Monday, February 5, 2024 • 7:30 PM

Westminster Hall at Westminster Presbyterian Church

ACCORDO

Steven Copes, violin • Erin Keefe, violin
Rebecca Albers, viola • Anthony Ross, cello
Stephen Prutsman, piano

Piano Trio in G major, K.564 (1788) — Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)

Allegro
Andante
Allegretto

Prutsman, Copes, Ross

Piano Quintet (1976) — Alfred Schnittke (1934–1998)

Moderato
Tempo di Valse
Andante
Lento
Moderato pastorale

Prutsman, Copes, Keefe, Albers, Ross

Intermission

String Quartet No. 14 in D minor, D. 810, *Death & the Maiden* (1824) — Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

Allegro
Andante con moto
Scherzo. Allegro molto — Trio
Presto — Prestissimo

Keefe, Copes, Albers, Ross

PLEASE SILENCE ALL ELECTRONIC DEVICES

Piano Trio in G major, K.564 (1788)
W. A. Mozart (b.Salzburg, 1756; d. Vienna, 1791)

Mozart's entire creative life coincided with the emergence of the newfangled fortepiano. Its novel mechanism for sound production created vast new musical possibilities for composers, who quickly stopped writing anything for the now-obsolete harpsichord. However, since many households hung on to their harpsichords for years, it created a marketing dilemma for publishers in Mozart's era. This explains why Mozart's 6th and final piano trio (K. 564) was advertised as being *'for harpsichord or fortepiano with the accompaniment of a violin and violoncello,'* a sure sign that Mozart had intended this trio for the amateur market rather than for himself to perform.

Mozart's six piano trios were all written within a prolific two year period that included some of his greatest works, such as his last three symphonies, two string quintets, the Divertimento for string trio, the opera Don Giovanni, and the "Coronation" piano concerto.

In Mozart's hands, the piano trio developed into a far more sophisticated genre than earlier 'accompanied sonatas' that Haydn wrote by the dozen, which could be played by the piano alone, strings optional. The violin parts tended to duplicate the melodic material in the pianist's right hand, while the cello reinforced the relatively weak bass sound of the early fortepianos.

Mozart's piano trios—especially this one—are written with more instrumental balance in mind, resulting in an intelligent conversation between three players. In a signature Mozart device, the piano, still first among equals here, always states the primary themes before they are "echoed" by the strings.

The second movement is worthy of special notice, an inventive seven-minute Andante, set as a theme and variations. Never lacking for inspiration, Mozart's variations are skillful and creative, and every instrument gets a chance in the sun. The good natured Finale, in rondo form, opens with a playful tune in the rhythm of a *siciliano*, with its familiar lilt in 6/8 time. Mozart folds in contrasting episodes between appearances of the Rondo theme, one in a dark minor key, another a cheeky peasant dance, that brings this charming trio to a close.

Piano Quintet (1976)
Alfred Schnittke
(b. Engels, Russia, 1934; d. Hamburg, 1998)

Alfred Schnittke's five-movement work for piano and string quartet, composed from 1972–1976, was a memorial to Schnittke's mother, who died in 1972. Some of his early sketches found their way into his Requiem, which he had been working on concurrently. In fact, he initially conceived of the Piano Quintet as "an instrumental requiem", with each of its five movements corresponding to the Introit, Kyrie Eleison, Dies Irae, Benedictus, and Agnus Dei of the Requiem Mass.

His work on the first movement went quickly, but he reached an impasse and put it aside for three years. When he resumed work on it however, he found that his music had changed significantly. In an interview he gave in 1980, he said that his desire to write a "simple, but earnest" musical memorial for his mother posed "an almost insoluble problem" to him:

> *"I was unable to continue because I had to take what I wrote from imaginary spaces defined in terms of sound, and put it into psychological space as defined by life, where excruciating pain seems almost unserious, and one must fight for the right to use dissonance, consonance, and assonance*."*

> **Sidebar:** *While that last word might sound like it was made up by a 6th grader, in fact *assonance* is "the repetition of vowel sounds in words that are close to each other in a sentence or phrase, to create a sense of rhythm."

