Chamber Music Society of Fort Worth presents
CMSFW Ensemble
Saturday 21 November 2026 Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2026

String Trio in C Minor, Op. 9 No. 3
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Beethoven composed for virtually every musical genre and standard instrumental combination, enriching the literature every step of the way. Three areas in which his contribution towers above all his contemporaries are symphony, piano sonata, and string quartet. Symphonies were the accepted vessel of orchestral music in the late eighteenth century (witness Beethoven's most important models, Mozart and especially Haydn, who wrote extensively as symphonists). To the young Beethoven, piano sonatas came more naturally. He was a keyboard virtuoso whose reputation initially developed more from his pianism than from his compositional talent.

The string quartet was another matter altogether. Beethoven wisely approached this ultimate form of chamber music with trepidation. He regarded the mature quartets of his teacher Haydn, and those of Mozart, with awe and respect, laboring for several years before he released his first set of quartets, Opus 18, published in 1801. Quartets eventually became his primary chamber music interest; indeed, the late quartets (Opp. 127-135) absorbed him during the last four years of his life, almost to the exclusion of everything else.

Although Beethoven received instruction on violin as a child and played into his early twenties, he was not so accomplished a string player as he was a pianist. Consequently, he eased

his way gradually into writing for strings. The string trio, to some extent an outgrowth of the eighteenth-century divertimento or serenade, was an excellent proving ground. He published an early trio in E-flat as Opus 3; the piece was probably written before 1794, but Beethoven was still proud enough of it to present it to the Viennese public. He did the same with the Serenade in D, Op. 8 for string trio, composed in 1796-1797. The crowning glory of these pre-Opus18 efforts is the three trios of Opus 9, which followed in 1798. In his dedication to Count Johann Georg von Browne, Beethoven called them "the best of his works," and most critics agree that they were the finest he had written up to that time.

String trios present compositional challenges. By definition, their texture will be sparser than that of a string quartet, though of course it is possible to achieve four or more pitches sounding simultaneously by means of double-stopping. Each instrument is exposed and takes an aggressive role in terms of delivering material. The three trios of Opus 9 are all four-movement sonata structures, demonstrating Beethoven's firm command of form.

Like all Beethoven's compositions in C minor, this one is fraught with intensity and drama. The first movement is filled with surprising modulations that look forward to a more daring nineteenth-century harmonic vocabulary. In the C major *Adagio con espressione,* Beethoven's rich sonorities belie the thinness implied by string trio texture. Here we have the operatic Beethoven, loosening the reins on his players' improvisatory urges. With the exception of the piano sonatas, there are no examples among his early works in which Beethoven achieves such emotional depth in a slow movement. This one is exceptional and justifies the composer's pride in these works.

In the last two movements, the grim implications of C minor are almost unrelieved although the scherzo is a technical display piece. Even the trio section is shadowed, clouding the boundaries between major and minor mode. The finale is another sonata-form movement, crisp and concise. As Maynard Solomon has noted, the entire work "[strives] for the sense of inevitability and logic which characterizes Beethoven's later symphonic C minor projects."

Piano Quintet (2017)
Pierre Jalbert (b.1967)

Pierre Jalbert's music makes a welcome return to CMSFW with this afternoon's Piano Quintet, the premiere of which was a highlight of this organization's thirtieth anniversary season. Jalbert's quintet, whose instrumentation matches the iconic ensemble of the Shostakovich Quintet we hear after intermission, was a consortium commission. The co-commissioners were the Arizona Friends of Chamber Music and La Jolla Music Society. The first performance took place at the Tucson Winter Chamber Music Festival on 19 March 2017. CMSFW presented the Texas premiere in April 2018 and is pleased to be revisiting this work.

During the past three decades, Jalbert has quietly and steadily made his way into the ranks of America's most prominent composers. Focusing primarily on instrumental music, he brings to his compositions a refined sense of color and impressive handling of instrumental resources.

Jalbert's family came from Quebec; however, he was born in New Hampshire and grew up in Vermont. He holds degrees from Oberlin Conservatory and the University of Pennsylvania, where his principal composition teacher was George Crumb. Since 1996, Jalbert has been Professor of Composition and Theory at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music in Houston. From 2002 to 2005, Jalbert served as Composer-in-Residence with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. He has graciously provided the following note.

