

PROGRAM NOTES

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String Quartet No. 2, in D Major. . .Alexander Borodin (Born November 12, 1833, in St. Petersburg; died February 27, 1887 in St. Petersburg)

The chamber music tradition in Russia goes back to the 18th century, when Catherine the Great brought some of Western Europe's best and most renowned musicians to her court. She sensed the importance of their music although she admitted that she had only a limited understanding of Haydn's string quartets. Later, Beethoven wrote some of his greatest quartets on commission of two Russian noblemen who had refined musical taste, Count Andre Razumovsky and Prince Nicolas Galitzin. When Russia's first great composer, Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857), fell under the spell of this genre of music from the West, chamber music began to have an important place in Russian musical life.

Alexander Borodin was one of Russia's greatest 19th century composers but music was only his avocation, and his works are relatively few in number. Born the illegitimate son of Prince Luka Gedeonov and Avdotia Kleinecke, the wife of a physician, he studied in Germany in Heidelberg and became a distinguished scientist, a physician, a leading medical researcher and chemist. He was a brilliant academician, teacher and author and even founded and directed a medical school for women. All this commitment gave him limited time for musical composition, but he wrote two fine symphonies, the great opera, Prince Igor, and a number of other works that are still performed. He had a problem about finalizing his work and completed some of it only when his friends forced him to do so, and presumably, sometimes they finished compositions for him.

Borodin joined fellow composers Balakirev, Rimsky-Korsakov, Mussorgsky, and Cui to form a group that came to be called "The Russian Five." Their mutual aim was to create an independent Russian art based primarily on national folk songs, dances, and legends. None of the five was completely successful in dissociating himself from the European musical tradition, but Borodin was probably the least nationalistic of the five.

In an unusual stroke for him, he composed the Quartet No. 2 quickly, during a summer holiday in 1881. This work, one of the most adored works in the quartet literature, it has been suggested, was written as a special anniversary present for his wife, Catherine; its composing coincided with the 20th anniversary of their having fallen in love. The Quartet's popularity is due to its warm, lyrical themes.

Borodin's love of chamber music had led him to learn to play the cello when he was a young man, and he probably wrote the many marvelous passages for the instrument into this score with the intention of playing them himself. The quartet, which he dedicated to his wife, was first performed at a concert of the Imperial Russian Musical Society in St. Petersburg on January 26, 1882.

The third movement is the romantic Nocturne, Andante that is often performed separately. It has one theme only, a tender and passionate line, which the cello first articulates, and then the violin answers. For contrast, Borodin uses repeated, quick, rising scalar passages.

Quartet No. 8 in C minor, Op. 110 . . . Dmitri Shostakovich *(Born September 25, 1906 in St. Petersburg; died Aug. 8, 1975 in Moscow)*

Shostakovich, music's last great classicist, composed 15 symphonies, 2 operas, 3 ballets, 15 string quartets and 36 film scores. Communists paid lip service to new art, yet attacked Shostakovich's works of the late 1920's and early 30's for "bourgeois decadence" and ideological "formalism," and they were withdrawn from circulation. Shostakovich humbly described his Symphony No. 5 (1937) as "a composer's reply to just criticism," and with it, re-entered the mainstream of Russian musical life.

String Quartet No. 8, composed in 1960, is one of Shostakovich's most emotional, most private and most desolate works. His viewing of Dresden's ruins after World War II inspired it; the music echoes the bleakness and the hopelessness of that experience. At first, Russian authorities described the work as anti-Fascist, but in truth, and with historical perspective, it is not. Shostakovich, in his autobiography *Testimony*, published posthumously, reveals that this composition speaks most clearly in an autobiographical voice. The critic, Paul Griffiths, has hypothesized that it owes its "relative popularity to the fact that it is ostensibly a public expression of privacy."

The quartet has five movements, which although characteristic of Shostakovich, includes one more than traditionally written, and these five differ from those of Shostakovich's other quartets. Reflective of the mood is the very slow tempo of the first and last two movements, Largo, especially noteworthy since almost all quartets, even most of Shostakovich's, conclude with a fast movement. Structurally, the Quartet No. 8 is cyclical, returning in its final movement to the theme first articulated in the opening measures of the first movement.

