

**TUESDAY EVENING CONCERT SERIES PRESENTS**  
**Dover Quartet with Haochen Zhang**  
**26 March 2024 at UVA's Old Cabell Hall**  
**Program Notes by Laurie Shulman © 2024**

**String Quartet in E-flat, K. 428**  
**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)**

In one of the most celebrated private musical gatherings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, four men convened one night in Vienna to play quartets. The violinists were Joseph Haydn and Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf, a Bohemian composer and violin virtuoso. The violist was young Wolfgang Mozart; the cellist Johann Baptist Vanhal, another native Bohemian who had studied composition with Dittersdorf. We know it occurred through the *Reminiscences* of the Irish tenor Michael Kelly, the original Don Curzio and Don Basilio in *Le Nozze di Figaro*. The Italian opera composer Giovanni Paisiello and the poet Giovanni Battista Casti – then Austria's poet laureate – were among the listeners. Oh, to have been a fly on the wall of such a gathering!

The sweetest fruit of Mozart and Haydn's friendship was not, of course, their music-making that evening (which was surely wondrous) but rather the rich exchange of ideas and influence that each derived from the other. The most famous and immediate example was Mozart's six string quartets dedicated to Haydn. Mozart composed them between late 1782 and early 1785, an unusually long time for him to labor over any composition.

It was worth the wait. The six quartets – confusingly known as Mozart's "Haydn" quartets because of their dedication – are all masterpieces of the first order and staples of the string quartet literature.

Mozart may have been indebted to Haydn, particularly the elder master's Opus 33

quartets, in this half dozen works, but they bear Mozart's own imprint nonetheless. The first hallmark occurs only three notes into the opening movement. A bold unison statement ascends the E-flat octave, establishing the key center, then immediately drops to A-natural, instead of A-flat. The interval is a tritone, the so-called *diabolus in musica* (the devil in music) and the most dissonant interval in tonal music. Mozart does *not* resolve it quickly, thereby restoring order. He makes us wait until the 12<sup>th</sup> measure before we hear a clear cadence in the main key of E-flat.

He has sent us a message: he will speak in chromaticism here— as he does throughout these six “Haydn” quartets. He uses chromaticism with subtlety, for expressive emphasis and color. By and large, the E-flat quartet is a sunny work. The slow movement is a standout for its combination of rich melody in the first violin *and* rich supporting accompaniment from the other three string players. Mozart understood the principles of equality inherent in good quartet writing. The *pesante* festivity of the minuet and the finale's jolly demeanor are both salutes to Haydn, whom Mozart both revered and loved.

### **Sonata No. 30 in E Major, Op. 109**

#### **Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

The year 1820 was emotionally chaotic for Beethoven. In autumn 1819 he had been removed as guardian of his adolescent nephew Karl, forcing him to relinquish custody to his sister-in-law Johanna. Beethoven appealed the decision in early January 1820. Three months later, he was reappointed co-guardian with Hofrat [Privy Councillor] Karl Peters, tutor to the children of Beethoven's patron Prince Lobkowitz.

Resolution of that difficult situation seemed to break a compositional logjam. Still, the E Major Sonata was the only significant piece Beethoven completed in 1820. He interrupted work on the *Missa Solemnis* when the Berlin publishing house of A. Schlesinger wrote to request three new piano sonatas. The commission restored Beethoven's productivity, which he would sustain nearly unabated until his death in 1827.

This sonata followed the oversized *Hammerklavier*, Op. 106, of 1817-18. In contrast to that notorious finger-buster, Op. 109 is filled with intimacy and warmth. Yet those qualities have their balance. Beethoven never strayed far from his architectural instincts. His intellect is present in the sonata's clear sense of formal organization and its contrapuntal devices.

The first movement is surprisingly brief: an economical four minutes. In discussing this sonata, William Kinderman writes of Beethoven's 'intense interest at this time with parenthetical structures that enclose musical passages within contrasting sections.' That translates to interruptions and startling shifts between animated music and *adagio* sections. The effect is not unlike a Baroque *fantasia*, resulting in a sense of improvisation. Such flexibility in his treatment of sonata form is a noteworthy trait of the late sonatas, paving the way toward romantic piano music.

Beethoven's scherzo is even more concise: barely two and one-half minutes of resolute, angry, disruptive music. Surprisingly, this *prestissimo* is a taut sonata-form structure. Beethoven is setting us up. Having ascertained that he has our full attention, he moves to the

emotional heart of the sonata, a set of double variations marked *mit der innigsten Empfindung* [with innermost feeling]. If we were not certain that this was the centerpiece of the sonata, sheer length would persuade us. The finale is more than twice as long as the previous two movements combined. More to the point is that it is a profound meditation, initially serene, presently ecstatic. The theme moves like a sarabande, another connection to Baroque thinking, as is Beethoven's reliance on a variety of contrapuntal devices. Biographer Marion Scott has noted the influence of Bach in the sonata's emphasis on counterpoint as a variation tool.

Charles Rosen, in his landmark study *The Classical Style*, offers a more philosophical insight to Beethoven's approach.

In many of the late variation sets (opp. 109, 111, 127, etc.) there is a progressive simplification as the variations proceed — not of the texture but of the conception of the underlying theme. . . . Beethoven tends to simplify as the texture becomes more complex. For this reason, his late variations give the impression that they are not so much decorating the theme as discovering its essence.

