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THE CHAMBER ARTS SOCIETY OF DURHAM PRESENTS**



CUARTETO CASALS

SAT, NOV 7
VIRTUAL PERFORMANCE

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PROGRAM

String Quartet No. 8
in C minor, op. 110

- I. Largo
- II. Allegro molto
- III. Allegretto
- IV. Largo
- V. Largo

Dmitri Shostakovich
(1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 8 in E minor,
op. 59, no. 2

- I. Allegro
- II. Molto adagio
- III. Allegretto
- IV. Finale. Presto

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

SHOSTAKOVICH: QUARTET NO. 8 IN C MINOR, OP. 110

On the one hand, the eighth quartet is a piece dedicated to “the victims of fascism and war;” the composer states this plainly at the top of the score. His motivations need not be questioned: though he’d lived through the Second World War in relative safety, he was a witness to tragedies affecting numerous friends, loved ones, and communities close to his heart. Additionally, the Soviet government was constantly peering over his shoulder, threatening to do much more, and occasionally following through. Suffice it to say that Dmitri Shostakovich had much to offer on behalf of those felled by state oppression.

But on the other, the eighth quartet is profoundly personal. Written over three days in the summer of 1960, it was born while Shostakovich was suffering from severe physical and mental health problems, including depression and suicidal thoughts. Though these issues may have been tied to broader concerns, the music itself most clearly positions its composer as its subject. The quartet is based entirely on a four-note motif, heard right at the beginning: D, E-flat, C, B. In the German system of musical notation, these pitches translate to D, Es, C, H; when sounded out-loud, they form a quite literal sonification of the composer’s initials (D.Sch.) The motif is used prolifically, obsessively, and conspicuously throughout the work, along with quotations from several of the composer’s earlier works. All of this plainly places Shostakovich himself at the center of the musical discourse.

Can it be, then, that the piece is about both large-scale oppression and one man’s state of mind? Was Shostakovich attempting to position himself as a representative of the oppressed? Must self-reference be regarded as introspection? Multiple readings are possible, many have been put into print, and none is necessarily more correct than the others. In this way, the piece is an object lesson in the hazards of viewing any work purely through one lens, whether it be based on the composer’s statements or biography. (Composers can be tricky that way.) What remains certain, though, is that this is a piece of troubles — troubles large and small, global and intimate.

These troubles are explored over five interconnected movements, all played without breaks. An air of serious contemplation is encouraged by the first movement; its *Largo* tempo marking, contrapuntal texture, chromatic (though tonal) melodic writing, and a bleak recurring ostinato figure all convey gravitas. But these are all

abstract notions; it is difficult to extract meaning from this opening section. Meaning comes instead from the subsequent movements, each of which emerges as a cascade reaction to what's come before. For example, as if it could no longer maintain the necessary calm required for such nuanced writing, the second movement is alarmingly anxious, if not actually crazed. Its eruptive notes are configured so that the sounds of the bows striking against the strings become critical parts of the experience. It is dangerous and frightening music, which does not quite yield in the third movement. Rather, the DSCH motto gets bandied about in a form of grotesque self-mockery, confined within a maniacal scherzo.

A very real sense of distress is thus established; music in a state of crisis. Control has lost to the forces of agitation, leaving the final two movements with the task of regaining stability. The penultimate movement makes a valiant first attempt. Violently short and loud articulations maintain the anguish previously established. Emphasis is placed on the instruments' lower ranges, again amplifying the bite of the bow. But these sounds work against long sustained notes — the oldest representation of stability in the book. Eventually, the pull of those drones proves to be an effective therapy. Energy is dissipated, focus restored, and the finale is permitted to emerge, steadily. A slightly varied reprise of the first movement, it reminds us that one can identify a point of origin for all the strife that's ensued. From this music, feelings were released, and whatever troubles belonged to the composer, or the world he represented, now belong to us as well. By hearing this music, we share in the acknowledgement that all is not well with the world, bearing this work as an ever-present reminder. So even if there is ambiguity over the scope of its meaning, it remains a call to action, imploring us all to know that suffering is real, and challenging us to not let that suffering persist in silence.

BEETHOVEN: QUARTET IN E MINOR, OP. 59, NO. 2

Around the year 1802, Beethoven hit a rough spot in terms of both health and social life. Never one to take twists of fate lying down, he took this particular patch as an opportunity for artistic reinvention. No longer satisfied with the more cerebral styles of the previous decades, he instead sought to make his expressions more personal, more bold, and more disruptive. The three quartets of op. 59 come from 1806, shortly into this new phase. Its second piece, the only in a minor key, takes this concept of disruption as its central theme — a concept that remains relevant in today's world.

Two harsh chords followed by silence. The Allegro's first gestures are fierce and big; the silence is loaded. It contains uncertainty: a strong opening followed by an open question. But, striking though it may be, that initial gambit was not unique to Beethoven. It even has a name — known since the 18th century as *le premier coup d'archet* (literally, the first attack of the bow). Actually remarkable is how this microcosm of the movement's first seconds becomes emblematic of the movement's overall strategy. Gesture is used as a thematic element — Beethoven develops shapes and textures in the same way most composers use melody and harmony. The music's disjunct nature emphasizes the unique feel of each short passage, but at the expense establishing a logical flow. This tradeoff is partially compensated for by the use of conventional motifs, but also by trusting in the memory of the audience. Familiar gestures leave an impression, helping us to notice when they return, and allowing us to interpret their functions. Some advance the action, some anticipate closure, and a few even grant it. Whether we trust that closure, however, is another story.

