

Program Notes

MONTANA CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

October 30, 2015, 7:30pm

Reynolds Recital Hall, MSU Bozeman, 7:30pm

MUIR STRING QUARTET

Peter Zazofsky, *violin*

Lucia Lin, *violin*

Steven Ansell, *viola*

Michael Reynolds, *cello*

with guest

Michele Levin, *piano*

Quartet for Strings in C Minor, *Quartettsatz*, D. 703 (1820)

FRANZ SCHUBERT [1797-1828]

[Duration: ca. 10 minutes]

"Picture to yourself," he wrote to a friend at this time, "a man whose health can never be reestablished, who from sheer despair makes matters worse instead of better; picture to yourself, I say, a man whose most brilliant hopes have come to nothing, to whom proffered love and friendship are but anguish, whose enthusiasm for the beautiful — an inspired feeling, at least— threatens to vanish entirely; and then ask yourself if such a condition does not represent a miserable and unhappy man.... Each night, when I go to sleep, I hope never again to waken, and every morning reopens the wounds of yesterday." [Schubert, 1819]

Schubert was extremely self-critical, leaving an unusually large number of incomplete works behind. The most celebrated is the *Unfinished* Symphony, however, many fragments survive of abandoned string quartets. Among these is the *Quartettsatz* ("Quartet Movement"), written just before Schubert turned 24, the only one to have entered the standard repertoire. When Brahms was working on the first scholarly edition of Schubert's music, he found, in the manuscript score of the *Quartettsatz*, the sketch (about 40 measures) for a second movement *Andante* in A-flat; apparently Schubert intended to write a four-movement work, though this movement is independently convincing and complete. There is no evidence that Schubert took this project any further and the reason why remains a mystery. (Perhaps Schubert was unable to sustain the high-level intensity of the first movement?) *Quartettsatz* serves as a stepping stone between Schubert's student works (prior to 1819), written for more technically limited quartets (most often his family), and the masterpieces of his later years written with accomplished professionals in mind. Listed as the twelfth of Schubert's fifteen string quartets, the *Quartettsatz* is generally acknowledged as the first of his mature quartets. The earlier ones had been written as *Hausmusik* for Schubert's family: his brothers played the violins, his father the cello, and the composer the viola. Because he was writing for amateur musicians in those quartets, Schubert had kept the demands on the players relatively light. But in the *Quartettsatz* and the three magnificent final quartets Schubert felt no such restrictions. The *Quartettsatz* makes enormous technical demands was clearly intended for professional performers. It is unknown why he didn't complete the Quartet, leaving only this first movement and 41 measures of an *Andante*; Schubert abandoned this abridged Quartet to work on another project, and simply never returned to complete it. He did not return to the genre again for more than three years. Like Mozart, Schubert left a sizeable number of incomplete works.

Cast in modified sonata form, this work is remarkable for its richness of melody and variety of mood. The adherence to Classical principles, characteristic of the instrumental music of Schubert's teens and early twenties, is demonstrably less rigid. His harmonic structure is more adventuresome,

moving away from the constraints of traditional harmony. The key relationships are one of the Quartet's most remarkable characteristics, beginning in C minor with the first violins, and then a lyrical second theme in A-flat major (marked *dolce*); the quiet third theme melody is in G major. As one expects in Schubert's mature music (and I believe *Quartettsatz* is mature Schubert regardless of his young age), keys change with skilled ease. The structure is wonderfully balanced and proportioned; the music is, as always with Schubert, lyrical throughout.

Quartet No. 1 in B Minor for Strings (1930)

SERGEI PROKOFIEV [1891-1953]

Duration: ca. 25 minutes

"Prokofiev has made an immense, priceless contribution to the musical culture of Russia. A composer of genius, he has expanded the artistic heritage left to us by the great classical masters of Russian music—Glinka, Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov, Rachmaninov." [Dmitri Shostakovich from *Prokofiev: His Life and Times*]

Born and raised in Tsarist Russia, Prokofiev, a precocious child, showed remarkable musical talent at a young age. He came from a financially comfortable and cultured family. His mother, well-educated with a special feeling for the arts, had a great influence on his early development. His father supervised his general education, along with various French and German governesses. As an only child (his two older sisters died in infancy), he was indulged and pampered, growing up expecting unconditional attention and with the misconception that he could behave in any way he wanted, resulting in a lack of regard and understanding for those less fortunate or less interesting—seemingly immune to criticism. Compassion and empathy were not always a strong part of his character. At age 13 Prokofiev was enrolled at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. His outstanding gift for music was contrasted with a slightly arrogant and abrasive personality (which alienated him from others throughout his life), a lack of respect for teachers and other students, often misunderstood. He completed his studies in composition (1909) and graduated with the usual Russian degree as free artist. After this, Prokofiev trained as a concert pianist and as a conductor. During his time at the Conservatory, he composed numerous small-scale piano works and six early piano sonatas, some of which he utilized later.