The Borodin Quartet told about playing a private performance for Shostakovich, which emphasizes the predominantly emotional nature of listening to this exceptional quartet. As they played, they noticed Shostakovich sinking lower and lower in his chair. When they finished, the composer buried his head in his hands, "apparently sunk in inconsolable grief." Today's listeners might not be fully aware of the details of Shostakovich's life, taken up with the struggles of maintaining artistic integrity under Stalin. Yet the impact of his suffering and pain still speaks clearly from the music.

The quartet's most distinctive feature is Shostakovich's personal stamp, the musically initialed signature that begins and ends this poignant composition. In German notation S(ES) is E flat, and H is B natural. Those notes, emblematic of D. SCH, (Shostakovich's first initial and the first three letters of his last name) are D, E flat, C and B, and they are the first notes the unaccompanied cello sounds in the first movement. After appearing episodically throughout the quartet, these notes return as the subject of the fugue, bringing the quartet to an end.

In his autobiography, Shostakovich identified for his listeners the many musical borrowings he uses in this quartet: a Russian revolutionary song that would have been recognized by his contemporary compatriot auditors, "Exhausted by the hardships of prison" and the medieval chant of Requiem Masses, Dies Irae. Also present are quotations from his own music: in the first movement, Largo, he quotes his Symphony No. 1 and Symphony No. 5; in the second movement, Allegro Molto, he takes what he calls a "Jewish" theme from his Piano Trio No. 2. Known as the "Dance of Death" theme, Jews sang it in concentration

camps as they dug their own graves. In the Allegretto third movement, Shostakovich quotes the opening of his Cello Concerto No. 1, and in the fourth movement, Largo, a motif from the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* appears.

The five movements connect without pause. Two Largo movements flank the quartet. The first movement begins with a fugato theme; this movement also contains three other themes. The second movement, an angry, percussive toccata, *Allegro molto* and the Dance of Death segment (mentioned above), follow. The third movement, a menacing waltz, is based again on DSCH, and the fourth movement, also slow, contains some brutal chords over the whine of the sustained violin. Some critics say this whining sound reflects gunfire over Dresden. The DSC(H) motive again predominates in the last Largo movement, and a Russian funeral song, 'Tormented by the Lack of Freedom' appears close to the end, before the D-S-C-H returns.

String Quartet No. 16, in F Major, Op. 135 . . . Ludwig van Beethoven

(Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn; died March 26, 1827, in Vienna)

On October 30, 1826, after only three months of work, Beethoven finished his last extended composition, the F-Major String Quartet, Op. 135, but it is not the very last chamber music he wrote. The last was a new finale for the Op. 130 Quartet, a dancing rondo to replace the great, weighty *Grosse Fuge* ("Grand Fugue"), which was later published as a separate composition, Op. 133.

With Op. 135, Beethoven gave up the gigantism of his preceding quartets and returned to a compact four-movement structure. The new work surprised his friends and almost disappointed posterity. Even in the early 20th century, some scholars and critics seemed to feel that Beethoven had let them down by abandoning his colossal forms and earth-shaking style for the simple charm, subtle clarity and gentleness of this work. The absence of solemnity from all but the slow movement was thought to be an offense against the future, a sin against history. For Romantic critics, the idea that Beethoven could even insert a private joke into his last work, whether or not he knew it to be his last, was incomprehensible. The truth is that the terrible troubles of Beethoven's last year did not destroy his frequently bitter wit, and they may even have enlivened it.

The most famous frivolity of the quartet is in the heading of the finale, where Beethoven wrote, as though giving it a title, "The Difficult Decision." Below this inscription is a line of music consisting of the movement's two principal pieces of melodic material, each with a few words written under the notes, as in a song. First comes a question, gravely put, "Muss es sein?" ("Must it be?"), and then comes the quick and emphatic reply, "Es muss sein! Es muss sein!" ("It must be! It must be!").

