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DANISH STRING QUARTET



Thursday, April 11, 2024, 8pm | Irvine Barclay Theatre

Photo: Caroline Bittencourt



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Irvine Barclay Theatre, Cheng Hall

PHILHARMONIC SOCIETY OF ORANGE COUNTY
AND IRVINE BARCLAY THEATRE PRESENT

DANISH STRING QUARTET

Frederik Øland, violin
Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, violin
Asbjørn Nørgaard, viola
Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, cello

Franz SCHUBERT (1797-1828)
"Gretchen am Spinnrade," D. 118
(arr. Danish String Quartet)

Franz Joseph HAYDN (1732-1809)
String Quartet in G minor, Op. 20, No. 3

Allegro con spirito
Menuet. Allegretto & Trio
Poco Adagio
Allegro molto

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

Allegretto
Lento
Allegro

INTERMISSION

Franz SCHUBERT (1797-1828)
String Quartet in A minor, D. 804
"Rosamunde"

Allegro ma non troppo
Andante
Menuetto. Allegretto - Trio
Allegro moderato

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SCHUBERT: "GRETCHEN AM SPINNRADE," D. 118 (ARR. DANISH STRING QUARTET)

Schubert composed *Gretchen am Spinnrade* ("Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel") on October 19, 1814. The text is from Part I of Goethe's *Faust*. As Gretchen spins, she thinks of Faust, who is coming to seduce her. She is restless, troubled, anxious, out of control, and she knows it—"Meine Ruh is hin," the song begins: "My peace is gone." The piano's steady oscillation is the sound of the spinning wheel, and it is a reassuring sound—sort of. Because it is the piano that tells the tale here, capturing the emotion in a way that the words sometimes do not. Its shifts of key and changes of dynamic all underline the meaning in subtle ways, and at the climax of the song—when Gretchen thinks of Faust's kiss—it stops completely: she's overcome, and the wheel resumes its spinning falteringly as she collects herself. In its dramatic sense, insight into emotion, compression, and intensity, *Gretchen am Spinnrade* is a masterpiece. Schubert was all of seventeen years old when he wrote it. This concert opens with an arrangement of *Gretchen am Spinnrade* for string quartet made by the members of the Danish String Quartet.

HAYDN: STRING QUARTET IN G MINOR, OP. 20, NO. 3

In 1772, Haydn composed the six quartets that he would publish as his Opus 20, but listeners should not for an instant be fooled by that low opus number—these quartets are the work of an experienced composer. When he wrote them, Haydn was 40 years old, he had been kapellmeister to the Esterhazy court for over a decade, and he had composed nearly fifty symphonies. The string quartet had begun as an entertainment form, usually as a multi-movement work of light character intended as background music at social occasions. The original title of this form—*divertimento*—made clear that this music was intended as a diversion. Haydn in fact published the six quartets of his Opus 20 under the title *Divertimenti*, but he had already transformed the string quartet. No longer was it entertainment music content to remain in the background—Haydn made it a concise form, capable of an unusual range of expression. He reduced the number of movements to four, liberated all four voices (particularly the cello), and built the music around taut motivic development.

The evolution of the form, though, was not simply a matter of newly-refined technique—it was also a matter of new depth of expression. Haydn brought to his Opus 20 all his recent growth as a composer (some have heard the influence of his symphonic thinking in this music), and these quartets demonstrate a level of dramatic tension far removed from the form's original entertainment function. The

String Quartet in G minor is a very serious piece of music: its minor tonality is one indication of this, as is the fact that three of its four movements are in sonata form. Throughout this music runs an unusual level of tension, an atmosphere heightened by the fact that all four movements end quietly.

