

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM
Pro Musica March 23, 2017
Academy of St Martin in the Fields

Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

Quiet City

Aaron Copland's compositions are divided into three periods: the early jazz-inspired works, the severely avant-garde, and the "Americana" or populist style that produced his most beloved works such as *Rodeo*, *Appalachian Spring*, *Lincoln Portrait*, and *Fanfare for the Common Man*. While *Quiet City* of 1940 falls into Copland's populist style, we should be cautious about that categorization causing us to miss the work's purely musical qualities and genius. That said, we must recognize it as one of the most evocative pieces of Copland's output. In this case, it paints a night in a sleepless city, presumably New York, Copland's home. Based on Copland's incidental music for Irwin Shaw's failed play of the same name, *Quiet City* was premiered in 1941 by the Saitenberg Little Symphony in New York City. Copland himself commented that the work was "an attempt to mirror the troubled main character of Irwin Shaw's play." He also admitted that *Quiet City* "seems to have become a musical entity superseding the original reasons for its composition."

On Mozart and Shostakovich

In light of the combination of Mozart and Shostakovich on this program, we offer the following thoughts:

On the death of the American novelist Saul Bellow, *The New York Times* reported that Mr. Bellow once told a reporter that "for many years, Mozart was a kind of idol to me—this rapturous singing that's always on the edge of sadness and melancholy and disappointment and heartbreak, but always ready for an outburst of the most delicious music."

One could say much of the same about the music of Shostakovich, thus pointing to the *raison d'être* for combining these two composers on a program. Thematic programming can be tiresome when it stretches associations, but in this case the relationship is a profound and important one to anyone who thinks about music and treasures its significance in the world. Both Mozart and Shostakovich brought to their music their own agonies and ecstasies but universalized them in the name of their art. Thus we have an explanation for "the outburst of the most delicious music" that comes from "sadness and melancholy and disappointment and heartbreak." Both Mozart and Shostakovich experienced those emotions in their lives but did not succumb to them. Instead, they sang rapturously.

On a purely musical level—if there is such a thing—both composers also shared an elegance of style stemming from a thorough understanding of Classical form and incredible contrapuntal skills. The harmonic innovation we associate with Shostakovich is also clearly evident in Mozart, veiled though it may be in 18th century language. Even the grotesque and comic we hear in Shostakovich is not missing in the earlier master. Furthermore, Mozart's great gift of song is merely restated by Shostakovich in the rougher language of his time.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Concerto No. 9 in E-flat Major, K. 271, "Jeunehomme"

Allegro

Andantino

Rondeau: Presto

As Haydn forged the Classical Period and Beethoven pushed it towards Romanticism, Mozart consolidated it in a way unmatched by any other composer. To it he brought not only the elegance and grace we associate with the earlier Baroque Period, but also the brilliance, power, and clarity that define the Classical Period. So, too, was Mozart a harmonic and melodic innovator. His death at thirty-five has left us with endless unanswered questions of where he would have taken his profound effect on Western music. Despite the brevity of his life, he produced a catalogue of works that defined opera, the Mass, the symphony,

the piano concerto, and the piano sonata. To chamber music he brought his rich array of duo sonatas, string quartets, and quintets that never dull in their many performances. Those who play his music will quickly attest to its singular virtuosic challenges based on a demand for absolute clarity coupled with a pervading operatic quality.

While Mozart toyed with symphonies as young child, he was relatively slower in coming to the piano concerto, probably because the form itself was not as yet fully developed. His first piano concerto was heard in 1773 after he had completed thirty symphonies. He would eventually write some twenty-seven piano concertos, many of which he played in a Vienna concert series between 1774 and 1886.

The Piano Concerto No. 9 was composed in Salzburg in January of 1777 as Mozart turned twenty-one and was written for a young French keyboard player, Jeunehomme, who has been confirmed as Victoire Jenamy, the daughter of an 18th century ballet master. Little is known about her, but the conclusion can be drawn that she was very talented since the work is especially challenging and is considered one of Mozart's early masterpieces. It was also one of his personal favorites which he played on his tour to Mannheim and Paris in 1777-78 and remains a favorite among listeners and players today. It is easy to see why.