Prokofiev was one of the three iconoclastic figures who dominated the World War I period, along with Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) and Maurice Ravel (1875-1937). After the Russian revolution, which totally disrupted his life, Prokofiev went into self-imposed exile in New York and Paris. He spent many years abroad as a composer and as a pianist. Prokofiev's life was greatly affected by political turmoil. Unlike Stravinsky, Koussevitsky, Nabokov and others, Prokofiev decided to return to Stalin's Soviet Union after years of indecision and conflict. Prokofiev spent the last 17 years of his life in Russia. He was both stimulated and restricted by the cultural policies of the Stalin regime. Prokofiev's loyalty no doubt stemmed from his blind love for his country, his life complicated and enriched by the political and social transformation of his homeland following the Russian Revolution.

Prokofiev was happily married (1923–1940) to Lina Llubera, a Spanish-born singer he met in France. They had two sons (Svyatoslav, 1924 and Oleg, 1928). In 1940 Prokofiev, then almost 50, met the writer Mira Mendelson, a 25-year-old graduate from the Moscow Literary Institute. Their friendship, according to McAllister, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, "led to the break-up of his marriage. The details of the matter are complicated, and it has been suggested that political dealings were involved. Two facts are certain—Lina was financially dependent on Prokofiev and as a foreigner, she would be without protection from Soviet scrutiny if divorced from Prokofiev. She was certainly by that time *persona non grata* in Moscow. Years later Lina was arrested on charges of espionage and committed to 20 years in a labor camp—no doubt tormenting Prokofiev for it was possible that he contributed to the situation." Mira Mendelson had strong party ties and, as

Victor Seroff (*Sergei Prokofiev: A Soviet Tragedy*) has aptly put it, the years 1939-41 were less conducive to romance than they were to survival. This would strongly suggest that something was going on in the composer's life politically at the time and was probably the main reason he ended his marriage." Seroff questions further: "Can anyone be expected to believe that a mere matrimonial disagreement between Prokofiev and his wife could have endangered the state to such a degree that Lina had to be classified as almost a 'security risk.' Certainly neither Lina's nor Mira's *Memoirs* about Prokofiev indicate the slightest evidence of matrimonial troubles." It might also be pointed out that Mendelson is a Jewish name and there is no doubt another story there. In failing health, plagued by attacks on his compositions, torn between his love for Mira and his feelings of responsibility for Lina and their sons, Prokofiev was in an impossible situation. After 30 years of trying to live this double life, he was forced to make a decision between Russia and the West. Prokofiev (almost 57) married Mira Mendelson on January 13, 1948 (after living together as husband and wife for almost seven years). For many years it was unclear if and when the marriage had taken place; neither the composer nor Mira mention it in their memoirs and close friends expressed confusion and uncertainty about the date and circumstances of the wedding. One can only speculate regarding the no doubt complicated reasons for being so secretive. One obvious question remains: "how could Prokofiev legally marry Mira if he had never been officially divorced? In 1944, under the reform of Soviet law, all marriages, old and new, had to be registered with the Census Bureau to be valid and only registered marriages would be legal. Prokofiev and Lina were married in Ettal, Germany, and the union was never registered in Russia. Prokofiev never abandoned Lina and his sons financially. Lina spent eight years in labor camps and was released in 1956. She died in London on January 3, 1989.

Art in the Soviet Union was subject to political and social ideals that would decide between success and failure, rather than criteria related to the level of creativity. Prokofiev's comments to the press between 1932 and 1936 revealed his accord that "a simpler musical language could be combined with the official Soviet concept." Upon examining all of the contradictions and mysteries in Prokofiev's life, it remains impossible to say for sure whether or not his reaction to Soviet influence was sincere or whether he was merely telling everyone what they wanted to hear. Perhaps Prokofiev's return to Russia could simply have been a strong desire to be home. "I must see the real winter again and hear the Russian language in my ears," the composer told French friends. The confusion remains far from certain and unresolved. For the last eight years of his life Prokofiev, suffering from ill health and with one eye on mortality, dealt with rejections, disappointments, a reduced income and the deaths of close friends. He continued to work until the end. Ironically, Stalin and Prokofiev died on the same day, less than an hour apart, March 5, 1953. Stalin was 73 and Prokofiev was almost 62.