Haydn marks the opening movement *Allegro con spirito*, and spirited it certainly is, with the animated line leaping between the four voices at the opening—this interplay of four voices will mark the entire quartet. The development is terse—Haydn compresses his ideas into motivic fragments and their development feels lean rather than melodic; after all this energy, the quiet ending is particularly effective. The minuet stays in G minor, and a level of tension informs this dance. The trio—in E-flat major—feels like a ray of sunshine cutting through the chill mists of the minuet, and Haydn makes a characteristic decision here—the melodic interest is in the three lower voices, while the first violin weaves an amiable texture of steady eighth-notes above them. The *Poco Adagio* is the one movement not in G minor (it is in G major), and it is an unusually long movement—even if the repeat is not taken, it is still the longest movement in the quartet. Textures are somewhat fuller here, and while the music turns dark in the course of the development, this remains a melodic and attractive movement. There are many nice little touches along the way, including an extended brilliant passage for cello (its liberation from the old accompaniment role is clear) and some nice attention to sound when Haydn contrasts the quite different sonorities of open and closed D's in the second violin part. The finale, marked *Allegro molto*, returns to the mood and manner (and key) of the opening movement, with taut contrapuntal textures and spirited interplay between the four voices. After all this virtuosity, the ending is terrific: the dynamic grows quiet, and it is the (fully-liberated) cello that draws this quartet to its close on murmured bits of the movement's opening theme.

SHOSTAKOVICH: STRING QUARTET NO. 7 IN F-SHARP MINOR, OP. 108

In May 1932, when he was 26, Shostakovich married Nina Varzar, a bright, beautiful, 23-year-old physicist. It would prove a successful, if stormy, marriage. The storms were so severe, in fact, that within three years they were divorced. And at just the moment the divorce became final, they discovered that Nina was pregnant with their first child. The couple decided to give their relationship another chance, and they quickly re-married. Daughter Galina was born in 1936, son Maxim two years later. Nina Shostakovich died suddenly in December 1954, leaving behind the composer—then 48—and two teenaged children. Devastated,

Shostakovich in 1956 made an impulsive second marriage, which ended in divorce in 1959.

The year 1959 would have brought Nina's fiftieth birthday, and—with his second marriage coming to an end—Shostakovich's thoughts turned to memories of his first wife. He began a new string quartet, which would be his Seventh, and planned to dedicate it to her memory. He completed the first movement, but set the quartet aside to compose his First Cello Concerto during the summer of 1959 and then to go on a tour of the United States and Mexico that fall. Once he returned to Moscow, Shostakovich was hospitalized for treatment of his right hand, which was gradually losing its strength. In the hospital he resumed work on the quartet and completed it in March 1960. The first performance, by the Beethoven Quartet, took place in Leningrad on May 15, 1960.

One might expect such music—dedicated to the memory of his first wife and written under unhappy conditions—to be somber and grieving, but such descriptions hardly apply to the Seventh Quartet, which is extremely original both in structure and expression. It is also quite compact: its three movements (played without pause) last barely twelve minutes, and its themes are brief, almost epigrammatic: for example, the quartet takes much of its rhythmic energy from the simple pattern of three quickly-repeated notes.

The beginning of the *Allegretto* sounds almost playful, with the first violin skittering downward in a series of three-note figures. A second theme—in the cello's deep register and also built of three-note patterns—arrives beneath the steady pulse of the middle voices. The development takes place largely in pizzicato notes, and the movement comes to a quiet close.

The *Lento*—muted throughout—follows without interruption. Over quiet arpeggios from the second violin, the first violin sings a quiet melody that many will recognize as a quotation (slightly varied) from Shostakovich's own Fifth Symphony. The middle section moves along darkly in the lower strings before a brief recall of the opening violin melody leads to the final *Allegro*. Aggressive salvos of three-note figures preface a slashing fugue, introduced by the viola, and during this fugue's powerful development Shostakovich recalls themes from the earlier movements. At the climax, all four instruments shout out the skittering little dance tune that opened the quartet, and the music comes to a cadence that should be the close.

But it is not. Shostakovich instead appends a final section that almost becomes a fourth movement. He mutes the instruments, and now the swirling first violin part seems to dance off into new regions, but suddenly the quartet's

opening theme returns and dissolves into fragments. Music that only moments before had bristled with energy now seems spent, and the quartet concludes on a quiet chord.

