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Program Notes for CMSFW October 27, 2018 Concert
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“Masters of the Medium”

Quartettsatz, D. 703 (1820)
Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828)

Schubert's immortal B-minor symphony, the "Unfinished", is a cornerstone of the symphonic repertoire despite its truncated two-movement length. What many music lovers do not realize is that Schubert left dozens of compositions incomplete. This was particularly true during the late 'teens and early 1820s, a period during which he was growing more comfortable with the vocal medium and less comfortable with instrumental compositions. Most historians believe that Schubert was increasingly humbled by the Beethovenian model and lost momentum on a number of chamber and orchestral works.

The String Quartet in c-minor, called *Quartettsatz* ["Quartet movement"] by the Germans, falls into this category. Written in December 1820, it was apparently intended to be part of a larger work, for Schubert also sketched about 40 bars of a second movement, an *Andante* in A-flat major. But that movement remained incomplete, and if he did further work on this quartet, it has not survived. Why he left it incomplete is as much of a mystery as the "Unfinished" Symphony, for this sole movement is masterly.

Schubert had written no quartets since 1817. His early efforts in the genre -- about a dozen works between 1811 and 1814 -- were family affairs, literally. His brothers Ferdinand and

Ignaz played violin, Franz played viola, and Papa Schubert (Franz Theodor Florian) played cello in the family quartet. The comparative ease of the cello part in these early works suggests that Schubert's father was the weak link in the family quartet.

By contrast, the *Quartettsatz* has a sophisticated and technically demanding cello line. The stylistic change indicates that Schubert likely had a professional quartet in mind; however, no performance is documented during his lifetime. Unless it was played informally at a Schubertiade, the movement remained unperformed until 1868, four decades after the composer's death. Johannes Brahms owned the autograph manuscript for a while, and the piece was published in 1870 in Leipzig.

Quartettsatz is a stormy and turbulent movement, breaking from classic style in its adaptation of sonata form: true recapitulation of the *tremolando* opening does not recur until the very closing measures. Wild contrasts of mood ally the piece more with the Romantics than the classicists. To balance the brooding, unsettled power of the first idea is a second theme that has been variously compared to both Mozart and Irving Berlin (!). We will never know whether some personal crisis prompted this emotional outpouring. We can only regret that Schubert did not complete the quartet -- and temper that regret with gratitude that the *Quartettsatz* survived.

String Quartet No.3 “Coraggio”

George Tsontakis (b.1951)

George Tsontakis has long been recognized as one of America's most vibrant and gifted composers. His gifts were acknowledged early in his career. He was appointed artist faculty

composer at the Aspen Music Festival in 1976 – before he turned 25. As his reputation grew, recognition followed, including Fulbright and Guggenheim Fellowships and two Kennedy Center Friedheim awards, culminating in the 2005 Grawemeyer Award for his Violin Concerto No.2 (2003). The American Academy of Arts and Letters named him the fourth recipient of the Charles Ives Living from 2007 to 2009.

The awards and prizes are impressive and well deserved, for Tsontakis has a single-minded devotion to composition that has resulted in music of substance, originality, technical mastery, and humor. The quartet on this afternoon’s program reflects his diverse, distinctive musical language.

Tsontakis studied with Hugo Weisgall at Queens College and Roger Sessions at the Juilliard School. Overseas he worked with Franco Donatoni and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Since completing his formal education, he has accumulated a devoted group of colleagues and former students at Sarah Lawrence College and at Bard College, where he has been Distinguished Composer in Residence. After forty years, he remains a star on the Aspen Music Festival faculty.

With this quartet, Tsontakis moved from an atonal, intense style he described as “submerged in the seemingly inescapable malaise of our time.” In contrast, he has written that the Third Quartet:

. . .offers a certain exuberance and brightness, and optimism that might be based on our blindness – a momentary lapse into forgetfulness – to what surround us, or

else perhaps on the tenacious human spirit we have inherited, where even in the worst of times there is a taking of heart and welling up of courage.

Hence the subtitle: *Coraggio*. Modernist language makes startling switches, sometimes with allusions suggestive of Beethoven's quartets. These unanticipated shifts seize and hold audience attention. At a time when most American composers were still in thrall to serialist techniques, Tsontakis acknowledged and embraced tradition, what he called his musical inheritance: the work of the late classical masters and the stability of diatonic triadic harmonies. His navigation between disparate musical languages makes for fascinating listening.

The slow movement, *Misterioso*, has moments of heart-rending lyricism, while the finale is dominated by complex cross-rhythms. All three movements have connective tissue: a motive or family of motives that recur in varied guises. Tsontakis's understanding of strings comes through in his effective use of extended 'Bartókian' techniques, which also makes for gripping visual theatre. This is virtuoso writing.