In his autobiography, Sergei Prokofiev acknowledged that after receiving the commission for a string quartet from the Library of Congress in 1930, he began intense study of the quartets of Beethoven, chiefly in railway carriages traveling from one concert to another. At the time, Prokofiev was on a concert tour around the United States, Canada and Cuba. By then, he had been absent from the Soviet Union for a decade, having left for his first U.S. tour in 1918, not very long after the Russian Revolution. That first tour found audiences lukewarm to the *enfant terrible* but in the intervening years, his reputation as an interpreter of his own works had grown. The 1930 tour turned into a personal and artistic triumph. Although composition of Quartet No. 1 began in the U.S., the bulk was actually written in Paris. It was first performed by the Brosa Quartet at the Library of Congress's Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Festival on April 25, 1931. The Budapest Roth Quartet premiered it in Moscow later that same year. No key designation was to be found on the first edition published the next year, but subsequently, Prokofiev himself would point out the rarity of quartets in the key of B minor. As it happens, B minor is a half tone below the range of both the viola and the cello. Prokofiev, skillful chess player that he was, delighted in working out the resulting technical puzzle. Quartet No. 1 is a predominantly serious work, deeply felt, though there are moments of his celebrated wit and slightly sardonic style. The polyphonic texture owes much to Beethoven. The melodic material

exhibits more lyricism and less irregularity than is usually associated with Prokofiev. Also worth noting are the three-movement structure (not four) and the slow finale. The sonata form *Allegro* is sparse but sweet, with an emphasis on development; it concludes abruptly. Marked "tranquillo," the 14 bars of the *Andante molto* serve multiple purposes: as a contrast to the first movement; as a truncated version of the "missing" movement; and as both introduction to, and thematic germ for, the scherzo-like *Vivace* that follows in 2/4 time with two contrasting trios. The viola and cello open this section with an enthusiastic, captivating little tune. Prokofiev considered the folk-flavored *Andante* finale to be among the best single movements he ever wrote: "I ended the quartet with a slow movement because the material happened to be the most significant in the whole piece." The lyrical theme appears first with the viola as the music gradually unfolds towards its ambiguous final notes. The movement ends on a note of despair, but with a sense of inner strength.

Quintet in F Minor for Piano and Strings, Op. 34 (1861-1864)

JOHANNES BRAHMS [1833-1897]

Duration: ca. 43 minutes

"The metronome has no value...for I myself have never believed that my blood and a mechanical instrument go well together." [Brahms]

Johannes Brahms was always conscious of being the humble successor to Mozart and Beethoven. "You don't know what it is like hearing his (Beethoven) footsteps constantly behind me." Brahms would spend a long time composing any particular piece; his standards were high and he was extremely self-critical and difficult to please. He wrote and destroyed many compositions. He spent years revising and polishing compositions before allowing publication.

This Piano Quintet has a fascinating and complicated history of transformation. It was inspired by the enthusiastic acclaim the Brahms's String Sextet, Op. 18 had received in Leipzig and Hamburg. The original version of this Op. 34 was written for an atypical string quintet of two violins, viola and two cellos (rather than the standard combination of two violins, two violas and cello), and it proved to be a failure. It is possible that Brahms knew of Schubert's C Major Quintet (1853) that utilized this "atypical scoring." Distinguished violinist Joseph Joachim, Brahms's friend and trusted mentor, found much to criticize. Eventually Brahms decided that strings alone could not adequately handle his vision of the dramatic intensity of the music and after many unsuccessful attempts to correct the problems with the score, Brahms arranged the work as a sonata for two pianos. This too met with little success. At the suggestion of Clara Wieck Schumann, who liked the original version, and conductor Hermann Levi, he scored it for piano and strings. Joachim wrote of the piano quintet version: "The quintet is beautiful beyond words...a masterpiece of chamber music the likes of which we have not seen since the year 1828" (the year of Schubert's death). Levi's verdict: "Anyone who did not know it in its earlier forms of string quintet and piano sonata would never believe that it was not originally thought out and designed for the present combination of instruments. It does not contain a single note leading me to suspect that it is an arrangement; the ideas in it are rich in color. You have turned a monotonous work for pianos into a thing of great beauty, a masterpiece of chamber music." Brahms burned the original cello quintet version. The final Piano Quintet form is far removed from the destroyed original, of which only a few passages remain intact. He preserved the two-piano realization, which is published as Op. 34b.

The massive first movement is a rich diversity of melodies and rhythms. The serene slow movement places the gently swaying main melody in the piano, with a restrained string accompaniment. The rhythmic *Scherzo* has an abundance of melodic material, focusing on an insistent cello pizzicato and a rhythmic string design; the music builds powerfully to a sudden break followed by the contrasting cantabile melody of the *Trio*. The *Finale* opens with a slow introduction. The somber mood disperses as the cello saunters forth with a lively tune. The freely interpreted

development and recapitulation lead to the coda, a summing up of the entire movement in an unrestrained whirlwind of orchestral sonority. "*Johannes Brahms, a genius.*" [Robert Schumann]

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