

Sunday, October 27, 2024, 4:00 PM

Saint Anthony Park United Church of Christ

Pre-concert conversation one hour before the performance

CHIAROSCURO QUARTET

Alina Ibragimova, violin • Charlotte Saluste-Bridoux, violin
Emilie Hörnlund, viola • Claire Thirion, cello

Today's concert is dedicated to the memory of former Board member, Chris Levy

String Quartet No. 19 in C Major, K. 465 *Dissonance* (1785) W.A. Mozart (1756–1791)

Adagio — Allegro
Andante cantabile
Menuetto and Trio. Allegro
Allegro

Intermission

String Quartet in G Major, D. 887 (1826) Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

Allegro molto moderato
Andante un poco moto
Scherzo. Allegro vivace — Trio. Allegretto
Allegro assai

**String Quartet No. 19 in C Major,
K. 465 *Dissonance*** (1785)
W. A. Mozart (b. Salzburg, Austria, 1756; d. Vienna, 1791)

Mozart would have appreciated the irony; that his string quartet in the sunny, affirmative key of C major would come to be nicknamed *Dissonance* on account of the spicy harmony that occurs in the quartet's opening bars.

To our modern ears it's not that big a deal, but this would have been huge to conservative Viennese audiences—akin to musical pornography—because it violated longstanding rules for resolving dissonances in music that had been observed by composers since the Renaissance. Further adding to the moment's impact is the slow tempo, a leisurely *Adagio*, so that the moment in question happens slowly enough that people could not miss hearing it.

Many listeners back then were convinced they heard wrong notes. In Italy, some performers even returned the parts to the publisher for corrections. Later, an irate Hungarian count accused his musicians of incompetence before shredding the score.

After the taut, calculated opening, the bright and sunny *Allegro* that follows seems almost tame by comparison—a welcome release—and maybe that was the point. Wolfgang was no dummy after all.

Mozart composed K. 465 when he was 25, after hearing string quartets that Haydn had recently composed. They had such an inspirational effect on Mozart that he did something he almost never did: he composed for his own pleasure, not for a commission, or a nobleman's whim or some professional need. And he didn't write just one quartet, but a set of six that he dedicated to 'Papa' Haydn.

He sent the finished set to Haydn with a letter of dedication that read:

"I send my six sons to you, most celebrated and very dear friend. They are, indeed, the fruit of a long and arduous labor.... Please receive them kindly.... I entreat you to be indulgent to those faults that may have escaped a father's partial eye. May it please you therefore to receive them kindly and to be their father, their guide and their friend."

Sidebar: Reading between the lines of that last paragraph reveals much about Mozart and Haydn's relationship. The high esteem Mozart had for 'Papa' Haydn is evident in the obsequious praise and tone of humility he uses to address him. Certainly, getting Haydn's stamp of approval would have been hugely validating for young Wolfgang.

Interestingly, Mozart found that writing the six quartets was more difficult than usual for him, judging by the many erasures and crossed-out sections in the manuscript. This contradicts the popular image of *Mozart-as-savant*, who could allegedly write out works without mistakes or corrections, completely formed in his head, requiring only a process of mental extrusion to get them onto paper.

Deserving special mention is the slow movement. The beautiful *Adagio cantabile* is among Mozart's most personal and intimate quartet creations. The urbane *Minuet and Trio* is a study in contrasts: gentle melodies alternate with strong, declarative ones. The contrasting Trio arrives in a darker minor key, that is bookended by the restatement of the Minuet. The finale has a typical "C major" kind of feel: carefree and upbeat, full of Haydnesque wit, with only the slightest traces of Mozart's occasional darkness. There are two notable virtuosic passages for the first violin that race about in circles before resolving into a tender duet between the two violins in octaves.

As you listen to one of Mozart's most celebrated quartets, it might amuse you to read what a contemporary critic of Mozart wrote about K.465:

"It is a pity that in his truly artistic and beautiful compositions Mozart should carry his effort after originality too far, to the detriment of the sentiment and heart of his works. His new quartets, dedicated to Haydn, are much too highly spiced to be palatable for any length of time."

Apparently, music critics are no better than the rest of us at recognizing genius.

PLEASE SILENCE ALL ELECTRONIC DEVICES

String Quartet in G Major, D. 887 (1826)
Franz Schubert
 (b. Vienna, 1797; d. Vienna, 1828)

Franz Schubert's 15th and final string quartet was composed in just ten days during June of 1826, about two years before his tragic early death at 31. The G major quartet is arguably his most ambitious quartet, conceived on a huge sonic canvas. It can be over 50 minutes long (depending on the repeats observed) and makes unprecedented technical demands on the players.

