Program Notes for CMSFW November 16, 2013 concert

— Laurie Shulman ©2013

"From Venice of the North to New York Harbor"

LUIGI BOCCHERINI (1743-1805)
String Quintet in C Major

Luigi Boccherini was one of the great cellists and composers of the 18th century. Born in Lucca, he received his musical education in northern Italy and Vienna, but he is remembered primarily for the splendid music he composed during his 16 years of court service to the Infante Don Luis de Borbón, brother of Spain's King Carlos III. Consequently, Boccherini's musical legacy consists of a curious blend of Italian and Spanish influences.

Among Boccherini's 500-odd instrumental compositions, more than one hundred are cello quintets, that is, string quartet with one additional cello. This combination was rare in the 18th century; most string quintets favored a second viola. Don Luis employed a resident string quartet. Boccherini would have played with them. That accounts for the high profile of the first cello part in these works.

His catalogue of compositions was turned over to the French publisher Pleyel in the early 19th century. Pleyel was notorious for reassigning new opus numbers when he published music, a practice that has muddied the waters of Boccherini scholarship. Further complications have arisen because certain players assembled one movement from here, another from there, pulling together favorites to create a "new work." The quintet on this afternoon's program is one of those pastiches. Despite its grouping together of movements that may have been composed as much as 18 years apart from one another, this composite quintet has taken on a life of its own.

The compilation was probably made by Johann Christoph Lauterbach (1832-1918), a Bavarian violinist who was attached to the Dresden Royal Chapel from 1861. He led an acclaimed string quartet whose cellist, Friedrich Grützmacher, was responsible for the bowdlerized version of Boccherini's Cello Concerto that has entrenched itself in the repertoire.

The opening movement in triple time is drawn from Boccherini's Quintet, Op.42 No.2, G.349 (1789). This *Andante con moto* shows off the rich sonority of its extra bass voice, building long, elegant phrases. In both tempo and occasional daring modulations, it is sometimes reminiscent of Mozart's remarkable "Dissonant" quartet, K.465. But this movement is more fully developed than a slow introduction, a complete sonata structure despite its unusual placement at the head of the work.

Lauterbach cobbled together the remaining movements from earlier quintets, which accounts for the music sounding a bit old-fashioned and reflective of Baroque conventions. The graceful minuet in G major is borrowed from Op.28, No.4, G.310 (1779), transposed from the original key. Its central trio section, in G minor, is lifted from the quintet G.314 (1779). It emphasizes the variety of inner textures available with cello quintet scoring.

The C minor *Grave* is drawn from a 1780 quintet in E flat major, G.325. Concluding the pastiche is a lively *Rondeau* with a decidedly Spanish flavor. The original is the finale of G.310 (1779). One of Boccherini's best-known movements, it tempers rhythmic vigor with refinement. If the formal Spanish court ever let down its hair, surely this is the music they chose for merrymaking!

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)
String Quartet No.3 in F major, Op.73

The esteemed Beethoven Quartet, one of the Soviet Union's most distinguished ensembles, was closely associated with Shostakovich from 1940 on. They presented the premieres of nearly every major chamber composition he wrote. Violist Fyodor Druzhinin joined the Beethoven Quartet in 1964, succeeding his teacher Vadim Borisovsky. In conversations about the last string quartets, Druzhinin recalled:

> Only once did we see Shostakovich visibly moved by his own music. We were rehearsing his Third Quartet. He'd promised to stop us when he had any remarks to make. Dmitri Dmitriyevich sat in an armchair with the score opened out. But after each movement ended he just waved us on, saying, 'Keep playing!' So we performed the whole Quartet. When we finished playing he sat quite still in silence like a wounded bird, tears streaming down his face. This was the only time that I saw Shostakovich so open and defenseless.

