

September 24, 2017 Program

Beethoven -

Quartet No. 1 Op. 18 in F major

- 1) Allegro con brio
- 2) Adagio affettuoso
- 3) Scherzo: Allegro molto
- 4) Allegro

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Schubert -

String Quartet in D minor, D810 "Death and the Maiden"

- 1) Allegro
- 2) Andante con moto
- 3) Scherzo Allegro Molto
- 4) Presto

Program Notes

Willy and Friends have chosen two cornerstones of chamber music for this program. Both selections are by composers of the First Viennese School (Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven. Schubert is sometimes added). Both Beethoven and Schubert composed and performed at the end of the classical period but are considered transitional figures to the Romantic period. For Beethoven, it is considered his early period and for Schubert I will call it his final period.

These bachelors are in their late 20's at the time of these compositions.

Beethoven composed his between 1797 and 1799, completing it at the age of 29. *Passing in 1826, at the age of 56.*

(Another bachelor, Napoleon at age 30 in 1799, just named himself First Counsel of France, a short step from Emperor).

Schubert composed his in 1824, at the age of 27. *Passing in 1828, at the age of 31.*

So, what do young Viennese bachelors do in their late 20's (while others are taking over the world)? They write string quartets! Some say they will change your life!

Beethoven's String Quartet No. 1 in F Major, Op.18. The use of a motif, a short-fragmented theme, is an identifying component in the early development of Haydn and Beethoven's works. The audience of the day trained themselves to pick out the motif and analyze how the composer plays with it in the movement. We are challenged to do the same. Beethoven gives us an opportunity in his first movement (the first six notes played in unison by the quartet are the motif) to recognize it in many forms throughout the piece. Beethoven is young, he pays Mozart and Haydn homage in the use of a motif in Movements 1, 3 and 4. But Movement 2 allows Beethoven to be himself, to write with an emotional intensity from his innermost heart that goes far beyond his predecessors' self-revelations. I anxiously await our musicians (and our) interpretation on September 24.

- Movement 1 - Allegro con brio - perform at a fast tempo with spirit (fire) - Listen for those first six notes played in unison by the group. This is the motif that Beethoven used throughout this movement, with drama, with lyricism, with slight flirtations to the minor key, but always with this motif in the tapestry.
- Movement 2 - Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato (D minor) - slow tempo with tender feeling and with passion. In a letter to a friend Beethoven had Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet tomb scene as a metaphor for this movement. It is a dramatic contrast to the other movements which are generally at a brisk and somewhat joyful, frivolous tempo. This expressive, and personal heartfelt movement, begins rather gloomy, anticipating what is about to happen, the suspense is in how he will express it, with stabs of agony, the racing pulse of the supporting instruments - which finally ends, the moments of silence, then the gloom returns, and the last sigh is heard, Death prevails.

- Movement 3 - Scherzo. a vigorous, light, or playful composition, in this case played at a very fast tempo. The tempo seems to build throughout this movement, this is a refreshing reprieve from movement 2, and lifts the spirits. Beethoven uses the traditional fugue technique in which an instrument introduces a short melody which is taken up by others and developed by the parts intertwining – but maintaining their melodic integrity. Violin 1 goes rather crazy with flourishes up and down his frets while his associates, and we, will doubtlessly watch in amazement!
- Movement 4 - Allegro - a brisk tempo. Again, a motif pervades the movement but with more playfulness and many expressive ideas. The motif almost becomes excessive in its repetition, thankfully broken by opposing melody lines opposing each other and then joining again in the conversation.

Schubert's String Quartet No 14 in D minor, D810. "Death and the Maiden ". Death must have been on Schubert's mind. While composing this quartet in 1824 he was slowly mending from a serious illness from which he could not fully recover. He realized he was dying. In this frame of mind, he took a melodic song he had written seven years earlier based on a poem by a German poet Matthias Claudius named "Death and the Maiden". The melodic tone of the song carries through this composition but never overcomes the presence of death. This piece is defined by the second movement, it is the source of the composition's common name, the amazing feature is how Schubert was able to translate the mood of the song into to the movement. Beginning with the funeral procession, the defiant but terrorized voice of the maiden, and the calm, reassuring insistence of Death. Who once again prevails.

Schubert's life was a constant battle with life itself. A humble birth and upbringing, always penniless until his very late period, married to his muse (the Maiden?), dedicated to his art – never slowing the writing process even when challenged by serious illness. Some say that he was only able to buy his own piano in his late period after a very successful performance. Previously he tried to make a living by composition and giving lessons. He took the life he was given and imbedded it into the second movement of this piece, only reluctantly giving in to death.

NOTES:

- I used You Tube videos of both selections by the Alban Berg Quartet. Austrians playing music composed by Austrians. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IK9581RGd74> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IPZZ8kxleY>
- We often hear the use of motif in Native American songs and dances. The characteristic chant at the beginning of the song carries through in many forms.
- Beethoven at this young age was already struggling with his loss of hearing. He composed our piece on a piano style that was only recently transitioning from five octaves to six (vs. the 7+ octaves on today's pianos). So he composed in a range that matched the quartet instruments but went beyond his keyboard's ability. He transposed the piece to get the best sounds from the viola and cello and wrote the individual parts himself.
- Beethoven's compositional demands and hearing issues led to the rapid development of pianos that could play in the range he demanded and manufactured with the durability required of a pianist who demanded louder tones on the instrument because of hearing deficiencies.

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