Grief is clearly the dominant emotion being worked out in this quintet, which leaves an overall impression of melancholy and quiet despair. The piano opens the piece with an extended cadenza, built upon a 5-note theme that will recur in every movement. The strings' entrance is shrouded in a fog that obscures all attempts to define tonality or melody. Listen for the repeated single note in the piano that drives the music to the climax, then gradually fade away into nothing.

The second movement emerges as a morose waltz that becomes ever more dissonant, inflected with trills and colorful outbursts from the strings. The waltz theme will tentatively return in the piano, becoming more entangled in the dissonant soundscape of the strings. Schnittke releases the tension of the climax in a dramatic way, as gravity seems to pull the strings down

chromatically in one fell swoop that fades away quietly to end the movement.

Schnittke considered the third and fourth movements the emotional linchpins of the Quintet. He said that they "are based upon situations of genuine grief, about which I wish to say nothing because they are of a highly personal nature and can only be devalued by words." In both movements, you'll hear the return of the obsessive single note that first appeared in the opening movement. The emotional peak of the 4th movement pits ferocious buzzing in the strings against thunderous piano chords, followed again by the repeated single piano note, which leads into the passacaglia theme of the finale.

The *passacaglia* (and its close cousin, the *chaconne*) is a musical form dating from the early baroque era that features a continuously repeated bass line, over which variations unfold in the upper musical lines. Schnittke invokes 14 repetitions of the bass line in the Finale, which provides the backdrop for repeating material from the previous movements. Themes appear in chronological order: the five-note main theme is first, followed by the "morose" waltz, then the opening of the third movement and select moments from the fourth movement are referenced, before the piano adjourns the proceedings with one final statement of the passacaglia theme.

A word about Alfred Schnittke's career, whose compositions span the last 40 years of the 20th century. He lived in the Soviet Union and is usually labeled a "Russian composer" when in fact, he was hardly Russian at all. Schnittke was born into a German-Jewish family in a German city in the USSR named Engels (after the German who co-wrote *The Communist Manifesto* with Karl Marx).

Although born in the USSR, Schnittke's musical education began in Vienna, where his father had been posted. It was in Vienna that Schnittke absorbed the musical language and traditions that formed him, but also made him feel like a man trapped between differing traditions. He said "Although I don't have any Russian blood, I am tied to Russia, having spent all my life here. On the other hand, much of what I've written is somehow related to German music and to the logic that comes out of being German, although I did not particularly want this."

Schnittke's career was marked by years of governmental suppression—much like Shostakovich—but nonetheless he was able to produce an enormous body of work: symphonies, concertos, chamber music, film and ballet scores, as well as vocal works, including operas.

La Jeune Fille et la Mort
painting by Marianne Stokes (c. 1908)

String Quartet No. 14 in D minor,
Death & the Maiden (1824)
Franz Schubert (b. Vienna, 1797; d. Vienna, 1828)

Schubert's epic String Quartet No. 14, known familiarly as *Death and the Maiden*, was completed just two years before his own premature death at 31. The most dramatic of his quartets to date was rejected by his publisher as "uninteresting". The one and only time it was performed during his lifetime, at a private house concert, *Death and the Maiden* received a critical blow from the celebrated violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, who premiered many of Beethoven's Quartets.

Schuppanzigh took Schubert aside and said "Brother, this is nothing at all, let well alone: stick to your lieder", at which Schubert quietly gathered up the parts and locked them up in his desk, where they remained undiscovered until after his death.

One wonders how they got it so wrong, but as often happens with great artistic achievements, the world was simply not ready for it yet. Not even five years after Schubert's death, at the first public performance of *Death and the Maiden* in Berlin. The reviewer was not kind to Franz even in death, criticizing at length the work's "irregular harmonic progressions". (He wasn't wrong, but those "irregular harmonic progressions" are exactly what makes the Finale so amazing! More below.)