During Beethoven's last years, his friends competed with one another to get their hands on the music of his latest works before they were published, and they were also expected to demonstrate their fidelity to the master by missing no opportunity to hear these pieces performed. One friend, a businessman who hired musicians to give quartet parties at his home, boasted that he could always get any music he wanted from Beethoven. However, he had failed to attend the first performance of the Op. 130 Quartet in March, and when he asked to borrow the music in April, the composer refused. An intermediary said that he

could restore himself to Beethoven's good graces by paying the full price of a concert-series subscription-ticket to the musicians who had played it. "Must I?" he is reported to have asked. In reply, Beethoven quickly composed a canon on the "Es muss sein" phrase, almost exactly as it was to appear in Op. 135 a few months later. It is set for four male voices, to be sung "quickly and angrily" with the text, "You must! Yes, you must! Take out your purse!"

Beethoven found this question and answer useful in a variety of situations. He wrote to his publisher that he had written the quartet only because he had been paid in advance for it, and therefore he knew that "Es muss sein" ("It must be"). Other Beethoven intimates later told different stories based on the "Must I? -- You must!" exchange. Perhaps they are all true. Beethoven evidently still enjoyed mixing truth and fiction and making little games out of his work.

The first movement of the quartet, Allegretto, opens with a long principal theme that also consists of a question figure, hesitatingly asked, and its answer. The second subject is a simple, direct theme that would not have been out of place in one of his earliest quartets or in one by Haydn, except that it is distributed among the instruments and is later developed in ways that belong entirely to this time of maturity. Even the simplest and most basic connecting passages here are so richly tuneful that, in development, the movement seems to have not just two subjects but as many as a half-dozen. Next comes a scherzo, Vivace, of great rhythmic freedom, with a central trio section that is a rustic dance recalling the Pastoral Symphony.

The third movement, Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo, is a brief elegy, only fifty-four measures long, that Beethoven described as a sweet song of calm and peace. In form, it is a simple set of variations on a short theme that becomes, among other things, a recitative, a smooth and elaborately polyphonic long phrase and a complex fragmented texture. The finale begins with the difficult "Must I?" phrase, Grave, in the viola and cello. It will be asked again later, even more forcefully, but most of the movement is devoted to the answer, "You must!" Allegro, or, in the end, perhaps "What must be, must be!"

ARTISTS BIOGRAPHIES

Cassatt String Quartet

Muneko Otani, violin

Jennifer Leshnower, violin

Ah Ling Neu, viola

Elizabeth Anderson, cello

Acclaimed as one of America's outstanding ensembles, the Manhattan based Cassatt String Quartet has performed throughout North America, Europe, and the Far East, with appearances at New York's Alice Tully Hall and Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, the Tanglewood Music Theater, the Kennedy Center and Library of Congress in Washington, DC, the Theatre des Champs-Élysées in Paris and Maeda Hall in Tokyo. The Quartet has been presented on major radio stations such as National Public Radio's Performance

Today, Boston's WGBH, New York's WQXR and WNYC, and on Canada's CBC Radio and Radio France.

Formed in 1985 with the encouragement of the Juilliard Quartet, the Cassatt initiated and served as the inaugural participants in Juilliard's Young Artists Quartet Program. Their numerous awards include a Tanglewood Chamber Music Fellowship, the Wardwell Chamber Music Fellowship at Yale (where they served as teaching assistants to the Tokyo Quartet), First Prizes at the Fischhoff and Coleman Chamber Music Competitions, two top prizes at the Banff International String Quartet Competition, two CMA/ASCAP Awards for Adventurous Programming, a recording grant from the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, and commissioning grants from Meet the Composer and the National Endowment for the Arts. In 2004, they were selected for the centennial celebration of the Coleman Chamber Music Association in Pasadena, California.

The Cassatt celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2006 with a series of world-premieres, a performance at the Library of Congress on the Library's Stradivarius Collection and gave concerts for the American Academy in Rome, Cornell and Syracuse Universities and were guest clinicians at the the Texas Music Educators Association. They also gave mini-residencies at the Centro Nacional de las Artes in Mexico City, Vassar College and the University of Texas at Austin.

