

## PROGRAM NOTES

### **Franz Schubert (1797-1828): String Quartet No. 7 in D Major, D.94 (1811or12)**

Franz Schubert composed more than 1000 works in his tragically short lifetime, even shorter than Mozart's. Unlike his Austrian predecessor, however, Schubert was neither a prodigy nor a virtuoso, and held no position of any prominence up until his death, at the age of 31, in 1828. Yet the Viennese composer is best loved for his melodies and intense lyricism that fills not only his Lieder but his instrumental works as well.

Schubert's string quartets span his whole creative lifetime. The early quartets are firmly rooted in the classical Viennese style; they are charming, fresh, lyrical and witty. The late quartets - especially "Death and the Maiden" - speak a deep, dramatic, and sometimes grim language, full of Weltschmerz, hope and despair. Schubert began composing string quartets when he was thirteen, initially to play with his family. These early works are clearly intended for a familiar, domestic setting rather than the concert hall. Although far from major works, the early quartets demonstrate characteristic features that would appear in later compositions. These include a fondness for tremolo (the shivering effect of single notes rapidly repeated) and an almost obsessive fascination with wide-ranging and surprising key relationships.

Such is the case with the String Quartet No.7, composed around 1811. Schubert's unconventional use of key changes is typical of his early works, which demonstrate a continuous process of experimentation and discovery. The String Quartet No.2 is conventional insofar as it employs the traditional four-movement structure of the classical string quartet. One unique feature of Schubert's early quartets is the use of clear thematic links between movements or within them. As for those key changes, get your tuning forks ready. We'll go from D Major in the opening Allegro to the G Major Andante con moto, then back to D major for the first part of the Menuetto (with a trio section in B-Flat Major) and wind up back in D Major for the Presto. (whew!)

-Steve Siegel

### **George Crumb (1929-2022): Four Nocturnes for Violin and Piano, Night Music II (1964)**

"Music might be defined as a system of proportions in the service of a spiritual impulse."—  
George Crumb

Possibly the most innovative of living American composers, George Crumb taught at the University of Pennsylvania. A native of Charleston, West Virginia, he studied there at the Mason College of Music, later moving to the University of Illinois and then to the University of Michigan where he was a student of Ross Lee Finney. He is the recipient of many awards and honors including the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1968. Before coming to the University of Pennsylvania, he taught at the University of Colorado, and he has acted as visiting composer at Tanglewood.

Crumb's music preserves the external formalities of traditional music but makes revolutionary changes in technical resources demanding, from performers, unusual procedures, exceptional precision, and subtlety of interpretation. When he writes for the voice, he asks for fractional intervals (in the cracks between the keys of the piano) and for whispering as well as more conventional vocal sounds. On occasion, he uses circular or spiral staves for recurring ideas.

The score of Four Nocturnes is full of directions for the above mentioned "unusual procedures." E.g., "with the knuckles," "pizzicato" (for the piano), "scrape fingernail over metal winding of string," "violin pizzicato with fingernail," "rap on the most sonorous part of the violin with fingertips," "place a wire brush on the piano strings," etc.

The score is a masterpiece of musical calligraphy and filled with clear directions on how to proceed—a far cry from Bach who tells one nothing.

It should not be thought that these procedures are merely freakish. Crumb seeks new and unusual effects, and he is highly successful in doing so. Tone color is an important element in his work. Nevertheless, there is thematic development. In the Four Nocturnes, for example, there is a four-note motif of widely separated notes, initially heard at the violin's first entry, which recurs in many different permutations throughout the four pieces.

-Hoyle Carpenter

### **Robert Schumann (1810-1856): Piano Quartet in E-Flat Major, Op. 47 (1842)**

Toward the end of 1833, a group of young musicians used to gather at the Café Kaffeebaum in Leipzig for shop and other kinds of talk. Out of these gatherings arose one of the most distinguished of musical journals, the Zeitschrift für Musik. The editing fell to Schumann who continued brilliantly in this role for ten years.

#### House Rules and Maxims for Young Musicians (1848)

“The cultivation of the ear is of greatest importance. Endeavor in good time, to distinguish tones and keys. The bell, the window pane, the cuckoo—seek to discover what tones they produce.”

“You must practice scales and other finger exercises industriously. However, there are people who think they may achieve great ends by doing this alone; up to an advanced age, they practice mechanical exercises for many hours a day. That is as reasonable as trying to recite the alphabet faster and faster every day. Find a better use for your time.”

“ ‘Dumb keyboards’ have been invented; practice on them for a while in order to see that they are worthless. Dumb people cannot teach us to speak.”

Critical opinion of his Piano Quartet is curiously negative. Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber-Music, which might be called the bible of chamber music, finds much of the writing ineffective and accuses Schumann of being unable to write competently for strings. Another criticism is that he opposes the piano to the strings as a block of instruments. This certainly does happen, but it does in practically all piano quartets. This is one of the primary resources of the medium, and it does not occur excessively here.

The Pelican Books volume on chamber music says this: “The strain of so much extended abstract thinking was beginning to tell on Schumann's health when he plunged into the E-flat Major Piano Quartet toward the end of 1842, so that while the work aims at greater profundity of thought and feeling than the Quintet, it lacks the effortless spontaneity of the earlier work.”

The slow introduction of the first movement announces the basic four-note motif (G-F-G-A-flat) that prevails throughout the first movement in many different guises. The swift Scherzo, mysterious and spooky, suggests the influence of Mendelssohn. The principal theme of the Andante cantabile is built around the interval of the seventh, both rising and falling. With the restatement of the main idea at the end, the cellist is instructed to tune the C string down to B-flat in order to have a pedal-point on a note below the normal range of the cello. There are only fifteen measures to do this while, at the same time, counting measures. The Finale, a vigorous vivace, brings into play some strong contrapuntal writing. An episode in A-flat recalls the “spooky” writing of the Scherzo.

The piano quartet was written in what is called Schumann's chamber music year, which included, in addition to this work, the three string quartets and the piano quintet. In disagreement

with the above quoted critics, I find no lessening of the composer's inspiration and skill. I agree with Clara Schumann's diary—"a beautiful work, so youthful and fresh, as if it were his first."  
-Hoyle Carpenter