The work's monicker comes from the theme of the second movement. Schubert borrowed from a song he'd written nine years earlier called *Death and the Maiden* and made it the basis of the five dramatic variations that follow. The text of the original song,

by the German poet Matthias Claudius, recounts an age-old superstition: Death visits a bride-to-be on the eve of her wedding, demanding certain pre-nuptial "benefits". If she declines, Death will instead take her husband on their wedding day.

The bride sings: "Leave me, terrible specter, I am so young, go away and let me be".

Death replies: "Give me your hand, beautiful and sweet creature, I am your friend, and have not come to punish you. Have courage! You will sleep sweetly in my arms".

Penning a work so hyper-focused about death raises an obvious question: did Schubert *intend* for the quartet to be a statement about his own death somehow, a sort of pre-epitaph of his impending demise? The idea had to be lurking below the surface at some level. For example, it is curious that Schubert chose to quote only the portion of the song when Death speaks as the theme for his five variations.

Schubert must surely have been affected by his own brush with death two years earlier, when symptoms of syphilis became so severe that he spent most of the year in bed. He was equally weakened by the debilitating treatments, which today would be considered medieval. In an often-quoted letter, Schubert wrote to his friend about the daily misery he was dealing with:

Think of a man whose health can never be restored, and who from sheer despair makes matters worse instead of better. Think, I say, of a man whose brightest hopes have come to nothing, to whom love and friendship are but torture, and whose enthusiasm for the beautiful is fast vanishing; and ask yourself if such a man is not truly unhappy

While he eventually did rally from this acute phase, the end game of syphilis was well-known. The effect this degenerative disease must have had on Schubert's creative subconscious, along with the reality that he would probably die young must have influenced the works he composed in his final two years.

While *Death and the Maiden* is a string quartet in every respect, it could also be seen through a much bigger lens: as a four movement romantic tone poem about death and its many guises. For example, from the swaggering opening gestures, this music has an epic, larger than life quality that seems bigger than a piece for just four players. For listeners in the classical era, the opening gestures must have sounded brash and maybe even a bit terrifying, a macabre fanfare, announcing Death's arrival and his inevitable proposition. This is not Schubert, the artful composer of genteel songs. The writing here is always very dramatic, evoking death in many guises: harsh, gentle, even seductive.

Schubert's choice of the key of D minor is significant as well. He generally reserved D minor for songs about of death, penitence, remorse, shadowy dreams, and shrouded moonlight. There are scant few moments of major-key lightness to alleviate what is otherwise an emotionally tortured and exhausting work.

The second movement opens with a very austere theme, followed by five dramatic variations of which only the fourth one moves into a major key, before dark reality returns for the final variation. Surprisingly, the final bars end in a tranquil major key, to accompany Death's final line: "You shall sleep gently in my arms". (Listener note: following convention, Schubert indicates that the two sections of the theme, as well as each variation be repeated, resulting in the form: AA:BB throughout.)

The short Scherzo could also be seen through the lens that this quartet is a tone poem about death. It is a grotesque dance, a dark waltz that opens with fierce, slashing syncopations, that one writer has described as a "dance of the demon fiddler". The music briefly drifts into a major key in the contrasting Trio section (feigning comfort to the bride?) before the repeat of the Scherzo once more.

For the Finale, Schubert sets the music to a frenetic tarantella dance step, creating a sense of the chase. According to legend, the tarantella dance was supposed to cure one bitten by a tarantula. A more prosaic explanation of the dance has it named after the southern Italian city of Taranto.

The "irregular harmonic progressions" that were alluded to earlier? They surely refer to Schubert's habit of quickly alternating between major and minor modes in the Finale. All throughout the movement, phrases start in the minor key but at the last minute switches to major. This quicksilver alternation—a Schubert trademark--creates even more tension in this whirling tour-de-force that tests the mettle of every string quartet that attempts it.

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