In music dedicated to the memory of his first wife, Shostakovich refuses to make predictable gestures and instead writes music of unusual emotional focus and technical control. The Seventh String Quartet finally becomes—on its own quite original terms—haunting and moving music.

SCHUBERT: STRING QUARTET IN A MINOR, D. 804 "ROSAMUNDE"

The year 1823 was devastating for Schubert. He had become ill the previous fall (every indication is that he had contracted syphilis), and by May he had to be hospitalized. Much weakened, and with his head shaved as part of the hospital treatment, he required the rest of the year simply to regain strength to function, and early in 1824 he turned to chamber music. His friend Franz von Schober described him in February: "Schubert now keeps a fortnight's fast and confinement. He looks much better and is very bright, very comically hungry and writes quartets and German dances and variations without number." But—despite Schober's hopes—Schubert had not made a triumphant return to life and strength. Instead, he entered the new year with the bittersweet knowledge that although he may have survived that first round of illness, he would never be fully well again.

Schober was right, though, that his friend had returned to composing with chamber music. Schubert first wrote the Octet, and then in February and March 1824 he composed two extraordinary quartets: the Quartet in A minor heard on this program and the Quartet in D minor, nicknamed "Death and the Maiden." The Quartet in A minor was first performed on March 14 by a quartet led by the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, one of Beethoven's close friends. It is nearly impossible to define the quality that makes this quartet—and much of Schubert's late music—so moving. His lyricism has now been transformed by a new emotional maturity, and a quality of wistfulness, almost sadness, seems to touch even the music's happiest moments. Schubert's biographer Brian Newbould draws attention to the fact that this quartet takes some of its themes from Schubert's own songs, and the texts of those songs furnish a clue to the quartet's emotional content. This music is also full of harmonic surprises (keys change suddenly, almost like shifts of light) and is marked by a complex and assured development of themes. The Quartet in A minor may lack the dramatic, hard-edged impact of "Death and the Maiden," but many consider it Schubert's finest quartet.

From its first instant, the *Allegro ma non troppo* shows the hand of a master. The accompaniment—a sinuous, winding second violin line over pulsing cello and cello—is static, and Newbould points out that this is precisely the form of the accompaniment of Schubert's great song "Gretchen am Spinnrade" (1814), which begins with the words *Meine Ruh' ist hin*: "My peace is gone, My Heart is sore, I shall find it never and nevermore." Over this, the first violin's long-lined main melody seems to float endlessly, beginning to develop and change harmonically even before it has been fully stated. The remarkable thing about this "lyric" theme is that it can be developed so effectively as an "instrumental" theme: its long flow of melody is finally interrupted by a fierce trill motto in the lower strings that will figure importantly in the development. A second theme, shared by the two violins, is similar in character to the opening idea, and this movement—which arcs over a very long span—finally concludes with the trill motto.

Listeners will recognize the theme of the *Andante* as a Schubert favorite, though this one is not from a song: he had already used this poised melody in his incidental music to Rosamunde and would later use it in one of the piano Impromptus. This song-like main idea remains simple throughout (it develops by repetition), but the accompaniment grows more and more complex, and soon there are swirling voices and off-the-beat accents beneath the gentle melody.

The *Menuetto* opens with a three-note figure from the cello's deep register, and that dark, expectant sound gives this movement its distinct character. Newbould notes that Schubert took the theme of the trio section from his 1819 song "Die Götter Griechenlands," where it sets Schiller's nostalgic lament *Schöne Welt, wo bist du?*: "Beautiful world, where are you?" The minuet returns, and this movement dances solemnly to its close.

The A-major tonality of the finale may come as a surprise, given the gravity of the first three movements, but it does make an effective conclusion. This *Allegro moderato* is a rondo in which all three themes have a dancing character, though at moments one feels the wistfulness of the earlier movements creeping into the music's otherwise carefree progress. Full of energy, this movement is also marked by Schubert's careful attention to detail: in the parts, he notes with unusual care the phrasing, accents, and dynamic shadings and contrasts that give this music its rich variety.

—Notes by Eric Bromberger

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