Program Notes

Divertimento in D major for String Quartet, K. 136
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Born January 27, 1756, in Salzburg.
Died December 5, 1791, in Vienna.

Composed in 1772.

A divertimento, at least according to the 1802 musical lexicon of German music theorist Heinrich Christoph Koch, is music that should be pleasing to the ear and doesn't need to stir the listener's emotions in any particular way. Divertimentos were usually light music, performed outdoors or in the background at dances and other social occasions, and often scored for a flexible ensemble of winds and strings.

In the winter of 1772, the 16-year-old W.A. Mozart was between tours in Italy. He had been writing operas for these trips, a very demanding activity even for a highly skilled young composer. Working on a light piece for strings would have provided a much-needed diversion—as pleasing to his mind and ear as the music ought to have been to a listener's. Inevitably, Mozart's compositional ambitions could not be contained by a nominally laid-back genre like the divertimento. The Divertimento in D major that he wrote that year sounds more like a staging ground for his later quartet and symphonic writing than something to put on while doing the dishes. Still, the labeling of the lowest part left open the possibility of being filled by a standing double bass player, suggesting the potential for outdoor performance.

The initial descending scale motif, undergirded by a highly energetic string accompaniment, is the basic idea that motivates much of the composition. Most of the music in the first movement is built out of this scale, with the exception of a surprising interlude in the brief development section, where noodling minor-key music in the second violin weaves around melancholy counterpoint in the other voices. The slow movement is perhaps proof that Mozart had a hard time writing music without emotional stakes. Rather than open his phrases with the first movement's triumphant downward scale motif, he closes his phrases with this descending gesture, giving it a tension and poignancy that perfectly balances the other melodies heard in the movement. The following *presto* opens with an ending: a childlike, soft cadence in D major. When the true *presto* sets in in the fifth measure, the descending scale has returned to its exultant character. Virtuosic streams that traverse the strings of all four instruments follow, leading the group to a quick and uplifting close.

Chacony in G minor for String Quartet (arr. Britten)
Henry Purcell
Born September 10, 1659, in London.
Died November 21, 1695, in London.

Composed c. 1678, arr. 1948, rev. 1963.

In 16th-century Spain, if a performer wished to scandalize members of the church, they might sing a "chacona," a lively song with occasionally bawdy lyrics. By the early 17th century, the "chacona" had become Spain's most popular dance, and by mid-century "ciacconas" and "chaconnes," instrumental or

vocal pieces that typically featured a continuous series of variations over a short, fixed harmonic progression, began to appear all over Italy and France. The form spread to Germany and eventually to England, where Henry Purcell wrote a number of successful pieces that followed this variation form. Among these was a 1678 work for viols and continuo, which he called “Chacony,” coining an English name for this approach to composition.

The bass voice establishes a fixed line at the outset that repeats consistently in one voice or another for almost the entire piece. Around that line, the melodies and harmonies vary, sometimes overlapping unevenly with the fixed bass progression in ways that drive the music forward. At a few brief moments, the group departs slightly from the bassline, but for the most part Purcell sticks to the rule, using new harmonies and chromatic melodic shapes to create a powerful arc with quite simple materials.

The British composer Benjamin Britten felt a strong affiliation with Purcell, not only because of their shared national identity but because of some similar stylistic sensibilities. The last movement of his Second String Quartet of 1945 was a massive, continuous variation set bearing the title of “Chacony,” an obvious allusion to Purcell’s example. In the same year, Britten wrote in a booklet accompanying his opera *Peter Grimes* that he wished to “restore to the musical setting of the English language a brilliance, freedom and vitality that have been curiously rare since the death of Purcell…. English writing for the voice has been dominated by strict subservience to logical speech-rhythms, despite the fact that accentuation according to sense often contradicts the accentuation demanded by emotional content.”

Britten’s string arrangement of Purcell’s Chacony is minimally invasive. He gives the original string lines directly to the two violins, viola, and cello, making very few alterations to Purcell’s notes and rhythms. However, Britten inserts a number of dynamic shapes, articulations, and character indications like “majestic,” “heavily,” “sadly,” and “cold.” Perhaps his aim with these performance instructions is akin to the changes he sought in English-language vocal composing: encouraging players who might otherwise make decisions based on some hesitant sense of logic to accentuate the notes on the page in ways that are in line with the powerful, emotional extremes he hears contained in this music.

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Quintet in G major for Two Violins, Viola, Cello, and Bass, Op. 77
Antonín Dvořák
Born September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves.
Died May 1, 1904, in Prague.

Composed in 1875.

When his *Slavonic Dances* were published on November 15, 1878, Dvořák became wildly famous overnight. But like many seemingly instant successes, his breakthrough was years in the making. He started his career as a performer: he spent nine years as principal violist in the Provisional Theatre in Prague (1862–71), and later served as organist at the Church of St. Vojtěch (1874–77). He composed mostly in secret while at the Provisional Theatre (“None but the friends who shared my apartments knew how much I wrote, tore up, and burnt.”), and ended his tenure there by announcing he was composing an opera. After a few bumps in the road and a complete re-write, the opera *King and Charcoal Burner* premiered at the Provisional Theatre on November 24, 1874. It must have been a

poignant milestone for Dvořák to present an opera at the theatre he had performed at for so long. Yet he was still struggling. He was well-known in Prague but virtually unknown outside Bohemia.

In the years after his first opera, Dvořák developed his mature style, steeped in the tradition of Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms with Slavonic influence mixed in, and always presented with his characteristically appealing melodies and natural rhythms. This quintet was one of the first of Dvořák's works in that style. Its first movement introduces the piece with the cello and bass in long, held notes before the other instruments join and casually find their places. Once the movement starts in earnest it sets the tone for a work of intricate interplay between the five instruments. The second and fourth movements are both based on melodies that could be pulled straight from exuberant Slavonic folk dances. The slow, third movement, in contrast, is heartfelt but almost meticulously poised, never overwrought, and climaxes in a surprising duet for violin and cello that shifts and reflects back all the movement's intriguingly beautiful qualities.

This quintet won a competition sponsored by the Prague-based Artistic Circle and was premiered on March 18, 1876 in Prague. However, it had to wait until 1888, when Dvořák was at the height of his fame, for publication. His publisher Simrock released it with the artificially high opus number of 77 to make it less obvious that it wasn't newly composed, a practice Dvořák hated. The published version also differed from the original. The original 1876 version had five movements, including an Intermezzo that Dvořák adapted from an earlier string quartet. He removed the Intermezzo in 1883 and published it under the title Notturno, leaving the quintet with the more traditional four movements that we know today.

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