

“*Joie de vivre*”

Program Notes

“*Forgive me, Majesty. I am a vulgar man! But I assure you, my music is not.*” – W.A. Mozart

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) lived a mere 35 years and found great pleasure in writing enchanting tunes and lively, infectious themes for whimsical characters. What makes Mozart’s music so joyful? He blends elegance with exuberance, creating compositions that are both light-hearted and deeply moving.

In July 1783, Mozart returned to his native Salzburg from Vienna. He took with him his new bride Constanze to meet his father Leopold and his sister Nannerl. He planned to keep a low profile and did not want to draw the attention of the Archbishop of Salzburg, Hieronymus Colloredo. Mozart had left employment with the Archbishop in 1781 turning him a cold shoulder. Since Colloredo considered his house musicians little more than hired help, and since the young Mozart considered himself an uncommon employee, the two were often at loggerheads. Michael Haydn, brother to Franz Joseph “Papa” Haydn and good friend of Mozart, had assumed the role of composer and musician at the court of the Archbishop. The Archbishop had commissioned Michael Haydn to compose a set of six duos for violin and viola, of which the composer had completed four before he fell seriously ill. Colloredo, without regard for the sick composer’s condition, threatened to cut Haydn’s salary until the commission was completed. Mozart on hearing of the plight of his friend offered to write the remaining two duos so that Haydn could still receive his commission.

The String Duo No. 1 in G major for violin and viola, K. 423, was the first of two duos that Mozart wrote to complete Michael Haydn’s set of six duets for the Archbishop Colloredo. While the duos by both Mozart and Haydn have many viola double stops (two strings played simultaneously), Mozart’s duos differ in that the viola also has many passages in sixteenth notes, almost in equal proportion to the violin. Even in a light work such as this, Mozart’s opera writing chops allow him to animate the two instruments as characters in a musical conversation.

Philippe Gaubert (1879-1941) wrote “Trois Aquarelles” (Three Watercolors) in 1915, while serving in the French army during World War I. Despite the circumstances of their composition, these Aquarelles are light and elegant pieces, maybe serving Gaubert as an escape from life in the trenches. The original version was for violin, cello, and piano. Gaubert was himself a flutist, a pupil of the influential Paul Taffanel. Gaubert won First Prize for flute at the Paris Conservatoire in 1894 and joined the orchestra of the Paris Opéra three years later. He also studied composition and conducting. A renowned soloist and teacher, he collaborated with Paul Taffanel on a flute method and became professor of flute at the Conservatoire, where Marcel Moyse was one of his students. As a composer, he wrote operas, ballets, songs, and orchestral works, as well as a large body of music for the flute.

Gaubert’s compositional compass for this work can be described in the words of Miles Hoffman, music commentator for National Public Radio:

“Just as paint colors can be perceived alone and blended with other colors, simultaneously obscuring and revealing the texture of the paper underneath, the distinct tonal colors of the flute, cello, and piano sound alone and in combination, with melody and rhythm providing basic textures.”

In the first movement, *On a Clear Morning*, the flute opens with a spirited wakeup call, while piano arpeggios suggest the rays of the morning sun, and the cello plays robust tunes. Marked by a melancholy passage in the cello, *Autumn Evening* has a subdued and elegiac quality. *Sérénade* is in a Spanish dance style with an exotic mode or scale. One can almost hear castanets.

(over)

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Program Notes (continued)

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 -1975) began composing his Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor, Op. 67, in late 1943 and finished in August 1944 during World War II. He dedicated it to the memory of his close friend Ivan Ivanovich Sollertinsky, music critic and musicologist, who spoke 26 languages and liked roller coasters like Shostakovich did. Ivan died in February 1944 causing the grieving Dmitri to have difficulty composing for quite some time. His friend was an exceptional conversationalist – witty, and well-versed in many subjects, namely, ballet and dance theory, and fine art of the 1920's and 30's, and he also promoted the works of Mahler, Bruckner, Berg, and Schoenberg. He did not, however, know how to play the piano. Since Dmitri did not speak another language, they swapped piano and German lessons, with not much result to show for it.

The four-movement work opens with the cello playing a slow, mournful melody in harmonics, which are ethereal tones produced by bowing a string which has been lightly touched at certain fractional distances down its length. The movement's opening was originally written for the violin, but renowned Russian cellist Rostropovich convinced Shostakovich to change it to the cello. The violin and piano then imitate the melody in lower registers, all three instruments playing in canon. A rhythmic eighth-note accompaniment in this movement returns in the fourth movement. The second movement is a scherzo with a theme built on the tones of a major triad. The basis for the third movement is a *passacaglia*, eight measures of piano chords which repeat throughout the movement. The violin and cello play in various creative ways above it. The fourth movement is a percussive allegro based heavily on Jewish themes.

This is the composer's first piece to employ Jewish themes, and he did not leave any notes about its compositional influences. Possibly the composer was making a commentary on the atrocities of the Holocaust, whose news was just breaking on the world at this time. Also, while Shostakovich was composing the work, Leningrad (St. Petersburg) was liberated from the German siege in January 1944 after two-and-a-quarter years, only 600,000 persons having remained of the 2.5 million inhabitants. While the Trio is not an outwardly joyous composition, it reminds us to cling to joy as a source of survival in the face of contrary events.

One unconventional tone color that Shostakovich uses is to write sparsely for the piano. In comparison with the massive keyboard sonorities of nineteenth century trios, Shostakovich's piano writing is transparent. Each hand is generally confined to a single line, with one hand doubling the other at one, two, three or four octaves. One would think the part would be easier for the pianist. No, it is not. Shostakovich himself played the piano part for the premier in Leningrad on November 14, 1944. Then the piece was banned between 1948 and 1953 until after Stalin's death.

- Notes by Rhonda Gowen

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