

## Program Notes

### **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791): String Quartet in B-Flat Major, K. 458 (Hunt) (1784)**

This quartet is one of those that received its first performance at the famous “quartet party” held in Mozart’s house. The “all star” cast included Haydn and Dittersdorf on violins, Mozart on viola and Vanhall on cello. Dittersdorf was a celebrated violinist and well-known composer. Vanhall was the leading Viennese cellist of the time. Leopold, Mozart’s father, was a guest. He wrote to his daughter Nannerl (part of the traveling prodigy team during their childhood): “They played three of the new quartets, those in B-flat, A, and C major (K. 458, 464, 465)...Herr Haydn said to me, ‘I assure you solemnly and as an honest man, that I consider your son to be the greatest composer of whom I have ever heard; he has taste, and possesses a thorough knowledge of composition!’” These quartets are part of a set of six that Mozart dedicated to Haydn. They were written at a leisurely pace in contrast to the fourteen piano concertos that he wrote during the same period. These were written for specific performances and were his principal source of income. The quartets had no deadlines and no pressing monetary motive.

The nickname “Hunt” probably comes from the fast jogging six-eight of the beginning as well as the bugle-like opening motif. But Mozart surely had no programmatic idea here. He did not coin the nickname. The first movement is in a sonata form and is in Mozart’s most amiable, cheerful manner. The second movement is a minuet and trio. There are several subtle rhythmic irregularities. The following adagio is a broad three-part form. It is written in note values that make the normal phrase length two measures instead of four. There is generous use of ornate melody given mostly to the first violin. The last movement sounds like a typical fast rondo finale. It is, nevertheless, a sonata form. A great variety of sonorities occur—one, two, three and four-part writing; two-part writing in octaves, antiphonal effects and short strettos.

### **Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953): Sonata for Two Violins, Op. 56 (1932)**

Prokofiev was born in the Ukraine on an estate of some 18,000 acres where his father was manager. The family was in comfortable circumstances since they received twenty percent of the estate income. Their home was in an isolated village on the estate—thirteen miles from the nearest railroad station. Sergei received his first schooling from his mother. She was a good amateur pianist. According to Sergei, “While my mother awaited my birth, she played the piano for as long as six hours a day. Thus, the future little human was being formed to the accompaniment of music. Eventually, he studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory where he was a pupil of Liadov and Rimsky-Korsakov. He became a fine pianist under Anna Esipova. He was “a brilliant pianist of a kind hitherto unknown, an athlete rather than a poet of the keyboard.”—A fact that is reflected in much of his music.

More self-analytical than most composers, Prokofiev came up with a one-word description of his music—“scherzoish,” which his orderly mind divided into three categories: whimsicality, laughter and mockery. At the time of beginning the work (1918) The Love of Three Oranges, he saw his music developing in five directions: a classical line that he traced back to his mother’s playing Beethoven sonatas; a trend that he called “modern” which seems to be a search for a personal style in the use of the building blocks of composing—harmony, melody and orchestration; a toccata-like or “motoric” drive that stems from his first hearing of Schumann’s Toccata; a lyricism that did not become important until his later works; and finally, the grotesque, which he regarded as an occasional deviation from the other four.

The Sonata for Two Violins was written near the time of his fourth and fifth piano concertos. It is one of the last works he wrote in Western Europe before returning to Soviet Russia. The first performance by Robert Soetens and Samuel Dushkin took place in Paris on December 16, 1932 for Triton, a society for the performance of new chamber music. In addition to Prokofiev, Milhaud and Poulenc were members. The sonata can be described as a “constructivist” work—that is, it is music for its own sake and not dependent on expression of extra-musical concepts.

The framework of the sonata is that of the Baroque sonata—four movements alternating slow and fast—like that used by Corelli. But the parallel ends here. The harmonic treatment is mostly acridly dissonant, frequently polytonal and rhythmically driving with contrasting sections using a more relaxed and less dissonant treatment. Viewed as a whole, the work is tonal with the principal key of the first and last movements being “C” and that of the two middle movements being “G” minor. The first movement sets the stage with melodious themes. It is mostly subdued but dissonant and with one climax. The following allegro is forceful with big chords. There are two contrasting themes with sonata-like development but without a formal recapitulation. The third movement is tense but, nevertheless, subdued. The composer suggests that it be played with mutes. It is a sort of macabre waltz. There is a middle section that is more relaxed. The meter changes to four beats and is slower. The ending returns to the first tempo and meter, suggesting the minuet and trio form without actually being so. The finale is the most substantial movement. It is full of energy. The several returns of the first theme suggest a rondo structure.

### **Amy Marcy Cheney Beach (1867-1944): Quintet in F-Sharp Minor for Piano and String Quartet, Op. 67 (1909)**

Amy Beach (Mrs. H.H.A. Beach) belongs to the school of New England composers that includes John Knowles Paine, George Chadwick and Horatio Parker who are known as the Boston Group. She may well be the most important.

Her background is completely New England, and her training was entirely in the United States. A precocious child, she was singing songs at the age of one and composing music at four. John Tasker Howard, the writer on American music, reports this: “She was extremely sensitive to melody—anything sad or sentimental upset her. When she must be punished, her mother would play Gottshalk’s Last Hope instead of giving her a New England spanking.” Today this might be considered cruel and unusual punishment.

She became an outstanding pianist. As a composer, she was almost completely self-trained. She was recognized as an outstanding performer and composer both here and in Europe.

Her music is in a late Romantic style with some impressionistic touches. Her piano writing recalls that of Chopin, Liszt and Brahms. An economical writer, she works out logically the implications of her thematic material. In the quintet, she uses a descending four-note scale passage (technically known as a Phrygian tetrachord) as a basic motif. It recurs in many guises throughout the work.

The renewed interest in the Romantic style of music is causing a quickening interest in her music. The first performance of her only opera took place in Kansas City recently. A reevaluation of her work is certainly due. She may come to be regarded as one of our most important composers.

Notes by Hoyle Carpenter