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CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF FORT WORTH PRESENTS
A Virtual Concert – “Soaring Melodies”
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Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2021

Quartettsatz, D. 703 (1820)
Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828)

Schubert's immortal B-minor symphony, the "Unfinished", is a cornerstone of the symphonic repertoire despite its truncated two-movement length. What many music lovers do not realize is that Schubert left dozens of compositions incomplete. This was particularly true during the late 'teens and early 1820s, a period during which he was growing more comfortable with the vocal medium and less comfortable with instrumental compositions. Most historians believe that Schubert was increasingly humbled by the Beethovenian model and lost momentum on a number of chamber and orchestral works.

The String Quartet in c-minor, called *Quartettsatz* ["Quartet movement"] by the Germans, falls into this category. Written in December 1820, it was apparently intended to be part of a larger work, for Schubert also sketched about 40 bars of a second movement, an *Andante* in A-flat major. But that movement remained incomplete, and if he did further work on this quartet, it has not survived. Why he left it incomplete is as much of a mystery as the "Unfinished" Symphony, for this sole movement is masterly.

Schubert had written no quartets since 1817. His early efforts in the genre -- about a dozen works between 1811 and 1814 -- were family affairs, literally. His brothers Ferdinand and Ignaz played violin, Franz played viola, and Papa Schubert (Franz Theodor Florian) played cello in the family quartet. The comparative ease of the cello part in these early works suggests that Schubert's father was the weak link in the family quartet.

By contrast, the *Quartettsatz* has a sophisticated and technically demanding cello line. The stylistic change indicates that Schubert likely had a professional quartet in mind; however, no performance is documented during his lifetime. Unless it was played informally at a Schubertiade, the movement remained unperformed until 1868, four decades after the composer's death. Johannes Brahms owned the autograph manuscript for a while, and the piece was published in 1870 in Leipzig.

Quartettsatz is a stormy and turbulent movement, breaking from classic style in its adaptation of sonata form: true recapitulation of the *tremolando* opening does not recur until the very closing measures. Wild contrasts of mood ally the piece more with the Romantics than the classicists. To balance the brooding, unsettled power of the first idea is a second theme that has been variously compared to both Mozart and Irving Berlin (!). We will never know whether some personal crisis prompted this emotional outpouring. We can only regret that Schubert did not complete the quartet -- and temper that regret with gratitude that the *Quartettsatz* survived.

***Andante cantabile* from String Quartet No. 1 in D, Op. 11 (1871)
Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)**

Music-lovers know that Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* originated as the slow movement of his First String Quartet. Apart from chamber music devotees, however, few listeners know the complete Barber Quartet. Their acquaintance with the *Adagio* is generally limited to the popular transcription for string orchestra.

Tchaikovsky's First Quartet has a similar history. From the first performances, listeners adored the slow movement, which was promptly excerpted from its context and arranged for all manner of instrumental combinations. We know it as the *Andante cantabile*.

In fact, Tchaikovsky's Quartet was the first major Russian string quartet. It is surely his most successful effort in chamber music, a genre in which he admittedly did not excel. Perhaps wisely, he eschewed the medium. Other than three quartets, the piano trio, the string sextet *Souvenir de Florence* and a few pieces for violin and piano, there is nothing but juvenilia in his chamber catalogue.

Why did he write this piece? The answer is finances. He needed cash, and wanted to raise money via a concert of his works. An orchestra concert was too expensive, so he planned an evening of chamber music. The young composer hurriedly penned a string quartet to flesh out his slender catalogue of chamber works, then prevailed upon some colleagues at the Moscow Conservatory, led by violinist Ferdinand Laub, to perform it. The quartet's cellist, Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, would later play the premiere of the "Rococo" Variations, and received that work's dedication. The new quartet was an immediate success, largely because of the slow movement.

The *Andante cantabile* is as beloved as a folk tune. The composer actually based the first theme on a folk song he had heard at Kamenka, his family's summer home in the country. Tchaikovsky sometimes resented the fact that this movement became so fashionable at the expense of compositions he considered superior, which were overlooked or criticized. He grew to be very proud of it, however. In an 1886 diary entry, the composer wrote of sitting with Leo Tolstoy at a concert where the great author was moved to tears by a performance of the *Andante cantabile*. Tchaikovsky himself scored it for cello solo and orchestra in the late 1880s. He also sanctioned the performance of the *Andante cantabile* as a separate work for string orchestra. The version we hear this afternoon, however, is the original.

**String Quintet No.2 in B-flat major, Op.87
Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)**

During the 1844-45 season, 36-year-old Felix Mendelssohn was in London at the invitation of the Philharmonic Society. He returned to Frankfurt in July 1845, eager to spend the summer with his wife Cécile and their children. September meant journeying to Berlin - a city he disliked - to resume his duties as the Prussian King's *Generalmusikdirektor*, so the two months with his family were precious.

He had been working on the E-minor Violin Concerto for nearly six years. It pulled together in 1845, releasing a torrent of other new pieces: incidental music for *Athalie*, choruses for a production of *Oedipus at Colonus*, and two substantial chamber works: the Piano Trio No.2 in C minor and this second String Quintet (the first, Opus 18, he completed in 1832). The Quintet is rarely performed, which is a mystery, for it shares the youthful genius of Mendelssohn's miraculous early masterpieces along with his mature compositional skill.

The Quintet and the Violin Concerto have a particularly strong connection. Ferdinand David, for whom Mendelssohn wrote both works, had been concertmaster of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra since 1836, and the two men had become close friends. David wrote to Mendelssohn in January 1844 asking for a new string quintet. This B-flat major work was Mendelssohn's response to that request.

Anyone who knows Mendelssohn's early Octet will immediately sense its kinship to the Quintet's exuberant opening. Grandeur and impetuous momentum characterize this first movement, along with clever and unexpected modulations. The *concertato* style in the first violin part is doubtless a salute to Ferdinand David's virtuosity. A recurrent subsidiary idea in triplets serves as a secondary theme, but the brilliant violin arpeggios are what you will remember.

Mendelssohn's inner two movements are particularly strong. The second, an *Andante scherzando* in G minor, is not a madcap scherzo, but a more measured, intimate one. The form is a mini-rondo with two contrasting sections [A-B-A-C-A]. Misplaced accents and syncopations contribute to its rhythmic interest. Mendelssohn distributes his material beautifully among the five players in outstanding part writing, delivered with elegance, humor, and an impressive command of counterpoint. Mendelssohn pays careful attention to articulation – the specifics of musical 'pronunciation' – and to bowed vs. *pizzicato* passages.

His *Adagio e lento* approaches Beethoven's realm of the sublime. It opens with an elegiac theme that provides material for an extended meditation, essentially unfolding as free variations. Listeners familiar with the "Italian" Symphony may recognize a kinship to its processional pilgrims movement. Here again, first violin assumes an elaborate role. Dramatic chords, sudden dynamic changes, and *tremolandi* passages strengthen the connection to Beethoven's great slow movements.

The slow movement moves *attacca* [without pause] to the finale, a sonata-rondo replete with sixteenth note figures that give it a feeling of perpetual motion. Essentially the movement is monothematic, with three statements of the rondo theme. As in many of Mendelssohn's later works, one hears less motivic conversation, and more focus in dynamics and modulation. According to the composer Ignaz Moscheles, Mendelssohn was dissatisfied with his second theme (he excised it from his recapitulation). His reservations about the finale are probably the reason he withheld publication; the quintet was issued posthumously in 1851. For lovers of Mendelssohn's chamber music, this work is a marvelous discovery.