Chamber Music Society of Fort Worth presents
Atrium Quartet 25th anniversary concert
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Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2026

String Quartet in D Minor, K. 421
Wolfgang Amadè Mozart (1756-1791)

Mozart probably met Joseph Haydn in December 1781. It was the start of a remarkable friendship that lasted until Mozart's death ten years later. The two exerted a powerful mutual influence, with elements of each of their craft leaving an imprint on the other's compositions. Nowhere in Mozart's musical output is this more evident than in the set of six string quartets he dedicated to Haydn. Mozart was asked, when finishing the set, why he had chosen to dedicate them to Haydn. He responded, "Because I consider it my duty. It was from Haydn that I learned to write quartets."

Composed between 1782 and 1785 — an exceptionally long time for Mozart, who usually composed with enviable ease and often with lightning speed — these so-called Haydn quartets constitute six of the ten great, mature Mozart string quartets. With the possible exception of the famous G minor Piano Quartet, K. 478, they are arguably his best known chamber music. Part of what makes them unusual is the autograph scores, which reveal how many changes Mozart made in his music. He took great care with these works.

There is a story, possibly apocryphal, that Mozart composed the D minor quartet during the summer of 1783, when Constanze was delivering their first child. Irrespective of that

report's accuracy, Mozart is always saying something important when he writes in D minor: think of *Don Giovanni*, the Piano Concerto, K.466, and the Fantasia for Solo piano, K. 397: all intensely expressive and dramatic works. This piece, the only one in minor mode among Mozart's last ten quartets, packs considerable emotional wallop, in part because of the almost unrelieved tension (Alexander Hyatt King calls it "nervous melancholy") created by such a preponderance of D minor. No major mode codas compromise the seriousness of the outer movements. Extreme chromaticism underscores their dark expression. Surely this is the early manifestation of musical romanticism! The first movement's triple stops [three strings sounded together] in both violin parts are quite unusual in Mozart.

The second movement Andante is in F major, which is often a pastoral key. This slow movement, however, is no repository of unclouded lyricism. Hesitations and broken phrases lend it a breathless, tentative quality that interrupts the customary lilt of *siciliana* rhythm. Minor chords seem to lurk around every corner, and we never settle into unruffled serenity. A descending chromatic bass line in the minuet lends a strangely Baroque flair to the third movement; it half sounds like something Bach might have written. Once again, the chromaticism is a major component of the tension. The central trio section, a violin solo over pizzicato lower strings, reinforces the Baroque flavor, with a reverse dotted rhythm dominating the whole.

Mozart's finale, another *siciliana* in dotted rhythm, surely bears some indebtedness to Haydn's finale — also variations in D minor, also in 6/8 meter — in the Op. 33 No. 5 ("Fifths") quartet, which Mozart knew and probably played. A generation later, Franz Schubert, in his

turn, must have studied Mozart's K. 421 when he composed the variations to his own D minor quartet, "Death and the Maiden."

Quartet No. 7 in F-sharp Minor, Op. 108
Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Generally speaking, Shostakovich expressed his more public thoughts through his symphonies, reserving his more personal and private musings for the string quartets. The Seventh Quartet is indisputably a personal work.

The composer was married three times: first to Nina Varzar, then later briefly to Margarita Kainova (1956-59), and finally in 1962 to Irina Supinskaya. He dedicated this quartet to the memory of his first wife, Nina. The composer had lived with her from 1929 until her death in 1954. She was the mother of his children Galya (b.1936) and Maxim (b.1938). The quartet is the briefest of his fifteen, with three movements compressed into a pithy thirteen minutes. It has been called his shortest masterpiece.

What, if anything, does this brilliant and polished quartet tell us about the composer or the woman he apparently mourned and honored in its pages? It dates from 1960, the year of the Eighth Quartet. That frankly autobiographical work expressed Shostakovich's horror at the atrocities of war. In September 1960, Shostakovich was accepted by the composers' union as a candidate member of the Communist Party. He had completed the Seventh Quartet in

March; the Beethoven Quartet played the premiere in May at the Leningrad Philharmonic. Consider the following quotations from Shostakovich's writings, both published in 1960.

> I am glad that I work for the composers' organization of our country and represent the most progressive, most humane music in the world, that I represent Soviet culture. I hope to use my work to justify my holding the high title of Member of the Communist Party.
>
> *Pravda*, 15 September 1960

> My work has always been done under the guidance of the Communist Party, whose instructions I considered binding, and tried to fulfil to the best of my abilities.
>
> *Literature I Zhizn*, 2 October 1960

Certainly there is nothing in the Seventh Quartet to indicate that he was composing under anyone's instructions. The piece has no programmatic associations beyond certain theories that it is in some way a musical portrait of Nina. According to Shostakovich's friends and biographers Dmitri and Ludmilla Sollertinsky, by the time he undertook work on this quartet:

> . . . the bitterness of loss had softened. What remained were unclouded memories, regret, and sadness. Obviously, this was a leave-taking: Shostakovich was bidding farewell to one who had shared his life for more than 20 years.

