

Ariel Quartet

Gershon Gerchikov, violin
Alexandra Kazovsky, violin
Jan Grüning, viola
Amit Even-Tov, cello

with

Ilya Shterenberg, clarinet

Quartet No. 8 in C minor, Op. 110

Dmitri Shostakovich
(1906-75)

Largo
Allegro molto
Allegretto
Largo
Largo

Clarinet Quintet in A major, K. 581

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756-91)

Allegro
Larghetto
Menuetto
Allegretto con variazioni

- INTERMISSION -

Quartet in D minor, D. 810, "Death and the Maiden"

Franz Schubert
(1797-1828)

Allegro
Andante con moto
Scherzo. Allegro molto
Presto

Ariel Quartet is represented by MKI Artists; One Lawson Lane, Suite 320, Burlington, VT 05401.

Recordings: Avie Records

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Program Notes

Quartet No. 8 in C minor, Op. 110

Dmitri Shostakovich

By 1960 the 'Thaw' following Stalin's death had improved the outward circumstances of Shostakovich's life, and he was honored at home and allowed to travel abroad to perform and receive additional honors. The price was a requirement that he perform many duties for the official music establishment. In April 1960, at the personal invitation of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, Shostakovich was elected head of the Russian Composers' Union. He was also pressured to join the Communist Party, a step he had avoided during all his earlier years of torment. He did this without telling his family and friends, and when it became public the intense shame of his capitulation led to a nervous breakdown in June 1960. "I've been a whore, I am and always will be a whore," he told his old friend Isaak Glikman with tears streaming down his face.

After his recovery, Shostakovich traveled to Dresden in July on assignment to write the score for a film about the fire bombing of that city during World War II. Instead, still filled with anguish and self-pity, he composed his scathing Quartet No. 8 in the short space of three days. He wrote to a close friend, "However much I tried to draft [the film score], I just couldn't do it.... I reflected that if I die some day, it is hardly likely anyone will write a work dedicated to my memory. So I decided to write one myself." Another close friend later said the despondent composer meant the Eighth Quartet to be his final work. Ever mindful of the authorities, when Shostakovich returned from Dresden he publicly dedicated the quartet "to the victims of war and fascism"

The Eighth Quartet is written in five movements played without pause. The quartet is unified by the composer's musical signature, the up-and-down pattern of the notes D E-flat C B, spelling DSCH for Dmitri SChostakowitsch in German musical notation. Shostakovich keeps himself present throughout the entire quartet by weaving this four-note theme into the musical fabric of each movement and also by including many quotations from his earlier compositions. The first movement opens with the DSCH theme played first in the cello and then repeated by all the instruments in turn. Other musical statements are heard, some borrowed from his First and Fifth Symphonies, but the DSCH theme dominates the subdued first movement. The frenzied second movement based on variants of the DSCH theme proceeds to an impassioned quotation of the Jewish-sounding melody from his Second Piano Trio. In the third movement the DSCH theme is transformed into an ironic, grotesque waltz. Quotations from other works of the composer appear, including the opening bars of his Cello Concerto as the movement ends.

A loud three-note rhythm opens the fourth-movement Largo, described by some commentators as a fateful knocking. A sad revolutionary song, "Tormented by Harsh Captivity," is quoted extensively, and the character of the music changes magically as a love song from the composer's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* is played in the high register by the cello. The fifth movement, another Largo, returns to the DSCH theme in the form of an extended fugue, with a counter-subject again quoting *Lady Macbeth*. A dying ending ("*morendo*") completes the composer's musical memorial.

Clarinet Quintet in A major, K. 581

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Mozart was the first composer to free the clarinet from its original trumpet-like role and bring out its softer expressive qualities. In June 1789 he set aside work on string quartets for King Frederick William of

Prussia to write a clarinet quintet for a gathering of Vienna's Society of Musicians. Anton Stadler, a virtuoso performer and fellow member of Mozart's Masonic lodge, played the clarinet part; Mozart played viola. Mozart not only admired Stadler's skill but also was captivated by the extended lower range of his modified clarinet.

