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## **Program Notes for CMSFW January 7, 2017 Concert**

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### **“A Feast for the Ears”**

#### **Quartet in F major, Op. 77, No. 2, Hob. III:82 Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)**

Life expectancy in the eighteenth century was considerably shorter than it is today. In 1797, when Prince Franz Joseph Maximilian von Lobkowitz commissioned Joseph Haydn to write a set of six quartets, the 67-year-old composer was an old man by the standard of the day. He was also the most famous musician in Europe. During this late n of his creative years, he shifted his emphasis to vocal music: masses, the oratorios *The Creation* and *The Seasons*, some English folk song settings. Haydn’s days of writing symphonies and piano sonatas were behind him, and he composed little after 1801.

This late commission from Prince Lobkowitz was never completed. Haydn finished only two quartets of a projected six. The second and third movements of a third quartet in D minor, probably from 1803, survive. Scholars hypothesize that Haydn left it incomplete because work on *The Seasons* had drained his energy. The two movements were published in 1806 as Op. 103, and have traditionally been called “Haydn’s last quartet.”

That distinction, however, really belongs to the two complete works of Opus 77. They encapsulate and crown an entire career, during which the string quartet evolved in Haydn’s hands from a pleasant diversion to the pinnacle of chamber music. Haydn’s biographer Rosemary Hughes has written of Opus 76 (a set of six quartets) and Opus 77:

. . . in that last great wave of energy. . . he gathers up all the efforts and conquests, all the explorations, all the personal idiosyncrasies too, of nearly half a century of unbroken creative life. Nowhere is his thematic and structural concentration so powerful, his contrapuntal writing so strong and closely woven, his ranging through the furthest reaches of key so searching and profound.

Surprisingly, among Haydn’s 83 quartets, only three are in F major; this is the last of them. The key of F had pastoral associations in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and this work certainly has a benign aspect to its opening movement. A favorite Haydn technique — the metamorphosis of first theme into second — has an unusual twist here: he entrusts the second theme to second violin in its lowest register. The first violin’s decorative line above it camouflages the theme, whose character is altogether different the second time around. Haydn’s development section travels unusually far afield, with some enharmonic changes [musical spelling: for example, E-flat and D-sharp are the same pitch on the piano, but not on a string instrument; depending on the spelling, the pitch belongs to different tonal centers] that startle the performer perhaps more than the listener. Clearly Haydn remained interested in harmonic experimentation.

The customary order of the two inner movements is reversed, with the minuet preceding the slow movement. Haydn's tempo marking, *Presto ma non troppo*, indicates one beat per measure. This minuet is a scherzo in all but name, another forward-thinking concept that Haydn's student Beethoven would transfer to the symphony within a few years. The Trio section of the minuet switches abruptly to D-flat major, a distant jump of key centers.

In the slow movement, Haydn shifts just as suddenly to D major. Both these keys are related to the home tonality, albeit distantly, by the interval of a third. The thirds relationship would also be explored thoroughly by Haydn's student Beethoven and, to an even greater extent, by Schubert. This *Andante* is a stately set of variations. First violin and cello introduce the simple, elegant theme in a late example of the two-part writing that Haydn employed from his earliest chamber music.

Haydn's playful finale abounds with irregular phrase lengths and subtle cross-rhythms that require superior ensemble skills from the players. As in the first movement, he opts for sonata form, complete with repeated exposition. For a finale, where we would expect a rondo or sonata-rondo, his choice is unusual. Once again, he re-uses the material of his opening statement as the second theme. In fact, the movement basically *has* only one theme. In Haydn's skillful hands, limited motivic material has virtually unlimited potential for development. The great English scholar Donald Francis Tovey wrote that "the whole quartet is perhaps Haydn's greatest instrumental composition, with two of the last symphonies to bracket with it." This is marvelous music.