For example, Schubert writes long passages of *tremolo* bow strokes to accompany melodic material, a technique that presages Bruckner in his symphonies by fifty years. The resulting agitated "carpet" of sound (listen for it early in the first movement), is an effective way to intensify the drama of a moment. (Although from a player's point of view, extended, high-intensity *tremolo* can be very tiring!)

For context, it is worth mentioning that Schubert was working on this quartet around the same time that Beethoven was completing his own late quartets. Schubert was a keen admirer of Beethoven and would have been well acquainted with all the Beethoven quartets in print at the time. Yet the G Major Quartet is very different than its late-Beethoven counterparts, suggesting that had he lived longer, Schubert's hypothetical late quartets would have gone in a very different direction from Beethoven's, in both form and style.

In the opening bars, Schubert introduces a signature harmonic device that he uses freely throughout the entire work: toggling quickly between major and minor chords. The first sonority we hear (G major) resolves suddenly to a G minor chord. The pattern repeats again immediately, toggling just as abruptly from D major, to D minor. The effect is unsettling, as if the music can't decide where to go next. This battle—between light and dark—rages on until the very end of the quartet some fifty minutes later.

The second movement (*Andante*) begins with a lyrical, singing melody presented in the cello. Suddenly, the music takes a dark turn, as the first violin impetuously races upward with scales,

over and over, ending each with a wild shout from the others. Notice the liberal use of *tremolo* in the accompanying voices that adds to the intensity of this passage. Just as suddenly, the opening theme reappears in the violin, as if blithely unaware of what just happened. The stormy episode cannot be denied however, as it explodes forth again, even more fiercely than before. The movement ends as it began, with the cello sounding world-weary after such a turbulent affair, as the music gently fades to black.

The *Scherzo* is propelled along by a repeating rhythmic pattern of six fast and three slower notes, a figure that seems to generate its own inertia. (If it reminds you of one of Mendelssohn's signature Scherzos, coincidentally, he would have been a teenager hard at work on his Overture to *a Midsummer Night's Dream*, in the same year: 1826.) The *Scherzo* then yields to the genial *Trio*, in this case a very sweet *Ländler* (the drunken cousin of the waltz) that might be the only tranquil, untroubled music in the entire piece. The *Scherzo* returns again, minus its repeats, to end the movement.

The final movement, in rondo form, has been likened to an Italian opera buffa scene, full of comic relief and frivolity. It bounces along at a brisk clip in a 6/8 meter, but like the first movement, it plays constantly with the tension between major and minor modes. It begins with two bars of G minor, then a fast pivot to G major for two bars, then back again. This is followed just as quickly by restless modulations into new keys as he develops the material. This movement in particular tests the mettle of every quartet, as it requires perfect ensemble and absolute control to negotiate Schubert's sudden dynamic changes, not to mention the sheer stamina needed to play this monumental work.

Regrettably, this quartet was only played once during Schubert's lifetime (with the composer on viola) and was not formally premiered until 23 years after he died.

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Chiaroscuro Quartet

Formed in 2005, Chiaroscuro Quartet is comprised of violinists Alina Ibragimova and Charlotte Saluste-Bridoux, violist Emilie Hörnlund and cellist Claire Thirion. Dubbed "a trailblazer for the authentic performance of High Classical Chamber Music" in *Gramophone*, this international ensemble performs music of the classical and early romantic periods on gut strings and with historical bows. The quartet's unique sound – described in *The Observer* as "a shock to the ears of the best kind" – is highly acclaimed by audiences and critics all over Europe.

The Chiaroscuro Quartet has collaborated with renowned artists such as Kristian Bezuidenhout, Trevor Pinnock, Jonathan Cohen, Nicolas Baldeyrou, Chen Halevi, Malcolm Bilson, Matthew Hunt, Christian Poltera, Cédric Tiberghien and Christophe Coin. Their international tours have taken the ensemble to Japan, the U.S., the Vienna Konzerthaus, Beethoven Haus Bonn, Salzburg Mozarteum, and the Edinburgh Festival.

Their growing discography includes quartets by Beethoven (opp. 74, 130), Mozart (three "Prussian" quartets), and Haydn (op. 33, volume one). Future recording projects include Beethoven's op. 59 quartets and volume two of Haydn's op. 33.

In the 2024-25 concert season, the quartet will appear at Wigmore Hall London, Boulez Saal Berlin, Laeiszhalle Hamburg, and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw. Their American tour includes Weill Hall (New York), the Philips Collection (Washington D.C.) and Menil Collection (Houston), as well as a stop in St. Paul.

The Chiaroscuro Quartet is grateful to Jumpstart Jr. Foundation for the kind loan of a 1570 Andrea Amati violin.