Why did this comparatively early quartet, written primarily in 1946, elicit such strong emotions in the composer nearly twenty years later? We know he wrestled with the piece while he was composing, yet he was satisfied upon its completion, writing to the Beethoven Quartet's second violinist, Vasily Shirinsky:

> It seems to me that I have never been so pleased with one of my works as with this quartet. Probably I am mistaken, but for the time being this is exactly how I feel.

In Shostakovich's lifetime, Opus 73 acquired the nickname "War Quartet." When the Beethoven Quartet played the first performance in Moscow, on 16 December 1946, the program included the following subtitles for each movement:

I. Calm unawareness of future cataclysm
II. Rumblings of unrest and anticipation
III. The forces of war unleashed
IV. Homage to the dead
V. The eternal question: Why? And for what?

Shostakovich subsequently abjured these subtitles; still, they give one pause.

Like so many of his more personal compositions, this one was withdrawn shortly after its premiere. Within two years, the Zhdanov purge of 1948 had disgraced Shostakovich, along with numerous other composers and prominent artistic figures in the Soviet Union. Although the Third Quartet was not officially cited on Zhdanov's list of proscribed music, it became one of Shostakovich's so-called 'unofficial' works.

At nearly 33 minutes, this five-movement quartet is clearly large-scale. In places, Shostakovich treats the quartet as if it were a symphonic ensemble. Particularly in the climaxes of the third and final movements, the ensemble strains the confines of the quartet medium. Elsewhere, Shostakovich's musical fabric is characteristically spare and transparent, often reducing the texture to a trio or even a duo.

The quartet opens with a sonata form movement in F major. Two diatonic, deceptively innocent themes flirt with that underlying element of irony that so often shadows Shostakovich's music. A series of brief *ritardandi* lend a pushme-pullyu aspect to the music that subtly derails the forward momentum. The melodic emphasis is primarily in the first violin. Shostakovich introduces elements of canonic imitation in his exposition, expanding the counterpoint to a full double fugue in his development. A truncated reacapitulation leads to a surprisingly energetic and forceful coda.

Tradition has ascribed number symbolism to the Third Quartet, with the People associated with 3 and Stalin associated with 2. These links are easy to follow in the second and third movement. With its vigorous pace and spare textures, the *Moderato con moto* pairs a 3/4 waltz with the insistence of a march. Repeated patterns refuse to relinquish their hold, even in the staccato middle sections. Not until the end of the movement does an element of individuality emerge in the cello's elegiac, adagio close. The ensuing *Allegro non troppo* is a violent statement in G sharp minor with abrupt switches between 2/4 and 3/4. In its military atmosphere, it foreshadows the Stalin movement in the Tenth Symphony (1953). Atavistic dance rhythms are also at play here, but the overall impact of this movement is a damning indictment of the military.

Shostakovich's Adagio is the emotional heart of the quartet. It opens fortissimo with an extended unison passage for the lower three parts, answered by a more resigned, gentle duet for the two violins. The dichotomy between these two ideas sets up a dialogue that forms the narrative for the movement. Eventually each lower part gets a solo turn with the principal theme, in the manner of a threnody. The Adagio proceeds *attacca* to the finale, a Moderato in the home tonaliy of F major. Cello introduces the extended main theme, with viola pizzicato as accompaniment. The second theme seems straight out of a Prokofiev ballet: sweet, melodious, piquant, shadowed. As he works them out, Shostakovich slides between 2/4 and 6/8, eventually building to a tremendous and agitated climax that alludes back to the trim tragedy of the

slow movement. Presently he inverts the carefree principal theme of the opening movement. The Third Quartet concludes with recitative-like, anguished cries from the first violin, soaring into the sky in harmonics before ending with pizzicato.

ALAN SHULMAN (1915-2002)
***Threnody* (1950) for String Quartet**

Cellist and composer Alan Shulman began his studies at Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory, later continuing work in New York at the Juilliard School. In 1937 he joined the newly-formed NBC Symphony under the direction of Arturo Toscanini, studying cello privately with Emanuel Feuermann and composition with Paul Hindemith.