### ***Lullaby***

**George Gershwin (1898-1937)**

#### **Evaluating early Gershwin: differences of opinion**

In 1956, the American writer David Ewen published the following assessment of Gershwin's *Lullaby* in *A Journey to Greatness: The Life and Music of George Gershwin*:

The quartet provides evidence that Gershwin was already making notable progress in part writing, in tasteful harmonization, and in grateful writing for the four strings.

In the early 1990s, when Joan Peyser published *The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin*, her view was markedly different.

As early as 1919 Gershwin composed *Lullaby*, a string quartet. It showed no evidence of contrapuntal technique or sophisticated writing for strings. *Lullaby* was all substance and idea, a hauntingly beautiful, melancholy little piece.

Edward Jablonski, in his 1987 biography (*Gershwin*) glosses over the piece, alluding to it briefly

as "a harmony study for string quartet." Whom are we to believe? How could they all write about the same work and produce such divergent descriptions?

### **Gershwin and the string quartet: a study in harmony**

*Lullaby* was one of Gershwin's two essays in chamber music, and his only piece for string quartet. The few compositions he left in a more traditional vein -- that is, outside the realm of the Broadway musical and popular songs -- are heavily weighted toward orchestra (*Cuban Overture*, *An American in Paris*) or orchestra with piano solo (*Rhapsody in Blue*, *Concerto in F*), plus a handful for piano solo. *Lullaby* predates virtually all of them.

In 1919, the year he turned 21, Gershwin was already making a name for himself on Broadway. His first full score, *La La Lucille*, opened that year and ran for more than 100 performances. He had not yet ventured into the world of composing "long haired" music, despite a childhood interest in the musical classics. When he wrote *Lullaby*, he was studying harmony with the Hungarian composer Edward Kilenyi in New York, which lends some credibility to Jablonski's assessment of the piece as a harmony study. Certainly he had not yet undertaken formal study of counterpoint.

Rather than poking holes in this unassuming piece because of any purported lack of technical polish, we will do better to accept it at face value. *Lullaby* is a simple ternary form. Its lilting, tango-like rhythm provides a gentle underpinning to the sultry, bluesy melodies of which it is principally constructed. Utterly devoid of pretense, this lullaby is intended for adults: less likely to put us to sleep than it is to help us unwind at the end of a stressful day.

### **String Quartet in C Major, K. 465, Dissonance Wolfgang Amadè Mozart (1756-1791)**

Mozart moved from Salzburg to Vienna in 1781. Initially still in service to the Archbishop of Salzburg, he soon dissociated himself from the Archbishop's entourage and embarked upon a career as an independent musician. The following few years proved to be his happiest and most successful. It seems very likely that the historic meeting between Haydn and Mozart took place during the winter of 1781. The older master encouraged Mozart, and the warm friendship and musical stimulation each provided to the other enriched the creative output of both composers.

For his part, Mozart returned to the string quartet, a medium he had neglected for some ten years. Between 1782 and 1785 he completed six quartets, which the Viennese firm of Artaria published in 1785 as Opus 10. Collectively, they are known as the Haydn Quartets because of their dedication to the older master, who had become Mozart's mentor and friend. They are an unusual example of Mozart freeing himself for a while from the restrictions, real or imagined, of commissioned music.

Mozart appears to have made a conscious effort to emulate Haydn's innovative Op.33 quartets (1781), and there is no denying the significant contact and strong mutual influence between the two composers during the early 1780s. Yet these quartets are highly individual, born of Mozart's innermost soul. They are also the pivotal chamber music of Mozart's first few years in Vienna. Though he described them in his dedication as the "fruit of a long and laborious endeavor", all six quartets glow with the effortless polish of genius.

K. 465 was the last of the six to be completed; the composer seems to have cast it as the musical climax of the set. It earned its nickname from the extraordinary opening measures, which are the only slow introduction in any of the Mozart string quartets. Mozart used the chromatic scale liberally throughout the so-called Haydn quartets, but this opening is unlike anything else in the Mozart canon, and indeed has been the subject of great controversy since it was written. What is its mood: tragedy? mystery? mournfulness or perhaps regret? It is music that probes the heart, demanding entrance to emotional corners, secret places one doesn't always admit to.