The first movement *Allegro* is thrilling with the piano's dramatic response to the orchestra's introduction. Themes are then fully developed and explored in new ways that suit both the 18th century keyboard and a modern one. A slower, tender but still brilliant moment intervenes in the movement. Mozart's darker side is heard in the C minor key of the second movement *Andantino* with its growing tension and dramatic solo piano moments with extended trills. The spirited and brilliant *Rondo*, with its contrasting slow moments, is tightly knit together by repeated thematic statements. It is harmoniously, rhythmically, and melodically ingenious and a most satisfying conclusion to the work.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 35

Allegretto

Lento

Moderato

Allegro con brio

The many photographs of Shostakovich's unsmiling face accurately depict the man, his sensibilities, and his music, but that depiction is unendingly complex. Arguments continue even today on his political views and on the compromises he may have made to sustain his creativity. The only thing certain is his position as a victim in the Soviet regime's attempt to control the arts and make them subservient to its political ideals. That many artists died in this process is enough to confirm its devastating effect. Shostakovich had also been deeply affected by World War II and even tried enlisting in the military but was turned down because of his bad eyesight.

In addition to the political problems of his time, Shostakovich was beset throughout his life with personal problems, marital and otherwise and including, in particular, persistent poor health. While these problems play out in his music, it sells him short to perceive only the non-musical references in his remarkable output that included, among others, three operas, fifteen symphonies, six concertos, fifteen string quartets, two piano trios, a string octet, and solo piano works including his monumental Twenty-four Preludes and Fugues. His three strongest musical influences were Sergei Prokofiev, Igor Stravinsky, and, interestingly, Gustav Mahler.

Shostakovich is buried near his first wife Nina in the famous Novodevichy Cemetery in Moscow. A dark gray stone marks the grave with an inscription of his solemn four-note motto, D, E-flat, C, B, used so frequently throughout his work.

The Piano Concerto No. 1 was composed in 1933 before Stalin's famous 1936 condemnation of Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth at Mtensk*. (Stalin would follow up in 1948 with accusing Shostakovich and Prokofiev of "formalist perversions and anti-democratic tendencies in music alien to the Soviet people and its artistic taste.") Perhaps it was the earlier composition date of 1933, before he had fallen out of political favor, that allowed Shostakovich the free reign of compositional style expressed in this startling work. Shortly after

this he would retreat to the inner sanctum of his creative genius in order to avoid the artistic compromise that occurs when politics toys with art.

The first movement *Allegretto* of the Piano Concerto No. 1 burst forth with a rippling piano statement which is then strongly supported by the orchestra and particularly the trumpet. This movement is brilliant, strong, and unquestionably modern. In the second movement *Lento*, brilliance and darkness meet creatively in both piano and trumpet solo moments. We also hear something of the “heartbreak” mentioned earlier by Saul Bellow in his comments on Mozart. The brief (some one minute) third movement *Moderato* offers a moment of playfulness before it turns dark and leads directly to the final *Allegro con brio*. Here brightness rules and all cares seem abandoned in the breathless tempo and sense of dance.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Symphony No. 29 in A Major, K. 201

Allegro moderato

Andante

Minuetto; Trio

Allegro con spirito

Mozart is known to have written forty-one symphonies plus some twenty-five that have been discovered after his death. While he produced seven in 1772 and six in 1773, the year 1774 brought only two including the Symphony No. 29 which is considered to be one of his finest. His lower output may have been caused by his position as concertmaster of the Salzburg court orchestra and the premiere of his opera buffa *La finta giardiniera*, but whatever the reasons, they did not lower the quality of his work, as indicated by the Symphony No. 29. We are reminded again of Saul Bellow’s words describing Mozart’s music as “most delicious.” Indeed it is with its pervading elegance.

Firmness of intention governs the first movement *Allegro moderato* with its full use of the strings. Despite this, it maintains a certain intimacy throughout. Also noticeable in the movement is the artful use of repeated notes that never hint of boredom but add continuity. The “walking” pace of the second movement *Andante* moves steadily onward with again the sweetest of melodies that are also complex, eloquent, and bear a certain Mozartian dignity. That dignity manages to continue in the lively *Minuetto* with its *Trio* section. The final *Allegro con spirito* is spirited indeed but continues the elegance and dignity we sense in the entire work. Mozart’s biographer, Alfred Einstein, refers to this final movement as “the richest and most dramatic Mozart had written up to this time.” How unbelievable it is that this fully mature symphony was written by an eighteen-year old!

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