Chamber Music Society of Fort Worth presents
Atrium String 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."

String 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 1955. 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 (String Quartet No. 8). 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. 3 in E-flat Minor, Op. 30

Pyort Ilich Tchaikovsky (1841-1893)

The elegiac piano trio composed *in memoriam* was an important subgenre that flourished in Central and Eastern Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. Smetana wrote his G Minor Trio, Op.15 after his favorite daughter fell victim to scarlet fever when she was only four. Tchaikovsky composed his monumental Piano Trio, Op. 50 in memory of Nikolai Rubinstein in 1882. Dvořák composed his Piano Trio in F Minor, Op. 65 in 1883 on the heels of his mother's death. Anton Arensky composed two trios, Op. 32 in D Minor (1894) and Op. 73 in F Minor (1905) that fall into this category,

and there are some lesser-known works by the Czech composer Josef Förster (1859-1951) that are consistent in character. The young Sergei Rachmaninoff composed his *Trio elégiaque,* Op.9 upon learning of Tchaikovsky's death in 1893. These works share minor mode, a direct response to death and grief, and an impassioned spirit that gives voice to emotions from the depths of the soul.

Fewer examples exist in the string quartet literature, but Tchaikovsky's third and final quartet was conceived in the same vein. He composed it in response to the death of Ferdinand Laub (1832-1875), a Czech violinist who had been Tchaikovsky's colleague at Nikolai Rubinstein's Moscow Conservatory for ten years at the time of his death. Laub had played first violin in the premieres of Tchaikovsky's first two quartets, and the composer considered Laub to be "the best violinist of our time." The quartet was completed in February 1876 and was first performed at the Moscow Conservatory on 18 March 1876. It foreshadows both Tchaikovsky's own *Trio élégiaque* and the Sixth Symphony (*Pathétique)*.

By any measure, this is a substantial work, clocking in at a generous thirty-five minutes. Though chamber music was not Tchaikovsky's strong suit, his Third Quartet shows significant growth over the first two (despite the ubiquitous popularity of the First Quartet's slow movement, aka *Andante cantabile*). The thematic material is richer, and Tchaikovsky demonstrates a more secure command of musical form.

A slow introduction, marked *Andante sostenuto,* precedes a spacious sonata form. The principal themes are tinged with sadness. As writer Paul Griffiths has noted, the music seems more anchored in B-flat major than the stated tonality of E-flat major (a decidedly problematic key for string players). Nevertheless, the extended introduction sounds melancholy and has the character of a funeral march. The switch to *Allegro moderato* ushers in a waltz that seems lifted from one of Tchaikovsky's ballet scores. Recurrent triplet figures and a liberal use of hemiola (rhythmic displacement that briefly superimposes duple meter in a triple meter passage) provide rich material for Tchaikovsky's lengthy development. The *Andante sostenuto* music returns to close this lengthy movement.

By contrast, the witty *Allegretto vivo e scherzando* is tightly woven and compressed to its bare essence. Rapid sixteenth notes skitter about hither and yon, tossed between and among the four players (listen for an artful descending arpeggio). Tchaikovsky's concise trio section barely casts a shadow on the merriment.

The *Andante funebre e doloroso* is the quartet's emotional center. Muted strings further darken this funeral march, which focuses closely on the mournful key center of E-flat minor. An impassioned climax does not mitigate the lament. A tender interlude in E major lifts the mood, but the relief is short-lived. Tchaikovsky's letters report that this movement elicited tears at its first performance. Seventeen years later, it was played at memorial concerts in his memory in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Kharkov.

As if determined to eradicate the atmosphere of mourning, the finale is downright rambunctious. The form is a rondo, now in the cheerful key of B-flat major. Tchaikovsky's dance-like themes seem lifted straight out of a collection of Ukrainian folk tunes. He develops them with unflagging energy. Only a brief reminiscence toward the end recalls the elegy, then a brief coda races to the final chords.