



PROGRAM NOTES

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FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

Cello Quintet in C, D. 956 (1828)

One of the most prolific composers in history, Franz Schubert began work on his Cello Quintet in the final weeks of his life, during which time he also composed his three last piano sonatas (D. 958-60), as well as several sacred works for symphonic forces, chorus, and soloists. Purchased posthumously from his brother Ferdinand by the publishing house of Diabelli in 1829, Schubert's autograph manuscript remained shelved until the first public performance in 1850 by Josef Hellmesberger's quartet and cellist Josef Stransky, at the Musikverein in Vienna. The first of four movements begins in C major, and strikes one at once as being music of vitality, strength, and uncanny lucidity for a composer so very nearly on his deathbed. The principal thematic material is vigorous and spontaneous, with subtle use of repeated tones in inner voices. Schubert's most natural mode of expression, the lied or "art song", is manifest by the two celli during the second principal theme in E-flat major. Indeed, most of the movement involves development of this second theme – it is an undercurrent of expressive melody that later emerges in its final form, an arrestingly beautiful duet for viola and first cello.

The second movement begins in E major with a serene remembrance of the first movement, as the second cello reprises its plucked ostinato. A soft yet urgent accompaniment echoed by delicate, bird-like refrains in the first violin reminds the modern listener of 20th-century composer Olivier Messiaen. The abrupt shift to f minor, signaling the arrival of the second of three sections, is terrifyingly virtuosic. Schubert's formidable technique births an impenetrably dense wall of sound. As the movement returns to E major and draws to a close, the two opposing sentiments are reconciled in a brief four-bar coda.

The third movement begins again in C major with a sound completely alien to music of the 18th-century: "quintal" harmony (chords built on the musical interval of a fifth), a sonority more closely identified with the music of 20th/21st-century composer Gyorgy Ligeti than Schubert. One might consider that the resonant potential of two celli prompted Schubert to choose the opening sonority. Displacement of the primary beat propels the scherzo forward with astonishing intensity. Moving again in radical key structure, the second theme (another lieder-inspired melody, full of majesty and solitude) in D-flat major exploits the three lower voices to great effect. A return to the opening material catapults the five instruments raucously toward the movement's end.

In the fourth and final movement, Schubert returns to the pedal point of repeated tones as an anchoring device for his harmony. He cleverly disguises the key of C major by beginning in c minor, and continues with a lyrical second theme in G major. What follows is development of mainly primary thematic material that adroitly moves through extremely remote key areas, arriving at a reprise in C major of

both first and second themes. In a series of sequential transformations, Schubert returns to the opening sonority of c minor for a brisk coda marked “Piu Allegro”, concluding ambiguously in a minor-inflected C major. It would be an incredible feat for any composer to create a single work containing four movements of singularly memorable and expansive melodies, but given Schubert’s abilities as a gifted and prolific lieder composer, it is no surprise. One may consider that this piece may well be his final statement of song played by a quintet of strings.

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PYTOR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

Serenade for Strings, Op. 48 (1880)

Tchaikovsky wrote two of his best-known scores in 1880: the bombastic and hugely popular *1812 Overture* and the elegant and beloved *Serenade for String Orchestra*. While the composer was dismissive of the former work as not serious, he described his feeling toward the *Serenade* as a “fervent and violent love.” Audiences since its premiere have felt the same fervent love for the piece, and it makes frequent appearances in the concert hall and ballet stage (Balanchine created one of his most famous choreographies to the full score).

Architecturally, the *Serenade* takes many of its cues from Mozart’s serenades. Mozart was Tchaikovsky’s greatest musical idol and this piece is the Russian’s homage to the master. It is not just in the structure of the work that we find a nod to Mozart’s classical sensibility, however. Those more accustomed to Tchaikovsky’s emotive symphonic works will be struck by the restrained Classical expressivity of this music. There is emotional restraint in the very opening of the work, in fact – a grand introduction that is more majesty than pathos.

