

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM
By Lucy Miller Murray

JOSEPH HAYDN (1732-1809)
String Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 50, No. 1

Haydn's voluminous output alone does not explain his powerful musical and cultural influence. His 83 string quartets and some 45 piano trios, though daunting in number, are also overwhelming in their stylistic breadth and ingenuity. They move across the boundaries of the Baroque and the Classical, lick the edges of Romanticism, and even point the way to Modernism.

The move to a freer, more emotional expression was occasioned by the end of Haydn's 29-year tenure as *Kapellmeister* in the court of the aristocratic and wealthy Hungarian Esterházy family. That, coupled with two highly successful visits to London, gave Haydn a wider musical exposure. Freed from musical and financial obligations, Haydn went to London where, under the direction of the German violinist and impresario Johann Peter Salomon, he became an international celebrity. Fame did not ruin Haydn, however, for the London years proved to be some of the richest in his compositional life. For the first time he heard music played in public halls by professional musicians for a general audience. This more democratic approach to music freed him from the decorative style demanded by aristocratic amateur players and audiences. Prior to this, however, Haydn's music had already taken on new emotional depths as a result of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, a philosophical influence that stressed the importance of faith and the senses as opposed to the logic and reason of the Enlightenment.

All of this is clearly evidenced in Haydn's glorious string quartets, piano trios, and other chamber music. If Haydn's paternity of the piano trio is sometimes overlooked, his fatherhood of the string quartet is honored universally. The number, some 83, is astonishing in itself, but the depth and breadth of his string quartets bespeak his genius even more clearly.

The six "Prussian" Quartets of Op. 50 were composed in 1787 and dedicated to Frederick William II, King of Prussia, a fine amateur cellist to whom Mozart and Beethoven also dedicated works. Motivic structure, variety, and a bow to the cello mark the set and are clearly indicated in the Op. 50, No. 1 Quartet.

The repeated cello note offers a darkness to the opening *Allegro* movement. With the entrance of the other instruments, things turn brighter yet a certain lyrical poignancy remains as the cello grounds the work while the violins and viola sing. Haydn thoroughly explores the theme with elegance and a touch of joy and sorrow. His creative use of the repeated note is nothing short of amazing.

The second movement *Adagio non lento*, the longest of the four, continues with the elegance of a courtly dance but shot through with subtle shifts to the minor that are always compelling to the listener. One has a sense that Haydn chooses to mask his own seriousness. He returns to a vibrant major key development before a gracious and quiet conclusion.

The third movement *Minuetto* goes well beyond the notion of dancing yet the spirit of the dance remains in the movement's unquestionable charm. The staccato descending notes of the trio section surely thrilled the court for whom it was performed.

The *Finale*, marked *vivace*, is a challenging race in the spirit of fun but still musically complex and elegant. The movement also contains musical surprises such as the unexpected pauses that we associate with Haydn. He brings things to a breathless conclusion.

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)
String Quartet No. 7 in F-sharp Minor, Op. 108

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. Shostakovich's American biographer, Laurel Fay, wisely says of him that he was "an artist who felt the suffering of his people deeply, who courageously challenged the prohibitive aesthetic restriction of his

time, to communicate through his music an emotional reality that could not be expressed in any other way.” Yet both Fay and scholar Richard Taruskin have contested the authenticity of *Testimony*, a 1979 publication by Solomon Volkov purported to be Shostakovich’s memoirs in which he admitted to anti-government messages in his music.

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, and solo piano works including his monumental Twenty-four Preludes and Fugues. In chamber music alone he produced fifteen string quartets (plus his Two Pieces for String Quartet), a piano quintet, two piano trios, and a string octet. His three strongest musical influences were Sergei Prokofiev, Igor Stravinsky, and, interestingly, Gustav Mahler.

With more and more certainty, the fifteen string quartets of Dmitri Shostakovich are seen as monuments of the 20th century literature and are ranked next to the six quartets of Béla Bartók. The quartets, however, differ so greatly from Shostakovich’s symphonic output that one sometimes comes to them in a secondary fashion. Such adjectives as “mysterious,” “fragmented,” “death-haunted,” and “confessional” have been applied to them, sometimes with a hint of the pejorative. Much of this is explained by Shostakovich’s working and surviving in a totalitarian state where it was necessary to cloud meaning. Behind that complex game, one finds, particularly in the string quartets, a tragic voice in mourning for the victims of tyranny. One also finds a composer determined to write his music under any circumstances.

Shostakovich’s string quartets punctuate his tumultuous relationship with the Soviet regime. In 1936, Stalin had stormed out in protest from a performance of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, and this was followed by the famous review in which the opera was described as “muddle instead of music.” *Pravda* wrote ominously that *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* “is a leftist bedlam instead of human music. The inspiring quality of good music is sacrificed in favor of petty-bourgeois clowning. This game may end badly.” In 1948 the situation came to a head with Shostakovich and Prokofiev being accused of “formalist perversions and anti-democratic tendencies in music, alien to the Soviet people and its artistic tastes.” Shostakovich was publicly apologetic but from that point on turned inward to chamber music and to the completion of his fifteen quartets. Prior to the 1948 condemnation, however, he had already begun that monumental task with his first three string quartets of 1938, 1944, and 1946. The remaining twelve quartets would come between 1949 and 1974, the year before his death.