Three Pieces for String Quartet

Erwin Schulhoff (1894-1942)

Czech-born Erwin Schulhoff was a protégé of Dvořák and a student of Reger and Debussy. He was a musician of remarkable versatility and stature in his day. He earned prizes in both piano and composition as a

student in Leipzig and Cologne, and went on to a successful career as a *jazz* performer! Between 1918 and 1938, his music was widely performed in Europe. Although the work we hear this evening is hardly revolutionary, Schulhoff allied himself with a number of *avant-garde* movements, including Dadaism and quarter-tone music. Schulhoff was one of the first to address the challenges of music "between" the pitches of the western piano, as developed by his contemporary Alois Hába. Schulhoff did not limit his radical causes to musical ones. He became a Communist and a naturalized Soviet citizen. Schulhoff was imprisoned by the Nazis when they invaded the Soviet Union in 1941. His Jewish heritage and communist affiliation were more than enough to force his incarceration. He died in the German concentration camp at Wülzburg, in Bavaria.

Schulhoff's 1923 *Five Pieces for String Quartet* essentially a neo-baroque dance suite for quartet. Each miniature adopts a different musical style. Schulhoff was no mere mimic, however, and the nationalities and dances of each movement are filtered through his personal compositional lens. The work was introduced in Salzburg at the International Society for New Music on 8 August, 1924. Its success encouraged Schulhoff to write the *First Quartet*.

In the original 1929 edition of *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, Erich Steinhard wrote of Schulhoff: "The distinguishing qualities of his style are humour, audacity, transparency, brilliance and grace." Eight decades later, the assessment of his music has altered, in part because of intense interest in Jewish composers who perished in the Holocaust. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (2001) identifies a stylistic shift beginning in the mid-1920s to a 'synthesis of avant-garde aggression and the continuing European mainstream tradition.' Czech music, in particular, made a strong presence felt in his original compositions.

All three of the pieces we hear are strongly flavored with the rhythms and inflections of Czech speech and dance, despite the more international sweep implied by Tango and Tarantella. In that respect, they show a strong kinship to the music of Leoš Janáček, whose work Schulhoff had studied in depth.

Quartet No. 8 in E minor, Op. 59, No.2

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Beethoven turned to the medium of the string quartet in 1804 after a hiatus of almost six years. The commission came from Count Andreas Kirillovich Rasumovsky, who had been Russian ambassador to the Austrian court since 1792. Immensely wealthy and cultured, Rasumovsky built a splendid residence in Vienna which he filled with a superb library and art collection. Rasumovsky was married to a sister-in-law of Prince Karl Lichnowsky, another important patron of Beethoven. A violinist himself, he maintained a household filled with music. From 1808 to 1816, he employed an in-house string orchestra that included many of Vienna's finest players, including the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh.

We know relatively little about Rasumovsky's commission, except that he apparently requested Beethoven to incorporate some Russian folk tunes into some string quartets. The three works Beethoven composed for him show astonishing growth from their predecessors, the six

quartets of Opus 18. Conceived on a vastly larger scale, their themes are broader and more extended, and a sense of spaciousness permeates each one.

A curious fact about all of Beethoven's compositions in the key of E, whether major or minor, is that he placed all movements in either the parallel major or minor, not choosing to travel to a more distantly related key for his inner movements. Clearly the tonality of E/e was riveting for him, demanding a measure of tonal unity not so binding in other keys. Within the broad confines of tonal centering, he sought variety of mood, of texture, of rhythm; at the same time, he succeeded in stretching the boundaries of tonal convention further than they had ever been challenged before.

The opening *Allegro* of Op. 59 No.2 is an anomaly. No sooner does Beethoven establish E minor in the first few measures than he echoes the opening phrase--in F! The sonata form journey to G major at the end of the exposition is at once conventional and iconoclastic. A pulsing undercurrent drives this movement, the most nervous and edgy of the Op. 59 set.

Beethoven marks the second movement, a *Molto adagio* in E major, with the instruction, "*Si tratta questo pezzo con molto di sentimento*" [This piece is to be played with great sentiment]. *Adagios* are unusual in Beethoven, and two of them occur in Op. 59. This one has a romantic story to accompany it. As relayed by Beethoven's contemporaries Carl Czerny and

Karl Holz (a member of the Schuppanzigh String Quartet), the inspiration for this movement came while Beethoven gazed at a night sky brilliant with stars; he was struck by the notion of "music for the spheres." Whether apocryphal or not, the tale lends a delightful, uncharacteristic programmatic aside to Beethoven's slow movement.

Count Rasumovsky's *thème russe* is incorporated into the third movement of this quartet, marked Allegretto but a scherzo for practical purposes. The theme, "*Slava Bogu no Nebe, Slava!*" is familiar from the coronation scene in Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov* and in a number of works by Rimsky-Korsakov, but Beethoven's adaptation came, of course, upwards of a full century beforehand. Double repetition of both the minor and trio sections, specified by the composer in the score, distinguish the movement.

Ambiguous tonality introduces the finale. The key signature and tradition tell us it will be in E minor. Beethoven goes to some lengths to establish C major in our ears, much in the same way that Schumann flirts with G minor (instead of E-flat, the home tonality) at the beginning of his finale in the Piano Quintet. Nervousness and uncertainty, recalled from the first movement, resurface here, underscoring the high-strung character of the entire quartet. Compact and somewhat abrupt in its comparative brevity, this second Opus 59 quartet leaves one practically gasping for breath.