As Symphony Space resident "All-Stars", this season the Cassatt joins forces with Marc Johnson, of the former Vermeer Quartet to premiere a Chamber Music America commission of Daniel S. Godfrey's Cello Quintet with Schubert's Quintet. They offer "Music from a Forgotten World" to include their recent commission "Playing For Our Lives" by Gerald Cohen with guest Ela Weissberger, a Terezin survivor. They perform Dvorak's beloved Piano Quintet for Boston's WBGH Drive Time Live with pianist, Judith Stillman and at Rhode Island College and return to Connecticut's Treetops Chamber Music Society in Weber's Clarinet Quintet with Oskar Espina-Ruiz. The Cassatt will give a mini-residency at Texas A & M University and return to their seventh annual Texas high school educational residency, Cassatt In The Basin! which includes intensive workshops, coachings and rehearsals of a commissioned work by Peter Lieuwen for Triple Quartet, in a side-by-side performance of students with the Cassatt. They rejoin the Allegro Chorale to present the premiere of Lowell Hohstadt's "Changing Seasons" and Elisenda Fabregas' "The Flaming Rock".

This Spring the Quartet will work with student composers and give masterclasses at the University of North Carolina at Greenville and at the North Carolina School for the Arts. They make their debut at New York City's River to River Celebration with the multi-media premiere of Mari Kimura's "One". The Cassatt's perform their commissioned work, Cadmium Yellow at Columbia University's Miller Theater for Laura Kaminsky's CD release and they will record quartets by Libby Larsen and Anna Weesner.

Additional highlights include a return to the Big Sky Music Festival (MT) with cellist, Hamilton Cheifetz and to Music Mountain (CT) and Bargemusic (NY) with pianist, Ursula Oppens. They give concerts at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and the University of Central Arkansas to include the premiere of Bruce Adolphe's quartet "Mary Cassatt: Scenes From Her Life" inspired by the Museum's renowned art collection. An unique collaboration with the Kyoshinan Ensemble brings the Cassatt to the Tenri Cultural Center in NYC to give James Nyoraku Schlefer's premiere for koto, shakuhachi, shamisen and quartet and the two ensembles will be in residence at the University of Hawaii. Finally they make their debut at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies.

Equally adept at classical masterpieces and contemporary music, the Cassatt has collaborated with a remarkable array of artists/composers including pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin, soprano Susan Narucki, flutist Ransom Wilson, jazz pianist Fred Hersch, didgeridoo player Simon 7, the Trisha Brown Dance Company, distinguished members of the Cleveland and Vermeer Quartets, and composers Louis Andriessen and John Harbison.

With a deep commitment to nurturing young musicians, the Cassatt, in residencies at Princeton, Yale, Syracuse University, the University at Buffalo and the University of Pennsylvania, has devoted itself to coaching, conducting sectionals and reading student composers' works, while offering lively musical presentations in music theory, history and composition. Selected by Chamber Music America, they recently served as guest artists for their New Music Institute; a series to help presenters market new music to their audiences. Summer often finds them at Bargemusic, Music Mountain and in residence at the Hot Springs Music Festival and the innovative Seal Bay Festival of Contemporary American Chamber Music. This past June 2012, quartet members celebrated the summer solstice with noted Astrovisualist, Dr. Carter Emmart at New York's Hayden Planetarium in a spellbinding performance that was described by New York Times music critic James Oestreich as "gamely and artistic."

Named three times by The New Yorker magazine's Best Of...CD Selection, the Cassatt's discography includes eclectic new quartets by Pulitzer Prize-winner Steven Stucky and Tina Davidson (Albany Records), by Daniel S. Godfrey (Koch International Classics) and by Grawemeyer and Rome Prize-winner Sebastian Currier (New World) as critiqued in The New York Times (Quartetset) was written for the Cassatt... which plays it strongly here."

The Cassatt has recorded for the Koch, Naxos, New World, Point, CRI, Tzadik and Albany labels and is named for the celebrated American impressionist painter Mary Cassatt.