The first movement, *Pezzo in forma di Sonatina*, adheres to the Classical era sonatina form of a long introduction, followed by thematic development and fleet accompaniment. The stately opening of the piece is echoed in the graceful waltz of the second movement. The listener is transported to the fantasy world of Tchaikovsky’s regal ballet scores. The third movement, *Elegie*, has humble beginnings that grow into lush and rollicking Romantic chords looking nostalgically back to some imagined memory of those passed. The inner two movements are regarded by many as some of the composer’s best work, but the fourth movement belongs right up there with them. Tchaikovsky writes “Russian Theme” in the score for this movement, and after a melancholic opening, he uses vibrant Russian folk melodies to bring all of the music we have heard before back down to Earth. Out of the elegant passages in the first, second, and third movements Tchaikovsky offers a new take with the music of the Russian countryside, which is both rhythmic and incisive. Before he ends, however, he returns to the opening introduction of the piece, which has been hiding in this folk music all along (listening to the active accompaniment and melody reveals the notes of the opening as an “Easter egg,” just in less royal clothes). Tchaikovsky called this last movement a “festive merriment of the people” in a letter to his benefactor, and suddenly the listener realizes just how great the journey has been all along.

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DAVID LUDWIG (b. 1972)

Our Long War (2011)

Composers keep poetry around like those important parts to appliances that you have to keep in a safe place where you won't forget them. The poetry has to be there waiting for just when you need it; if you've misplaced it in the cupboards of your mind, you'll miss out on that perfect text to speak to your piece. So we scour through books and the internet and make little mental notes; when the commission for a song comes up, we have to reach into that storage space where all of the poetry lives and find which text is most resonant to us then.

Around the time I got the commission to write a song cycle for the Lake Champlain Chamber Music Festival a mutual friend introduced me to the extraordinary work of Katie Ford. I knew right away her poetry fit with what I have been looking for in my music. It is simple and clear and incredibly expressive, like so many of the best works of art that hit us in the gut and we don't have to reason through why. I read through several of her books, but it was the poem she brought to coffee one day that focused what I had been feeling as an American for a long time.

"Our Long War" will bring to mind the work of other wartime poets, but it is absolutely contemporary in its call to feel the effects of our many conflicts abroad at home. It's a powerful message, and one too easily forgotten. I would like to thank Katie Ford for allowing me to set her moving words to music and the Lake Champlain Festival for the opportunity to do so.

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FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)

Piano Trio in c, Op. 66 (1845)

The great piano trios we hear today evolved from modest non-democratic forms of the baroque seventeenth century, deceptively entitled *sonate a tre*, as well as from the more honestly designated Sonata for Violin *with accompaniment* of keyboard and bass. With Mozart and Haydn equality began edging its way forward and some historians might dare think that the enlightened views of the French Revolution had bubbled up into chamber music, but really what happened is that Beethoven just grabbed all three instruments by the neck and shook them into a Piano Trio, a major competition for the String Quartet which had reigned complacently in palaces, drawing rooms, and latterly the concert stage. Imagine the impact on the meek little form when Beethoven took it in hand and poured out eleven thundering trios in just a few years. Even Brahms 50 years later complained: "you do not know what it means to the likes of us to hear Beethoven's footsteps behind us."

The self-assured Mendelssohn did not worry and the classic melodious grace of his three piano trios holds its own against the thunder of Beethoven. Mendelssohn's privileged, some-what aristocratic, background gave him a sunny confidence. The fashionable elite of Europe gathered on Sundays for music and elevated talk at the grand Mendelssohn house in Berlin (now replaced by a Mobil station) and there his standing as a musical prodigy was widely acknowledged, anointed by no less a personage than Goethe who withheld that confirmation from Felix's equally talented sister Fanny, a "mere woman." There was of course the awkward stain of being Jewish, later ameliorated by the adoption of the

additional Protestant name Bartholdy, but at least they were “the best kind of Jews.” Felix's grandfather was the brilliant philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. His father had standing on his own as a wealthy banker, but he modestly liked to boast “I am but a hyphen between two geniuses.”

This trio opens with a classically expansive sonata movement, the piano taking the first theme which rushes forward like a tumbling brook. The violin joins in with a melancholy melody, the Mendelssohn off-hand trademark of a 'Song Without Words', and the themes entwine. Tossing off some thrilling downward scales, the piano concedes finally to the second theme and the movement races urgently to conclusion. An introspective melody worthy of Schubert suffuses the second movement. Mendelssohn, worn out by the social whirl of Berlin, had retreated to write this trio in the quieter environs of Frankfurt and this movement glows with the tranquility of solitude.

Beethoven thrust into the modest three-movement trio sonata a fourth movement of varying nature and subsequent composers have followed his lead. Here we get a skittering fairy-light scherzo, a typical Mendelssohn indulgence. The final movement is in rondo style with three main themes. The last of these borrows a Lutheran melody *Vor deinem Thron*, first intoned in block chords on the piano, and the original C minor climbs to the sunny peaks of a major-key conclusion, one of a stately, almost religious, importance.

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