Stadler was something of a rogue—he would later lose his position in the court orchestra and leave his wife to live with his mistress. He treated Mozart shabbily, borrowing sizeable sums that he could not repay and adding to Mozart's chronic financial distress. Somehow this did not alter Mozart's warm feelings for Stadler, whose name Mozart himself appended to the title of the Clarinet Quintet.

A noble melody in the strings opens the Quintet. The clarinet first comments briefly then joins the strings to elaborate and lead the music forward. Twice more string voices present new themes and the clarinet answers. This wealth of melodic material continues in solo arias and tightly linked ensemble passages. The second movement *Larghetto* is a long, soulful aria in the clarinet accompanied by muted strings. Mozart achieves an ethereal blend of the five instruments as the clarinet pours out what he called its "soft, sweet breath."

The unusual *Menuetto* has two trio sections, the first for strings alone and the second for all instruments. In contrast to the good-natured minuet, the minor-key first trio is sighing and tinged with melancholy. After repetition of the minuet, the second trio is completely different in character, this time a peasant dance in which the clarinet becomes, in the words of Mozart commentator Alfred Einstein, "the rustic instrument that it was in Alpine provinces."

The last movement is a theme and six variations. In some variations the theme is embellished to display the clarinet's athletic abilities, while in others the theme is reworked to show its different moods and textures. During the third variation's plaintive viola lament, the clarinet murmurs softly in low tones. After Mozart lingers in the somber fifth-variation *Adagio*, he closes the Quintet with a sprightly, joyful final variation.

Quartet in D minor, D. 810, "Death and the Maiden"

Franz Schubert

The son of a poor schoolteacher, Schubert received musical instruction from his father, an amateur cellist, and piano instruction from an older brother. When he was eleven, he became a choirboy in the royal chapel of the Austrian Emperor, where he received his only formal musical training from 1808 to 1813. After a few years as a schoolteacher, which he disliked intensely, he left in 1817 and drifted into a bohemian existence in Vienna among other poor, struggling artists. During the remaining eleven years of his life, Schubert lived within a small circle of adoring friends who affectionately named him *Schwammerl* ("Little Mushroom"). Although Schubert's music failed to bring in much money and his attempts to obtain a court position were unsuccessful, his friends supported him and he was able to devote himself to composing.

Schubert's music received little public attention during his lifetime. In March 1828 he presented a concert of his own music that filled the hall to overflowing and was an artistic and financial success. Unfortunately, this high point in an otherwise uneventful career came after his health was already in serious decline. A few months later he became bedridden, and on November 14, 1828 he died at age 31.

The String Quartet in D Minor, “Death and the Maiden” stands out as one of the most acclaimed among the astonishing number and variety of Schubert’s compositions. The quartet is subtitled “Death and the Maiden” because he borrowed the theme for the second movement from his 1817 song of the same name. The short song tells of death coming with gentle, soothing words to claim the life of a young girl (“Be of good cheer...My arms in soft sleep shall contain you”).

The quartet opens with a tense, forceful motif. Its prominent triplet figure is a unifying element, reappearing throughout the movement in passages of forceful energy as well as briefer lyrical ones. In the somber second movement, Schubert uses the theme from his song as the foundation on which to build a set of five variations. The theme consists of a simple repeated rhythmic pattern with minimal melodic and harmonic movement, allowing the composer to add musical complexity and new expressive content in the ensuing variations.

The Scherzo opens with a fierce syncopation, and the rhythmic drive does not slacken through the entire first part. There is an abrupt change of character in the tranquil trio, and the Scherzo is repeated to end the movement. Although the Presto finale starts with a bleak unison, the high-speed rhythmic pattern propels the movement forward through several climaxes of increasing complexity, ending in a brilliant *prestissimo* coda.

Schubert’s “Death and the Maiden” Quartet was composed in 1824 and first performed in the home of friends in 1826. It was published in July 1831, nearly three years after Schubert’s death.

--notes by Robert Strong