> My Piano Quintet consists of four contrasting movements. The first movement, entitled 'Mannheim Rocket,' is a modern take on the 18th-century musical technique in which a rising figure speeds up and grows louder. Marked 'Furioso,' the movement is gradually filled with rising scalar figures which build in volume and finally 'launch' into space with ethereal string harmonics. At this point, the music becomes almost static, though the inner rhythm continues.
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> The second movement, entitled 'Kyrie,' is marked 'Still, chant-like.' The principal idea, stated between first violin and viola, is a chromatically transformed chant-like motive. It also features a long, lyrical cello line, made up exclusively of natural harmonics, emphasizing the non-tempered ('out of tune') 7th and 11th partials.
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> The third movement is a scherzo in which the strings and piano sometimes alternate and imitate each other, reacting to each other's gestures, and at other times, combine and synchronize to produce a more blended sound. A short Trio-like section appears before the return of the scherzo music.
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> The last movement, 'Pulse,' is made up of perpetually moving 8th notes, sometimes harmonically static but always pushing forward. The work is interrupted twice with short, freer sections but always returns to its pulse-oriented nature.

Jalbert acknowledges that he tends to write virtuosic piano parts, because piano is his primary instrument. Nevertheless, he strives to ensure that every player has something important to say. He describes his fast music — the quintet's outer movements — as having an underlying pulsation that drives it, whereas in slower music he strives for an ethereal mood where time

seems to stand still. To this should be added Jalbert's sense of sonic variety and wry wit, which surface in his puckish scherzo.

Piano Quintet in G Minor, Op. 57 (1940)

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

The Shostakovich Piano Quintet is a rare, thought-provoking work. Even a first hearing leaves listeners with the uncanny sense that they already know this work well and that they have heard something significant. At the same time, one is struck with the quintet's originality; nothing sounds hackneyed, and Shostakovich's score comes across as fresh and immediate.

Shostakovich composed it during summer 1940, shortly before the Nazi invasion forced the Soviet Union into the Second World War. The composer played the premiere in Moscow on 23 November 1940 with members of the Beethoven Quartet. (Its members were lifelong friends; they also premiered thirteen of Shostakovich's fifteen string quartets.) Critical and popular reaction to the new piece was electric. The quintet was immediately hailed as a masterpiece. It earned Shostakovich the Stalin Prize of 100,000 rubles; at the time, this was the largest sum of money ever awarded for a piece of music.

The quintet has five movements, but it may also be perceived in three large sections, because the first two and last two movements are played without pause. These outer sections

make a centerpiece of the middle scherzo, creating a sort of arch form of the complete work.

Within the five movements, Shostakovich pays homage to many of his musical predecessors. The prelude and fugue that begin the work hark back to the Baroque era. Dance-like and fleet, the scherzo recalls the breathtaking and magical third movements of Beethoven and Mendelssohn. Shostakovich's intermezzo, though in some ways the most individual of the five movements, manages to take a simultaneous bow to J.S. Bach and to Paul Hindemith. And the finale, with its delicate diatonic grace, is quite Mozartean.

Despite this apparent melting pot of musical styles, the Piano Quintet is well-unified and closely knit. One of the ways in which Shostakovich accomplishes this unity is texture. Only rarely does he employ the full sonority of the quintet. Because of that, when all five performers do participate, the composer achieves extra emphasis and emotional power. Many momentary duets and trios occur; it is as if he wished to give each player a special opportunity to listen to the others. This is music as much for the performers as it is for the listeners.

The piano is treated polyphonically for most of the quintet. In the fugue, Shostakovich temporarily increases his voicing to six by using each of the pianist's hands for a separate fugue entrance. In all four movements, the pianist frequently plays unisons at a distance of one or two octaves, rather than chords, which might compromise the balance. By treating the piano in this

linear fashion — a technique characteristic of Shostakovich, especially in chamber music — he focuses attention on melody and the interplay of polyphonic lines. The piano becomes an extension of the string instruments.

A prevalence of slow tempi in the quintet throws a bright spotlight on the central scherzo. Curiously, though this movement is generally taken at breakneck speed, it is only marked *Allegretto*. Shostakovich apparently wished to maintain a sense of moderation and restraint throughout. His concluding movement fulfills this intent admirably. Its pastoral simplicity and direct terms show startling grace. There is humor as well. According to biographer Victor Seroff, one of the finale's themes is the traditional tune used by Russian circuses to herald the arrival of the clowns. Philosophical, witty and uplifting, the finale is music for the soul.