

JULY 21, 2024

PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

Sonata in E minor, Op. 27, No. 4

EUGÈNE YSAÏE

Born: 1858

Died: 1937

Composed: 1924

- I. Allemande. Lento maestoso
- II. Sarabande. Quasi lento
- III. Finale. Presto ma non troppo

Eugene Ysaÿe's six sonatas for unaccompanied violin date from 1924. Ysaÿe wanted to write a cycle of six works for unaccompanied violin in the manner of Bach's music for solo violin, and he dedicated each sonata to a different violin virtuoso, trying to capture something of that performer's style in "his" sonata. The list of dedicatees includes Sziget, Kreisler, Enesco, and Thibaud. So fascinated was Ysaÿe by the idea of adapting these pieces to individual performers that he composed this music almost overnight: he went up to his room with instructions that he was not to be disturbed (meals were sent up to him), and when he came down twenty-four hours later he had sketched all six sonatas.

Ysaÿe dedicated his Sonata No. 4 in E minor to Fritz Kreisler. Ysaÿe and Kreisler were good friends who often played string quartets together at informal gatherings. The introduction of the Allemande alternates powerful gestures with delicate, almost haunting passagework, and the main subject of this music is in the unexpected meter of 3/8—its noble melodic line and powerful chording do sound distinctly "Bach-like." The Sarabande features a one-measure "ghost" theme that repeats throughout as a sort of ground bass. The finale has some of the same perpetual-motion quality of the last movements of all three of Bach's unaccompanied sonatas.

CONCERT

Adagio and Allegro, Op. 70

ROBERT SCHUMANN

Born: 1810

Died: 1856

Composed: 1849

In the winter of 1849 Schumann became interested in the French horn. The recent invention of the valved horn gave the once-awkward natural horn much greater range, flexibility, and expressive power, and—working at white heat—Schumann set out to exploit the possibilities he recognized in the new instrument. He composed the Adagio and Allegro for horn and piano in four days (February 14-17, 1849) and then over the next three days sketched out the Concert-Piece for Four Horns and Orchestra. Schumann specified that the Adagio and Allegro could be performed by other instruments, specifically the cello or the violin, and it is heard at this concert in a version for cello and piano.

The Adagio and Allegro has become one of Schumann's most popular chamber works. The dark opening section (Schumann marks it "Slow, with inward expression" and stresses that it should be played very legato) is suffused with a melancholy cast, but this vanishes at the second section, marked "Fast and fiery." The Allegro bursts to life here in a flurry of triplets, and this music demands athletic playing through a very wide range. A quiet interlude provides some relief before the exciting rush to the close.

Schumann's wife Clara was delighted by this music, and—after playing it through with a horn player—she is said to have exclaimed: "A magnificent piece, fresh and passionate; just what I like."

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

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born: 1906

Died: 1975

Composed: 1960

I. Largo

II. Allegro molto

III. Allegretto

IV. Largo

V. Largo

In the summer of 1960 Shostakovich went to Dresden, where he was to write a score for the film *Five Days, Five Nights*, a joint East German and Soviet production. The devastation of Dresden by Allied bombing in 1945—the event that drove Kurt Vonnegut to write *Slaughterhouse Five*—was still evident in 1960, and it stunned the composer. He interrupted his work on the film score and in the space of three days (July 12-14) wrote his String Quartet No. 8, dedicated “To the memory of the victims of fascism and war.”

The Eighth Quartet has become the most-frequently performed of Shostakovich's fifteen quartets, but this intense music appears to have been the product of much more than an encounter with the horrors of war—it sprang straight from its creator's soul. In it Shostakovich quotes heavily from his own works: there are quotations from the First, Fifth, Tenth, and Eleventh Symphonies, Piano Trio in E minor, Cello Concerto No. 1, and his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, as well as from several Russian songs. The quartet also uses as its central theme Shostakovich's musical “signature”: he took the letters DSCH (D for Dmitri and SCH from the first three letters of his last name in its German spelling) and set down their musical equivalents: D-Es (E-flat in German notation)-C-H (B in German notation). That motto—D-Eb-C-B—is the first thing one hears in this quartet, and it permeates the entire work.

Why should a quartet inspired by the destruction of a foreign city (and an “enemy” city, at that) have turned into so personal a piece of music for its composer? Vasily Shirinsky—second violinist of the Beethoven Quartet, which gave the premiere—offered the official Soviet explanation of so dark a work: “In this music, there is a portrait of Shostakovich, the musician, the citizen, and the protector of peaceful and progressive humanity.” But in *Testimony*, Shostakovich's much-disputed memoirs, the composer strongly suggests that the quartet is not about fascism but is autobiographical and is about suffering, and he cites his quotation of the song “Languishing in Prison”

and of the “Jewish theme” from the Piano Trio as pointing a way toward understanding the quartet.