Beethoven tries to restore a modicum trust with the Molto adagio. He telegraphs as much through the movement's subheading, instructing the performers to play with “much sentiment.” To follow through, the music maintains a restrained and refined tone throughout. In the context of the first movement, though, this attempt at stability is unsettling; it takes the full duration to truly believe there are no major textural ruptures, such as pervaded the Allegro. But this latent anxiety is stoked by another, more immediate effect. The movement's harmonic language is incredibly complex, often trading an expected harmony for one that's just a little off. And, in this slow-tempo environment, we are given time to process each of these aural stings. So the surface might convey a relative calm, but its placidity is thin.

Gesture was problematized in the first movement, harmony in the second. Rhythm becomes a focus in the Allegretto. Depending on which instrument you listen to, you may develop a completely different sense of the beat than your (virtual) neighbor. Beethoven was a big fan of metric disruption, which here continues to develop the whole work's focus on shape, but also helps situate the movement's central theme. A Russian tune, included to honor Count Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador who commissioned the work, it is itself rhythmically unusual. While this in and of itself is not remarkable, what's interesting is that we're given a clear case for disruption as a positive force. The rhythmic peculiarities of the movement's outer sections help prepare us for the nature

of the Russian theme. We are prepared to hear it with a greater appreciation of its innate qualities. Perhaps the moral is this: disruption can make us uncomfortable, but it can also help us understand difference. Not a bad message to bake into music for a diplomat!

What's left for the Presto to disrupt? In its way, the finale is perhaps the most subversive. It is based on an Italianate main theme, which is heard several times throughout the movement. It is, however, in the wrong key. Ostensibly, by being a quartet "in E Minor," we would expect the finale to be in that key. Or, at the very least, in *E Major* — an evergreen signal of light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. But this finale? None of the above. C Major — that is the key of the theme. Granted, C Major and E Minor are close relatives (from a theory perspective), but they are worlds away when it comes to the expectations of a right and proper string quartet. Just how different they are is highlighted by the theme's constant veering towards E Minor at the end of each phrase before obstinately reversing course back to C. The one time E Minor wins out is at the very end, but it's an awkward victory. By not being the key of the theme, E Minor can only declare itself the victor through a show of sheer force, creating an awkward balance between the movement's optimistic opening and brusque close. Consequently, it would be fair to leave the quartet with a lack of trust in the veracity of its events — a strange sensation. One generally doesn't question the honesty of musical features such as keys; we tend to take them as objective facts. Then again, one tends not to question a lot of things taken as facts, and that is the point. This whole quartet is one of disruption, yes, but not one in complete opposition to accepted norms. On the contrary, it repeatedly engages norms (musical truths) to show how they can be expanded to contain so much more than would seem appropriate. It is an argument against complacency and the triumph of the mundane, showing how so many small perturbations, working against the norm, can render outsized effects. And though this music does so abstractly, and within the relatively limited confines of chamber music, the larger message is as loud and far-reaching as that opening *coup d'archet*.

CUARTETO CASALS

Founded in 1997 at the Escuela Reina Sofía in Madrid, the **Cuarteto Casals** celebrated its 20th anniversary season with an especially ambitious, multi-year project: a six-concert series of the complete Beethoven quartets, accompanied by six commissioned works

from composers of its generation, performed in cities throughout Europe, Asia and Latin America including London, Vienna, Berlin and Tokyo. Highlights of coming seasons include cycles of the complete late Mozart quartets as well as projects focusing on Hungarian composers Bartók, Ligeti and Kurtág.

Since winning First Prizes at the London and Brahms-Hamburg competitions, Cuarteto Casals has been a repeated guest at the world's most prestigious concert halls including Carnegie Hall, Philharmonie Cologne, Cité de la Musique Paris, Schubertiade in Schwarzenberg and Concertgebouw Amsterdam, among many others around the world.

The quartet has compiled a substantial discography with the Harmonia Mundi label, including to date 12 CD's, with repertoire ranging from lesser known Spanish composers Arriaga and Toldrá to Viennese classics Mozart, Haydn, Schubert and Brahms, through 20th Century greats Debussy, Ravel and Zemlinsky, as well as a live Blue-Ray recording of the complete Schubert quartets, for Neu Records. In 2018 the first of a three-volume recording of the Beethoven quartets was released on the Harmonia Mundi label to great critical acclaim; the second box-set was released in 2019 and the final group in 2020, to coincide with the 250th anniversary of the composer's birth.

A prize from the prestigious Burletti-Buitoni Trust in London enabled the quartet to begin a collection of matching Baroque and Classical period bows which it uses for works from Purcell through Schubert, refining its ability to distinguish between diverse musical styles. In addition, the quartet has been profoundly influenced by its work with living composers, especially György Kurtág, and has given the world premiere of quartets written by leading Spanish composers, including a new concerto for string quartet and orchestra by Francisco Coll, premiered with the Orquesta Nacional de España.

In recognition of its unique contributions to the cultural life within Catalunya and throughout Spain, Cuarteto Casals has been acknowledged as cultural ambassadors by the Generalitat of Catalunya and the Institut Ramon Llull. Past awards include the Premio Nacional de Música, the Premi Nacional de Cultura de Catalunya and the Premi Ciutat Barcelona. The quartet performs yearly on the extraordinary collection of decorated Stradivarius instruments in the Royal Palace in Madrid.

Cuarteto Casals often appears on television and radio throughout Europe and North America, and in addition to giving much sought-after masterclasses, is quartet in residence at the Koninklijk Conservatorium Den Haag and at the Escola Superior de Musica de Catalunya in Barcelona, where all four members reside.



AlSarah talking to students at Durham School of the Arts.

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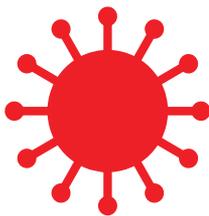
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