There is always danger of artistic compromise when politics toys with art. Particularly in his chamber music, Shostakovich solved the problem by retreating to the inner sanctum of his creative genius, which was more abstract and therefore more impervious to political controversy. As the Nazis did not comprehend the irony of the performance of Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time* before five thousand prisoners in 1941, so did the Stalinists miss the impact of Shostakovich’s fifteen string quartets.

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.

Although Shostakovich dedicated the brief String Quartet No. 7 of 1960 to his first wife Nina who died in 1954 of colon cancer, the work is more than a personal elegy. A universal grief drenches the work.

Even the first movement, with its odd waltz-like rhythms, suggests something of the macabre beneath its superficial cheerfulness. The ominous second movement *Lento*, if not a mourning for Nina, is a powerful expression of sadness. The music strangely evaporates before the *fortissimo* opening of the *Allegro*. In this last movement, an angry and brutal fugue suggests something well beyond personal grief. The first movement is recalled before the Quartet ends in quiet resignation.

In his memoirs, Shostakovich said that critics wanted his music “to be comforting, to say that death is only the beginning. But it’s not a beginning, it’s the real end, there will be nothing afterward, nothing.” It is that hard philosophy which underlies the String Quartet No. 7.

The work was premiered in Leningrad on May 15, 1960 by the Beethoven Quartet.

MAURICE RAVEL ((1875-1937) String Quartet in F Major

Quite in contrast to the elusive portrait of himself that Ravel fostered, his international impact is evident specifically in England, Germany, Italy, Spain, and America. Whatever the source of his creativity, the results of it are extraordinary and bear his singular trademark of beautiful textures and effects expressed in elegant and Classical form.

While the “exotic” qualities we associate with Ravel’s music stem mostly from his compositional genius, surely they had to be influenced by his family background—a mother of Basque-Spanish heritage and a Swiss father from the French Haute-Savoie. Not to be omitted from his list of influences would be the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes who was a foremost interpreter of his piano music.

Ravel’s studies at the Paris Conservatoire where he was considered “very gifted” but “somewhat heedless” were interrupted by his being expelled in 1895. He returned, however, in 1898 to study with Gabriel Fauré and to a competitive but mutually admiring relationship with his older colleague, Claude Debussy. About that time, he also became a member of the infamous Apaches, a group of young artists, poets, critics, and musicians who championed the avant-garde. His travels began in 1905 and brought with them his productive Spanish period.

Although he was not accepted for enlistment, Ravel was profoundly affected by World War I and shortly thereafter wrote his famous *La Valse* which so ironically captures the climate of the times. In post-war Paris he also came under the influence of American jazz and in 1928 undertook a four-month concert tour in North America where he met George Gershwin. He returned to France and later that year produced his famous *Bolero* which surprised him with its enormous success. His own description of the work was “a piece for orchestra without music.” In 2008, the *New York Times* published an article suggesting that Ravel may have been in the early stages of frontotemporal dementia at the time of its composition, accounting for its repetitive nature. Once again, as with most observations about Ravel, the truth is elusive and such scientific projections become relatively meaningless. The only thing we are certain of is the beauty of his music.

Following brain surgery, he died in Paris on December 28, 1937 at the age of 62.

Written in 1902-03 when Ravel was still a student at the Paris Conservatoire, the F Major String Quartet is dedicated to his mentor, Gabriel Fauré, who took issue with the last movement. Debussy, on the other hand, implored Ravel not to change a note of it. This encouragement is interesting in light of the endless comparisons that would be made between the Debussy and Ravel quartets, comparisons that led to a frosty relationship between the two composers. Yet the coupling of the two quartets on recordings continues to this day. Ravel’s Quartet was premiered in Paris on March 5, 1904.

Despite Ravel’s statement that music must be “emotional first and intellectual second,” his sole string quartet is elegantly crafted in Classical sonata form reminiscent of Mozart. Superimposed on that form are the gorgeous tonal colors and effects we associate with this 20th century French master with an interest in music of the Far East.

The first movement opens with a rich melody shared by the four instruments and then handed to the first violin over rapid figures by the second violin and viola. An exciting tonal effect occurs when the violin and viola play two octaves apart. In the second movement, Ravel’s love of the exotic reveals itself in the suggestion of a Javanese gamelan orchestra. The rhapsodic third movement includes a reference to the opening melody, thus preserving form but always in lustrous and ever-changing colors. Stemming from a five-beat meter, the restlessness of the last movement is ended by a return to the first movement theme. Structure is not all, however, since the ravishing melodies and tonal colors remind us that this work is, indeed, “emotional first and intellectual second.”

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