In her recent biography of the composer, Laurel Fay suggests an even darker autobiographical significance. In the spring of 1960, just before his trip to Dresden, Shostakovich was named head of the Union of Composers of the Soviet Federation, and the Russian government clearly expected such a position to be held by a party member. Under pressure to join the party, the composer reluctantly agreed and then was overwhelmed by regret and guilt. There is evidence that he intended that the Eighth Quartet, a work full of autobiographical meaning, should be his final composition and that he planned to kill himself upon his return to Moscow. Five days after completing the quartet, Shostakovich wrote to a friend: “However much I tried to draft my obligations for the film, I just couldn't do it. Instead I wrote an ideologically deficient quartet nobody needs. I reflected that if I die some day then it's hardly likely anyone will write a work dedicated to my memory. So I decided to write one myself. You could even write on the cover: ‘Dedicated to the memory of the composer of this quartet.’”

Was the Eighth Quartet to be Shostakovich's epitaph for himself? The quartet is extremely compact and focused—its five interconnected movements last twenty minutes. The brooding Largo opens with the DSCH motto in the solo cello, which soon turns into the fanfare from the First Symphony, followed in turn by a quotation from the Fifth Symphony. The movement, somber and beautiful, suddenly explodes into the Allegro molto, in which the first violin's pounding quarter-notes recall the “battle music” from the composer's wartime Eighth Symphony. At the climax of this movement comes what Shostakovich called the “Jewish theme,” which seems to shriek out above the sounds of battle. The Allegretto is a ghostly waltz in which the first violin dances high above the other voices. Each of the final two movements is a Largo. The fourth is built on exploding chords that some have compared to gunshots, others to the fatal knock on the door in the middle of the night. At the climax of this movement come the quotations from the prison song and—in the cello's high register—from Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth*. The fifth movement returns to the mood and music of the first. The DSCH motto enters fugally and many of the quartet's earlier themes are recalled before the music closes very quietly on a chord marked *morendo*.

Piano Quintet in G minor, Op. 8

JOSEF SUK

Born: 1874

Died: 1935

Composed: 1893

- I. Allegro energico
- II. Adagio. Religioso
- III. Scherzo. Presto
- IV. Finale. Allegro con fuoco

Born in a rural Czech village, Josef Suk learned to play violin, piano, and organ as a boy and entered the Prague Conservatory at age 11. There he became Dvořák's favorite composition student, and he married Dvořák's daughter Ottilie in 1898. Suk taught for many years at the Prague Conservatory, numbering Bohuslav Martinu and Fritz Reiner among his students, and his grandson was the violinist Josef Suk. Suk's music was admired by the aging Brahms, who helped arrange its publication, but the demands of teaching and performing left little time for composing during Suk's later years. One late work deserves mention, though: at age 58, just three years before his death, Suk was awarded a prize for his march *Toward a New Life*, composed for the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles.

Suk composed his Piano Quintet in G minor in 1893, when he was all of nineteen years old. He dedicated it to Brahms, who had encouraged the young composer. The Quintet is very much the work of a young composer, and its virtues are the virtues of youth: boundless energy, grand conceptions, and a soaring confidence. It is a big-scale work, dramatic in content and written for virtuoso performers. Suk was an excellent pianist as well as a violinist, and his familiarity with both keyboard and stringed instruments shows here: the piano has a prominent role, and the first violin plays so much of the time in its highest register that its part can seem more suited to a concerto than to a piece of chamber music. Suk himself must have recognized some of its excesses, for he returned to this score in 1915, when he was 41, and revised it; the revised version is the one always heard today.

The opening *Allegro energico* is well-named: it explodes to life with a seething energy that rarely relaxes. Textures can be thick here, as Suk often has the strings playing in octaves. Solo viola introduces the second theme-group over rolled chords from the piano, and there is even a third theme, introduced by the strings. Suk takes these ideas through a high-voltage development before the movement closes quietly—and unexpectedly—in G Major.

The second movement has the unusual marking *Adagio religioso*, and it opens with ethereal chords from the string quartet that eventually give way to a prominent cello solo. Suk's markings give some sense of the kind of performance he wants (*dolcissimo* and the constant reminder *espressivo*), but this movement shares some of the same intensity of the first movement: it too rises to a grand climax and subsides to a quiet conclusion.

Piano leads the way into the Scherzo, skipping lightly along the movement's 6/8 meter on an opening theme full of trills. This movement features a prominent role for the viola and a trio section set in 2/4 before the return of the opening section.

Note carefully Suk's marking for the finale: *Allegro con fuoco*—he wants this movement played “with fire.” Once again the piano leads the way, and once again we are back in the seething energy of the opening movement—Suk asks that this opening played *pesante*, *marcato*, and *appassionato*. More lyric material brings some welcome relief, but the energy of the opening always boils up, and Suk hurls the Quintet to its close on two great hammered chords.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger