Program Notes for CMSFW October 14, 2017 Concert
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"Outside the Shadow of Beethoven"

Quartet in A minor, Opus 51 No. 2
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Johannes Brahms left no excess baggage behind when he died in April 1897. Unlike Beethoven, who hoarded all his musical sketches and conversation notebooks, Brahms preserved no record of his creative and thought processes. If a composition did not satisfy him after revision, he destroyed it. Occasionally he reworked one composition into another; the Piano Concerto No.1 in D minor, Op. 15, for example, was originally intended to be a symphony. But Brahms took the legacy of Beethoven very seriously, and it is not without reason that the Symphony No.1 in C minor, Op. 68, was hailed as "the Beethoven Tenth" when it was premiered in 1876. The composer had waited until the age of 43 to contribute to the symphonic canon.

He held the genre of the string quartet in much the same reverence, for many of the same reasons. Brahms's reluctance to publish any quartets until these is a tacit acknowledgment of his heritage: not only Beethoven, but also Haydn, Mozart, and Schubert in the realm of the string quartet. Cumulatively, the body of literature left by these four titans was a formidable psychological obstacle to the young Brahms.

We know this because Brahms revealed to a friend that he had composed, and subsequently destroyed, more than *twenty* string quartets in his youth. None of these early efforts met the exceptionally high standards he set for himself. He had brought the first of the lost quartets to Robert Schumann, who had enthusiastically approved the work and encouraged his protégé to publish. In spite of Schumann's endorsement, Brahms withdrew the work and the music is lost, presumably burnt by the composer. The loss to musical posterity of that quartet and its successors is incalculable: at once tantalizing to the imagination and tragic to the music lover. That makes the surviving three quartets – the two of Opus 51, and Opus 67 in B-flat – all the more precious.

Brahms worked on the Opus 51 quartets intermittently between 1865 and 1873, completing them during the summer of 1873. He dedicated them to his friend Dr. Theodor Billroth, an accomplished amateur violist who enjoyed playing chamber music. Of the two quartets, the A minor is less aggressive and more intimate, yet it is governed by discipline and airtight compositional technique.

The dominant motif in the first movement consists of the three pitches F, A, and E, which occur in the first violin's opening gesture (in the order A-F-A-E). F-A-E is an acronym for the phrase *Frei aber einsam* [Free but lonely], the motto of violinist Joseph Joachim. (Brahms would

use a similar musical motif in his Third Symphony, whose opening gesture F-A-F denotes his own motto, *Frei aber froh* [Free but happy].) Joachim's F-A-E recurs throughout the *Allegro non troppo* in various guises. The overall scope of the movement is broad because of an extended exposition and recapitulation. The development is actually fairly brief, but the first movement still clocks in at about fourteen minutes.

This quartet is unusual in its singular focus on the home tonality. All four movements are in A major or A minor. In the A major slow movement, a minor-mode passage has a quasi-Hungarian flavor with first violin and cello in a canon while the inner voices thrum away in agitated tremolo. Elsewhere, Brahms distributes his melodies and accompaniments with judicious balance among the four players.

The *Quasi Minuetto, moderato* is distinguished by open fifths and sixths in the cello part. Its rustic bagpipe drone underpins the gentle musings of the upper strings. The trio section switches to a skittish *Allegretto vivace* in duple meter, with a sly six-bar interpolation of the Minuetto in its midst. The return to the Minuetto is at once seamless and surprising. Brahms's recurrent attraction to Hungarian flavor manifests itself in the Gypsy-like finale, which lurches forward slightly off balance. Contrasts abound, in cross-rhythms, modulations, and switches from forceful gestures to lyrical sweep and back again. Dense textures never compromise the variety or the persuasiveness of Brahms's rhetoric.

Quartet in G, Op.18, No.2
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

By the time Beethoven undertook his first string quartets, he was an experienced chamber composer. Prior to the appearance of Op.18 in 1800 he had already published the three piano trios, Op.1, two cello sonatas, Op.5, several string trios plus the Serenade for Violin and Viola, Op.8, three violin sonatas, Op.12, and the Quintet for Piano and Winds, Op.16. And those are just the published works. In Bonn and during his early years in Vienna, he had also composed three piano quartets, two piano trios, a wind octet, and several sets of variations for violin & piano or cello and piano.

String quartets were a different hurdle to clear. Beethoven had studied briefly with Joseph Haydn, whose monumental contribution to the string quartet literature constitutes its very foundation. Although teacher and student did not always see eye to eye, Beethoven revered the older master's accomplishments, and Haydn's hand is more evident than Mozart's in the six quartets of Opus 18.