In 1938, he co-founded the Stuyvesant String Quartet with his brother, violinist Sylvan Shulman. During the 1940s and 1950s, the ensemble was noted for its performances and recordings of contemporary quartets by Bloch, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Malipiero, Hindemith and Kreisler. They played the American premiere of the Shostakovich Piano Quintet at Carnegie Hall in 1941, and recorded it for Columbia Records.

In the 1950s, Shulman wrote popular songs with entertainer Steve Allen and made arrangements for Skitch Henderson, Felix Slatkin, and others. During the 1960s and 70s, Shulman was busy in recording and television studios; he also composed teaching material and works for band. He was cellist of the Philharmonia Trio (1962-69), the Vardi Trio (MMO), An Die Musik (1976-77), and the Haydn Quartet (1972-82). Shulman taught at Sarah Lawrence College, Juilliard, SUNY-Purchase, Johnson State College (VT) and the University of Maine. In the 1980s his health declined and he retired in 1987.

The NBC String Quartet commissioned *Threnody* in 1950 for live performance on a national broadcast during Jewish Music Week. The premiere took place on 26 February 1950 over WNBC (New York) and the NBC Network. Shulman's subtitle is "For the Fallen Soldiers of Israel." The poignant initial theme is an elegiac lament. In the middle of this seven-minute movement, violin and viola play *sul ponticello* [on the bridge], emulating the distant sound of muted trumpets; pizzicato cello evokes muffled gunshots as eerie harmonics echo the initial theme. In the recapitulation, low pizzicati present the *ostinato* drum figure.

ALEXANDER BORODIN (1833-1887)
String Quartet No.2 in D major

In Borodin's youth he was a great admirer of Felix Mendelssohn, and Mendelssohn's influence is apparent in some of the Russian composer's early chamber music. After 1862, Borodin became acquainted with Mily Balakirev and his circle, which included Musorgsky, Cui, and Rimsky-Korsakov.

Balakirev deplored chamber music, regarding it as a refuge of lesser western composers. He discouraged his talented protégés from writing chamber works, urging them instead to incorporate Russian folk tunes into their music so as to develop a more individual style. Under Balakirev's influence, Borodin largely forsook western musical forms after 1863 in favor of specifically Russian music. Considering the attitude of the Russian Five toward chamber music, the most remarkable thing about Borodin's two string quartets is that he composed them at all!

The composer's biographer Dianin has suggested that the Second Quartet was a 20th wedding anniversary offering to Borodin's wife, the pianist Catherine Protopopova. The couple spent the summer of 1881 at their country house in the province of Tula. Whereas he had labored over sketches for the First Quartet for almost five years, this one came forth in a steady stream in barely two months. It was rare for Borodin to compose uninterrupted. Because he was a musical dilettante who earned his living as a professor of chemistry, his composing tended to be accomplished in installments.

The rapidity with which Borodin wrote accounts in part for the uncommon unity of spirit in the quartet. So does the romantic notion Dianin has suggested for its being composed. Borodin's own instrument was the cello, and the cellist has ample opportunity to sing in this work. It introduces both the opening theme and the famous Nocturne melody.

Robert Craig Wright and George Forrest made Borodin's music famous in the 1950s by their adaptation of his themes in the musical *Kismet*. No fewer than three of those well-known tunes derive from this quartet, making it one of the great "sing-along" works in chamber music, and certainly the better known of Borodin's two quartets. We are wont to forget that Borodin's melodic instincts were serving him remarkably well a good seventy years before *Kismet* hit the Broadway stage. Though it is difficult to suspend the echoes of "Baubles, Bangles and Beads" and the other songs based on this quartet, the rewards are great, for Borodin composed with great skill for his strings.

The second string quartet was premiered on January 26, 1882 at an Imperial Russian Musical Society concert in St. Petersburg. It was not published until after the composer's premature death at the age of 53.

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