The six variations that follow Beethoven's heartfelt theme span a universe of emotions, capitalizing on the expressive contrast of which the piano is capable. First is a slow waltz that preserves the dignity of the theme. Among the variations that follow are a playful virtuoso *Allegro vivace* (Var. III) and a distinctly Bach-like *Allegro ma non troppo* (Var. V).

The movement culminates in the radiant sixth variation, which reestablishes the serene opening tempo. By means of an extended pedal point trill, introduced as an inner voice, then transferred from left hand to right, Beethoven somehow suspends us in midair. The extended gesture lifts us, bird-like, aloft to the realm of the sublime. Our heavenly destination is the restatement of the theme, now layered with significance because of the journey we have completed. Listeners familiar with Bach's *Goldberg Variations* may sense a connection to that

work in Beethoven's reprise of the theme with reinforced octaves in the bass.

Opus 109 reveals a distinctly private side of Beethoven. He achieves a spiritual ecstasy that clearly paved the way for the glorious heights of the late string quartets.

### **Piano Quintet in E-flat Major, Op. 44 (1842)**

#### **Robert Schumann (1810-1856)**

Robert and Clara Schumann were married in September, 1840, the day before Clara's 21st birthday. The ceremony took place after almost four years of prolonged hostility and opposition from Clara's father, the prominent piano pedagogue Friedrich Wieck, and against his will. Still, Schumann was elated about his marriage. His ebullience gave rise to a stream of compositional energy, as if there were no end to the music within him.

Today, Schumann's bipolar nature is well known. His manic/depressive disorder manifested itself in composition by an obsessive focus on one particular type of writing for a prolonged period. In the late 1830s, he had composed almost exclusively for solo piano. The year 1840 brought forth an outpouring of *Lieder*, including the important song cycles *Dichterliebe* and *Frauenliebe und Leben*; 1841 was a year of orchestral works.

In 1842 Schumann turned his attention to chamber music, producing the 3 string quartets, Op. 41, this evening's piano quintet, and the Piano Quartet Op. 47, also in E-flat. Schumann was

treading a new path for himself with these works. This was the composer of brilliant vignettes inspired by literary masterpieces and the writings of Jean-Paul Richter; the composer of *Carnaval* and *Faschingsschwank aus Wien*, of *Kreisleriana* and the *Davidsbundlertänze*. Schumann, the miniaturist *par excellence*, turned from the extra-musical associations which had dominated the music of his youth. Instead, he immersed himself in the study of counterpoint, particularly fugue, and the composition of absolute music. The first result of his new absorption was the three string quartets. They proved to be his only essay in the genre, but he profited from his fresh experience with them to combine the quartet ensemble with piano in his next chamber work, the Piano Quintet.

Schumann cannot truly be said to have "invented" the piano quintet as Mozart did the piano quartet. The 18th-century Italian Luigi Boccherini (1743-1805), who was active in the Spanish court, wrote a dozen works for the same instrumentation. They are little known today, and were almost certainly unknown to Schumann, whose expansion to the combination of piano plus string quartet was logical in light of his recent completion of the Op. 41 quartets. He was anxious to return to composing for the instrument he knew and loved best – and Clara's instrument. At the same time, he was still filled with ideas for the string quartet. By combining the two, he brought together his own considerable musical imagination with the varied sonorities of five players.

Clara was, of course, the pianist for whom Schumann wrote the work. She played its premiere, and incorporated it into her repertoire immediately, thereby contributing to its

popularity. The piano quintet rapidly became one of Schumann's best known compositions. Schumann's friend Mendelssohn played the second performance, and had an early hand in the reworking of the scherzo.

The Piano Quintet is one of Schumann's happiest inspirations in the realm of formally governed, abstract music. It shows a command of form and a discipline over his musical imagination that recurred infrequently in his remaining 14 years. The opening movement is a fine sonata-form structure, with both strong and lyrical themes. As one would expect, the piano plays a major role, functioning as a partner to the string quartet as a whole rather than as one of five individual components of the musical texture. Nevertheless the keyboard does not overshadow the string players, whose parts are written effectively and idiomatically. The movement is noble and strong, characterized by aggressive foursquare phrases and a compelling vitality throughout. Schumann demonstrates his mastery of song-like writing in the lovely slow movement. He casts this march as a rondo, with strongly contrasting episodes interrupting its tentative main idea.

Schumann's scherzo is dazzling. This whirlwind bravura *tour de force* is constructed, remarkably, of ascending and descending scale passages. Both its trios provide rhythmic contrast; the second in particular contains probably the most challenging technical writing for strings in the work.

The finale is one of the most extraordinary movements in the entire chamber music

literature. Schumann teases us with G minor before firmly grounding his musical material in the home tonality of E-flat Major. As in the first movement, he shows a gratifying command of form and musical matter throughout; the finale is a convincing sonata-rondo. But in this *Allegro ma non troppo* he saves his finest writing for last. In the splendid coda – another *fugato* – he not only concentrates his most technically secure contrapuntal writing, but also incorporates the main theme of the first movement. This coda bears proud testimony to his hard-won mastery of counterpoint. Schumann weaves expertly, bringing his quintet to a brilliant, unified, and satisfying close.