The G major quartet sparkles with untroubled gaiety, often with barely suppressed mirth. In terms of Beethoven's heritage, it summarizes his respect for the century and Classical era that – we now know – were drawing to a close. The American composer and writer Daniel Gregory Mason described Brahms's opening *Allegro* as:

> . . . looking backward to the delicate grace of the eighteenth-century drawing rooms, where music could keep the dignity, even the formality, of a feudal court without losing its more intimate beauty. It is to this stately kind of charm that it

owes its name of "Compliments Quartet."

That peculiar sobriquet derives from the opening paragraph of music. Beethoven's flowery theme and elegant phrases give a sense of breath and breadth, of hesitation and politesse, as if an exchange of courtly small talk were being punctuated by well-mannered silences.

If the first movement is reflective, the slow movement looks forward. More than any of the other Op.18 slow movements, this one touches on the psychological depth so evident in the analogous movements of his magnificent early piano sonatas. Not until the later quartets did Beethoven approach such nobility of spirit on a regular basis. The *Adagio cantabile* is doubly unusual for the insertion of a fast middle section, a highly unusual episode in a slow movement. Such a daring move is more in keeping with the unusual experiments that Beethoven continued to make in the last three quartets of his bold Opus 18 set.

The Scherzo and Trio show Beethoven's razor wit at its most incisive, bordering on flippant. The middle Trio section makes hilarious use of the ascending scale; it is a classic example, with strong roots in Haydn, of making something out of nothing, building music from the simplest of materials. To conclude, Beethoven awards the cello a theme with a strong rhythmic profile. Sturdy peasant joy and dance-like character only thinly disguise its strong thematic relationship to the first movement. Not one to relinquish the zany humor so cleverly captured in the Scherzo, Beethoven capitalizes on his momentum with Haydnesque glee.

Quartet No. 12 in D-flat, Op.133 (1968)
Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Shostakovich and Beethoven both composed string quartets throughout their respective careers. Like his 19th-century predecessor, Shostakovich returned to the quartet medium again and again, leaving some of his most profound musical utterances for his final years. Four of his last 15 compositions were quartets; all of them are considered to be among his most intense works. He composed his Ninth and Tenth Quartets in 1964. An Eleventh followed in 1966, and the Twelfth in 1968. There were to be three more before his death in 1975. With a legacy of 15 quartets, Shostakovich rivals Béla Bartók in the musical magnitude of his chamber music accomplishment, at least among 20th-century composers.

Curiously enough, Shostakovich waited until 1938, when he was 31, to compose his first Quartet, Op.49. Quartets became more important to him late in life. While they may not have been the purest expression of the proletarian ideal, they consistently elicited significant and serious music from him. Such import is immediately apparent in the Twelfth Quartet, decidedly his most powerful such work since the darkly autobiographical Eighth Quartet, Op. 110 (1960).

The Twelfth Quartet is an exploration of the inherent conflict between atonal and tonal music. Resolution of that conflict provides the work with its initial argument and forward momentum. Shostakovich wastes no time in setting forth his thesis in the opening measures, where the cello states all twelve pitches of the chromatic scale. Analysts eager to link him with serialism pounced on this figure when the quartet appeared, overlooking the fact that Shostakovich resolved his opening chromaticism almost immediately into D-flat major, the

stated tonality of the quartet. Diatonicism and chromaticism highlight one another. Still, one cannot altogether ignore that he chose to introduce the work so deliberately with chromaticism. Norman Kay has observed:

> The presence [of the 12 tones] is nevertheless indicative of a general widening of vocabulary, a motivic poise and sophistication which would have been inconceivable in the works written ten years earlier. . . . [This quartet] has stretched tonality to breaking point and provided the clearest example of the composer straining at the gates of total chromaticism.

Fully half the Shostakovich quartets are played without pause between movements. Technically this one does not fall into that category. It is divided into two discrete movements. However, the lengthy second movement -- approximately 20 minutes, as opposed to about 7 minutes for the *Moderato* -- merges scherzo, development, and recapitulation all into one giant arch form. The second movement also includes some techniques unusual for Shostakovich, including a violin *pizzicato* solo and, for him, a rare use of *sul ponticello* [bowing near the bridge]. A series of trills works its way down to a rapid motif in the cello. Meter shifts between 5/4, 3/4, 4/4 and 3/2 throw swirling chromatic runs into relief.

Shostakovich's friend and biographer Dmitri Sollertinsky considered the Twelfth Quartet to be "the ultimate examination of the performers' interpretative powers, in that it confronts them with a resourcefulness, a range of expression and imaginative coloring, unmatched elsewhere in the [quartet] series."