The result combines an elevated style with irony and humor, often juxtaposed in abrupt shifts of mood. Schnittke later abandoned poly-stylism, but it was his composing idiom when he composed the String Quartet No. 3 in 1983.

The first movement of String Quartet No. 3 presents musical quotations from three centuries in the short space of its first eight bars: a cadence phrase from 16th century composer Orlando di Lasso’s *Stabat Mater*; the main theme from Beethoven’s Op. 133 *Grosse Fuge* for string quartet; and, more obscurely, the four-note ‘D-S-C-H’ musical signature of Dmitri Shostakovich. These are all brief ‘turn’ figures, which Schnittke mixes and transforms in a variety of ways. The movement ends with the di Lasso cadence barely recognizable in an atonal multi-voice pattern of canonic lines.

The second movement is a turbulent scherzo whose main theme is a macabre waltz in the manner of Shostakovich. The movement is punctuated by reappearances of the di Lasso cadence, which becomes distorted and modern sounding. Diversion from the movement’s agitated flow is also provided by extended tonal passages that provide humorous contrast. The movement ends as instruments go their separate ways as though improvising and rise to a shriek.

The last movement begins almost immediately with a slow lament Schnittke marks “pesante”, or heavy. The di Lasso cadence and other allusions return, reinforcing the thematic unity they provide across the entire quartet. After an extended development section in which the original quotations are transformed anew, a grating climax builds on rising minor seconds. The music then fades down to a quiet pizzicato reprise of the second movement’s waltz theme and dies away.

-- Program note by Robert Strong © 2015

Quartet No. 13 in B-flat Minor, Op. 138

DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH

Born September 25, 1906, Saint Petersburg, Russia

Died August 9, 1975, Moscow, Russia

Performance Time

approximately 19 minutes

Premiere

On December 11, 1970 at the USSR Composers’ Club in Moscow, performed by the Beethoven Quartet (Tsyganov, Zabavnikov, Druzhinin, and Shirinsky)

Shostakovich was born with a fragile constitution and suffered periods of bad health throughout his life, but health problems became chronic following the onset of neurological disease in his middle 50s and his first heart attack in 1966. Hospitalized frequently during succeeding years for a variety of medical conditions, his physical condition gradually deteriorated. Although depressed by declining health, his creative energy remained strong. He continued to compose actively in a wide range of genres—chamber music, vocal music, movie scores, and symphonies.

The Thirteenth Quartet was written in 1970 and is dedicated to Beethoven Quartet violist Vadim Borisovsky. A prominent solo role is given to the viola part throughout the quartet. It is structured as a one-movement ABCBA arch form and shares many musical gestures with the composer's Fourteenth Symphony (1969). The symphony is a somber setting of eleven poems on the theme of death, a preoccupation many commentators also hear in the Thirteenth Quartet, given the precarious state of Shostakovich's health.

As in the Twelfth Quartet and Fourteenth Symphony, Shostakovich uses twelve-note rows as thematic statements in the Thirteenth Quartet. However, he continues his practice of modifying the note rows freely and building them into a musical fabric more consistent with his accustomed style rather than using them strictly in accordance with the practice of Schoenberg, Berg, and other 12-tone composers of the Viennese School. The quartet opens with a bleak, lamenting twelve-note row in the viola that is transposed and reordered as the other instruments join. The second section begins with soft *staccato* notes in the first violin in doubled tempo (*doppio movimento*). This repeated-note motif is transformed into a harsh, dissonant statement, first by the viola and then by all voices together. The middle section of the quartet is a sardonic *danse macabre*, punctuated by skeletal taps of the bows against the players' instruments. The last two sections of the quartet complete the overall arch structure, as thematic elements from the first two sections return in reverse order: first the repeated-note motif of the second section and then the icy harmonies of the slow opening. A coda featuring the viola states a final twelve-note row, the two violins join, and the music ends with a scream. The Thirteenth Quartet's ending recalls the musical cry following Wozzeck's murder of Marie in Alban Berg's opera.

-- Program note by Robert Strong © 2015

Quartet in E Minor, Op. 44, No. 2

FELIX MENDELSSOHN BARTHOLDY

Born February 3, 1809, Hamburg, Germany

Died November 4, 1847, Leipzig, Germany

Performance Time

approximately 27 minutes

Premiere

Composed in 1837, first performance on October 29, 1837 in Leipzig; revised in 1839

Few composers were born with as much musical genius as Felix Mendelssohn, and few achieved as much success during their lifetimes. Son of a prominent banker and grandson of a noted philosopher, Mendelssohn was three years old when the family fled French-occupied Hamburg and settled in Berlin, where their lavish home became a gathering place for prominent artists, intellectuals, and social leaders from across Europe. As a young child Mendelssohn displayed amazing musical ability, and at age nine he

made his concert debut. In the same year his choral setting of the *Nineteenth Psalm* was performed in public, and he began to compose in earnest.

In 1825 the sixteen-year old Mendelssohn composed his *Octet*, and a year later he composed the *Midsummer Night's Dream Overture*, showing a creative gift that surpassed even that of Mozart at a comparable age. After university studies Mendelssohn was appointed director of the prestigious Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig in 1835, and eight years later he founded the Leipzig Conservatory. By the time he settled in Leipzig, he was widely accepted as an outstanding composer, the greatest living conductor, and one of the finest violinists and pianists of the day.

The Opus 44 quartets were composed in 1837 and 1838, a time of great personal happiness for Mendelssohn. His marriage on March 28, 1837 and the birth of his son less than one year later gave him great pleasure, and every composition was eagerly awaited and immediately performed. Under his baton the Gewandhaus Orchestra rose to first-rank status in Europe, and Mendelssohn toured actively as conductor and performer.

Opus 44, No. 2 opens with a dark melody that is given a sense of urgency by the continuing syncopations in the second violin and viola. A lyrical second theme in the first violin follows, and Mendelssohn combines these main themes in the movement's powerful closing. The light, elfin *Scherzo* is built on a motif of four rapid notes played as one beat and is more rhythmic than melodic. Rather than a traditional trio section for contrast, Mendelssohn introduces a soulful new melody in the viola midway through the movement and again just before it ends.

The *Andante* resembles the popular nineteenth century genre known as a character piece, one written to express a specific mood or emotion. Its melodic line is wistful and nostalgic, but Mendelssohn protects it from sentimentality by instructing the players not to drag ("nicht schleppend") and by giving the non-melodic voices active roles.

The buoyant *Presto* pits its first theme, a rhythmic dance melody, against the second, a song-like melody. As the two ideas are worked out, they are heard both sequentially and superimposed one on the other, but the rhythmic forces prove the stronger at the boisterous conclusion.

--Program note adapted from "Guide to Chamber Music", by Melvin Berger © 1985