The Adagio introduction is grounded in the key of C Major only tenuously, by the opening cello notes. The same measure also establishes, albeit ambiguously, a slow pulse of triple time. Other than that initial bass line, we would have no clue to a tonality of C Major until the 16th measure. Mozart swims through the circle of fifths – the mathematical relationship among key centers that governs tonal music – flirting with what seems an impossible number of keys along the way. He seems to leave no tonal implication untouched in the sinuous chromaticism of his contrapuntal fabric. It makes for dizzying listening.

The familiar brightness of sunny C major is a relief when we arrive at the Allegro of this remarkable opening movement. A highly imitative texture dominates. The listener will do well to note the cello part throughout the movement and the entire quartet, for Mozart had learned a great deal from Papa Haydn about sharing the development of musical ideas among his four players. C is the lowest note on both cello and viola, which provides additional resonance in this C major work. Without compromising the integrity of his bass line, Mozart imparts much imagination to the lower voices, particularly the cello.

### **Quartet in F major (1902-03) Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)**

In the public imagination, the names of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel are practically uttered in the same breath, dually synonymous with French musical impressionism. Ravel was, in fact, half a generation Debussy's junior and survived the older composer by nearly two decades. He developed his own highly individual musical language, whose principal affinity with that of Debussy is that ineffable quality of being French. Nevertheless, the linking of their two names persists, perhaps nowhere more firmly than with their string quartets.

Each wrote but a single quartet, both early works: Debussy's dates from 1893, when he

was in his early 30s, and Ravel's was composed in 1902 and 1903, when he was still in his late 20s. Both quartets employ cyclic devices to unify the musical material among movements. Further reinforcing the prevailing modern idea that Ravel and Debussy "go" together is the fact that so many commercial recordings pair Debussy's G-minor quartet with Ravel's Quartet in F. In a curious twist of fate, this particular pairing is the most plausible of any possibility in their respective *oeuvres*, for Debussy's work was a significant model to young Ravel, probably more so than in any other of Ravel's compositions, except perhaps the songs of *Shéhérazade*.

The String Quartet in F was Ravel's first large scale composition, and the work that first established his reputation in French musical circles. Ironically, it was counted against him in one of his several failed attempts to win the coveted Prix de Rome. Even his teacher Gabriel Fauré (to whom the piece is dedicated) disliked the finale, criticizing its lack of balance. It was Debussy who came to Ravel's defense, purportedly writing to the younger composer: "In the name of the gods of music and of my own, don't touch a thing you have written in this quartet."

No programme is associated with Ravel's quartet. At this stage of his career, it was unusual for him not to employ an extramusical idea of some sort, but with the quartet he established a pattern of absolute music that remained constant in his chamber works. Counterpoint is a lesser priority than sheer beauty of sound. Norman Demuth has observed that "Ravel took the line that the four string instruments called for sweetness rather than vigour (although the scherzo has this element)." He emphasizes color, at the same time exploiting with great ingenuity the virtuosic potential of four string players.

The Quartet is marked by grace and charm throughout. Its characteristic sonority is the melody doubled at the octave or a wider interval, sometimes the tenth, sometimes the 13th or 15th. The second movement scherzo is particularly noteworthy for its contrasts of pizzicato and the lyrical theme. Modal sonorities recall the Javanese *gamelan* orchestra that had such a powerful impact on Debussy following the Parisian exposition of 1889. A rhapsodic slow movement re-introduces melodies from the opening movement, and the finale is even more strongly dependent on the opening *Allegro moderato* for its material. *Tremolo* sections, arpeggios, wide chords, and metric switches between 5/8, 5/4 and 3/4 combine with brilliant, flashy string writing to conclude this marvelous piece.