



CLEVELAND
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SOCIETY

PROGRAM NOTES

Cuarteto Casals

November 12, 2024 – 7:30 p.m.

The Cultural Arts Center at Disciples Church

String Quartet in D major No. 20, K. 499 (“Hoffmeister”)

Wolfgang Amadè Mozart

Born: Salzburg, 1756

Died: Vienna, 1791

Composed: 1786

In 1785, a 31-year-old composer named Franz Anton Hoffmeister decided to enter the music-publishing business. His firm soon emerged as the second most important in Vienna, after the well-established Artaria & Co. Hoffmeister enjoyed excellent relationships with Haydn, Mozart, as well as, a little later, with Beethoven; he and Mozart were personal friends. Between 1785 and 1791, he published a good dozen chamber works by Mozart, starting with the G-minor Piano Quartet, K. 478, during his very first year in business. A year later, Mozart gave his friend the present string quartet—the only one from his mature years that is a self-standing work and not part of a set.

The so-called “Hoffmeister” Quartet came a year after Artaria published the six quartets dedicated to Haydn, in which Mozart had reached the summit of quartet-writing. Even after that extraordinary set of masterpieces, the new work contains a number of novelties. In the opening *Allegretto*, Mozart uses an unusually large number of themes and their treatment is exceptionally elaborate, including some rather distant key relationships. The movement ends

with an extended coda, a device that Mozart did not use very frequently, to keep the excitement going a little longer.

The second-movement minuet, seemingly a model of simplicity, exhibits many subtle touches that make it unique. The middle section or “Trio,” the only portion of the work in a minor key, contrapuntal imitation and frequent accents on the weak beat generate a high level of tension. In another original move, Mozart composed a transition to connect the Trio section to the repeat of the minuet with no break, so that the recapitulation comes as something of a surprise.

One of Mozart’s most sublime Adagios, the third movement overflows with richly ornamented melodies, traded back and forth between the higher and the lower instruments. The final Presto could be another homage to Haydn, with a main theme interrupted by sudden rests. The movement is full of delicious musical humor, with one great melody and one exquisite harmonic idea after another.

Reflections on the Theme B-A-C-H by Sofia Gubaidulina

Born: Chistopol [Tatarstan, Russia, USSR], 1931

Composed: 2002

What is it about the notes B-flat - A - C - B-natural that have made them such an enduring source of inspiration for composers? The fact that these four notes spell the name of Bach in German are hardly enough to explain the phenomenon, even though the motif has frequently and conveniently served as an homage to the great Thomaskantor. We have to go a step further and ask: what kind of musical motif results from this combination of letters? Here the fact that the motif begins with a B flat and ends with a B-natural is of particular significance, since any major or minor key in the classical system would only contain one or the other of these two notes but never both. Since they cannot be part of the same key, they have a destabilizing effect on tonality. They produce a tension that composers have been exploiting ever since J. S. Bach included the motif in the last, unfinished *contrapunctus* of his *Art of*

Fugue. Challenging to harmonize, the motif represented a musical “problem” that was tackled by a long line of composers in the 19th and 20th centuries, as the process of tonal destabilization gradually led to different kinds of full or partial atonality.

Writing at the beginning of the 21st century, Sofia Gubaidulina reflected on the famous theme anew and found that it had direct implications for the music of our own time. In this brief work, the chromaticism of the four-note motif is extended and amplified in various ways. The composer also uses Bach’s countersubject to the B-A-C-H motif from *The Art of Fugue* as a self-standing theme. By the time we hear B-A-C-H in its original form at the end, it comes across almost as a logical consequence of everything that has gone before.

String Quartet in C minor, Op. 51, No. 1

Johannes Brahms

Born: Hamburg, 1833

Died: Vienna, 1897

Composed: 1873

In the works of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, the key of C minor acquired a special symbolic significance. Associated with turbulent emotions and sometimes outright tragedy, the tonality was used to express tense dramatic moments in the trial scene of Mozart’s *Magic Flute*, the opening “Chaos” movement of Haydn’s *Creation*, or the portrayal of Coriolan’s troubled soul in Beethoven’s overture of the same name. With its “fateful” opening motif, Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony confirmed the

character of the key in the minds of subsequent generations of musicians and listeners.

Brahms inherited the idea of a “tragic” C minor from his predecessors, and it is surely no accident that he used that key in three major works, each of which took many years to find its final shape, as a sign that they were particularly important—and problematic—for the composer. The three works are the First Symphony, the Third Piano Quartet, and the present string quartet. It is said that Brahms destroyed as many as twenty of his early quartets; it is

noteworthy that the the first one he decided to publish was a dramatic work in C minor.

One of the most striking features of this quartet is the extent to which three of its four movements are dominated by a single melodic idea, and an extremely simple one at that: the first three notes of the minor scale in ascending order. Those three notes constitute the principal building block of the quartet's first melody. The motif is heard almost constantly throughout the first movement, either in its original form or with some modifications that, however, always keep the connection clearly recognizable. This motivic "saturation," as commentators have called it, is a technical tour de force but also a means to ensure an unusual level of emotional concentration.

The energy of this rising motif animates the tempestuous first and last movements; in the second-movement *Romanze*, the same motif, in

a much slower tempo, serves to express solace and comfort. In the third movement, the primary melodic direction is reversed. The themes are now predominantly descending, not ascending, and the character of the music is that of the Brahmsian "intermezzo." The outline of a scherzo, with contrasting middle section ("trio") is followed but the mood is not as playful as in a scherzo but rather relaxed and gentle. The trio, in a tempo that is faster than the opening, is the most cheerful moment of the entire quartet.

Brahms fashioned both the passionate opening theme and the lyrical second melody of the finale out of the above-mentioned three-note motif. After a stormy development, the work ends with a coda where Brahms, surprisingly, used a device found at the end of Haydn's string quartet Op. 74, No. 1: a long drone on the cello's open C string which, in both works, gives the music a sense of stability that has been previously absent.

-Peter Laki

Mr. Laki is a musicologist and Visiting Associate Professor of Music at Bard College. He has been the annotator for the Society's program booklet since 2012, having previously served as annotator for the Cleveland Orchestra from 1990 to 2007. He is a native of Budapest and holds a Ph.D. in music from the University of Pennsylvania.