Whether audited as requiem, loving tribute, or absolute music, the quartet makes for fascinating listening and raises more questions than it answers. Shostakovich demonstrates a

masterly understanding of string playing, the quartet medium, and the demands of quartet form. The first movement, dominated by the rhythmic motive of an anapest [short short LONG], is a sonata structure with truncated development. The anapest motive suggests the knocking on the door of the KGB in the middle of the night, a sound that would have struck terror into the heart of any Soviet citizen in the 1930s or 1940s.

The slow movement, a tripartite *Lento*, is played with muted strings throughout. The descending four notes of the violin line that recur throughout the movement are a quotation from the Russian Mass for the dead. All Russians would have recognized this music and divined its significance, especially since sacred music was forbidden under the Soviet regime. In any case, Shostakovich was making another gesture toward his deceased wife. If we wish to perceive grief in this work, here is its most funereal manifestation.

The quartet concludes with a fiery, argumentative Allegro that borrows elements from scherzo, slow introduction, and fugue. Shostakovich resolves the frenzy with unexpected quietude, calming the strings to an Allegretto dance that alludes to the music of the opening movement. (Listen for the anapest 'knocking.') He concludes the quartet in rich F-sharp major, with *pizzicato* cello emphasizing the unanticipated ray of sunlight. But are we really intended to accept this 'happy ending' at face value? As Ian MacDonald has noted:

> Conceivably the secret of the Seventh Quartet is known to the Shostakovich family and will one day be made public. For now, its crystalline precision and intimate eloquence are sufficient in themselves.

String Quartet No. 2 in F Major, Op. 22
Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Beginning in 1869 with the composition of *Romeo and Juliet*, Tchaikovsky was, for a while, under the influence of the nationalist composer Mily Balakirev. He forged friendships with other members of Balakirev's circle, the group that became known as the *kouchka* or "mighty handful." The closeness was not long-lived, and ultimately Tchaikovsky branched off in a different direction. During the early 1870s, however, his relationship with the nationalist group flourished. In his memoirs, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov recalled his first meeting with Tchaikovsky.

> When on a visit to St. Petersburg, he readily dropped in on us. His visits often coincided with our musical gatherings. One one visit, to our usual question about what he had composed, he replied that he had just finished his Second Quartet in F major. We begged him to acquaint us with it and, after excusing himself briefly, he played it [at the piano]. Everyone liked the quartet very much. Several years later Tchaikovsky ceased playing his own compositions anywhere.

A distinguished group of string players introduced the quartet in January 1874 at a private musicale at the home of Nikolai Rubinstein. The ensemble included Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, the cellist for whom Tchaikovsky later wrote the "Rococo" Variations. The music critic and Moscow Conservatory professor Nikolai Dmietrievich Kashkin was among the guests. He recalled that Anton Rubinstein (Nikolai's brother), "with his usual bluntness declared that the style was not that of chamber music and that he could not understand the new piece." Kashkin, the other guests, and the performers were very enthusiastic about the quartet. Always sensitive to criticism, Tchaikovsky was wounded by Rubinstein's comments. Rubinstein remained unsupportive of Tchaikovsky's music, causing the composer to doubt his

abilities. The Second Quartet, however, gained more friends at its first public performance in Moscow two months later. Tchaikovsky dedicated it to Grand Duke Constantine Nikolayevich.

Brevity was not Tchaikovsky's strong suit. All his important chamber compositions — the three string quartets, the piano trio, and the string sextet *Souvenir de Florence* — are substantial works. The Second Quartet, which clocks in at about thirty-six minutes, has particularly expansive first and slow movements. It opens with one of the composer's most extraordinary musical gestures: a chromatic slow introduction as mysterious and jarring as the beginning of Mozart's "Dissonant" Quartet in C Major, K. 465. Can these grating string quartet sonorities really be music by the same composer as the ever-popular *Andante cantabile*? Why these odd cadenza-like flights of fancy from the first violin? If nothing else, the composer succeeds in grasping our attention. As Colin Mason has drily observed, "Having cleared his throat, Tchaikovsky gives us something more interesting." The balance of the movement includes thematic material based on Russian folk songs that link this work decisively to the nationalist movement, at least for this brief segment of Tchaikovsky's career. Their popular character resurfaces elsewhere in the quartet.

The second movement scherzo is set in D-flat, a somewhat unusual key for strings and for a quartet whose home tonality is F major. Rhythmically, too, Tchaikovsky is somewhat adventuresome, mixing 6/8 and 9/8 meter, a ploy that sometimes gives the overall pulse a lopsided feeling of 7/4. While this meter may seem irregular to us, it is not uncommon in Central and Eastern European folk music. Its use in this movement strengthens the Russian character of the quartet. The central trio section — another tonality journey, this time to the

upper third: A major — is a waltz with an uncharacteristic emphasis on the second beat. The segment sounds as if it might have come from Borodin's pen.

Tchaikovsky's *Andante ma non tanto* is generally regarded to be the finest of the four movements. In rondo form preceded by an impassioned introduction, its recurrent music is dominated by a falling fourth motive. The movement builds to a surprisingly powerful climax that approaches orchestral sonorities. The quartet closes with an *Allegro con moto* whose repetitive rhythmic patterns and sequences are easily identifiable as Tchaikovsky. The brisk unison opening provides material for the entire movement, culminating in a fugue and a lively coda.