

# About the Program

by Jason S. Heilman, Ph.D., © 2017

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## Joseph Haydn

Born March 31, 1732, in Rohrau, Austria

Died May 31, 1809, in Vienna

### String Quartet in C Major, Op. 20, No. 2, Hob.III:32

Composed in 1772; duration: 20 minutes

Joseph Haydn enjoyed a long career as a composer during a pivotal era in the history of music in Europe; this in part helps to explain how he was able to have such a pronounced and enduring influence despite his relatively provincial station. When he began his musical training as an eight-year-old choirboy at St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna in 1740, the baroque era was coming to an end. Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frederic Handel were both still actively composing, but their styles were already seen as old fashioned. Over the next thirty years, European music would transform itself as established genres fell out of favor and new ones took their place. By the 1750s, many composers had already abandoned the trio sonata, with its omnipresent harpsichord *basso continuo*, in favor of more homogeneous chamber ensembles of stringed instruments, yet the size and configuration of these ensembles remained very much in flux.

After getting himself expelled from the cathedral choir, Haydn spent the 1750s working as a freelance musician in Vienna. During this time, he frequently played as part of an *ad hoc* chamber ensemble of two violins, viola, and cello. The ensemble, which roughly corresponded to the four-part chorus Haydn had carefully studied at St. Stephen's, instantly seized his imagination. In the early 1760s, after gaining an appointment to the musical staff of the aristocratic Esterházy family, he began publishing his compositions for this newfangled string quartet in collected sets of six works. His Opus 1 and Opus 2 sets were simplistic, resembling divertimentos or even baroque dance suites, but his subsequent Opus 9 (1769) and Opus 17 (1771) quartets show a genre beginning to take shape. Haydn's next set of quartets would ultimately help to cement the ensemble's place in music history and serve as a model for an entire generation – including a sixteen-year-old Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Though they were written just a year after his Opus 17 set, Haydn's six Opus 20 string quartets represented a significant leap forward. They were each longer than any of his previous quartets, which gave Haydn the freedom to aspire to even greater formal sophistication and emotional impact. Moreover, the four instruments finally start to move towards equality in the Opus 20 quartets, with Haydn often assigning prominent melodies to the viola or cello. At the same time, the Opus 20 quartets have a closer relationship to the baroque past: three of the six quartets conclude with contrapuntal fugues, exemplifying the genre's evolution from mere parlor entertainments to something more cerebral. The Opus 20 set later became

known as the “sun quartets” quite by accident: an early edition featured an engraving of a rising sun on the cover. Yet the image is apt, as in many ways, Haydn's Opus 20 represented the dawning of the string quartet tradition.

The second of the six Opus 20 pieces, in C major, was one of Haydn's most democratic string quartets to date. Its *moderato* first movement begins with the main melody in the cello before being taken up by the violins. Haydn's formal technique was still developing at this time, and the remainder of the movement shows him chromatically exploring a variety of key areas before recapitulating the main theme. Haydn called the *adagio* second movement a *capriccio* and, true to its operatic roots, it opens with a bold unison statement before unfolding as a sectional aria, “sung” alternately by the cello and the violin against a dramatic background. The *allegretto* third movement juxtaposes the traditional, genteel minuet dance against a rustic, almost bagpipe-like accompaniment. The brief finale is a fugue based on four different short melodic subjects, introduced in corresponding pairs by the individual instruments. The movement opens and progresses in a tense *sotto voce* before exploding into a tangle of intertwined melodies to bring this revolutionary quartet to a close.

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## Alfred Schnittke

Born November 24, 1934, in Engels, U.S.S.R.

Died August 3, 1998, in Hamburg, Germany

### String Quartet No. 3

Composed in 1983; duration: 20 minutes

One of the leading Soviet composers in the generation after Dmitri Shostakovich, Alfred Schnittke created an eclectic musical style blending avant-garde modernism with a deep reverence for the past. Born to a German Jewish emigre father and a Volga German mother, Schnittke was a cultural outsider in his native Soviet Union. His love for music was awakened after World War II, when he and his family spent two years in Vienna, where his father worked as a translator. This was a formative experience for Schnittke's musical outlook: while Shostakovich would also be a significant influence, Schnittke was even more devoted to the Viennese classical tradition, from Mozart and Beethoven through Mahler. Back in the USSR, Schnittke continued his musical studies in earnest, eventually graduating from the Moscow Conservatory. He was a prolific composer, with ten symphonies, twenty-one concertos, four string quartets, and numerous film scores, yet his music was initially neglected in the USSR, due to his German ethnic background and Western orientation. This only began to change in the late 1970s, at the same time that his music began attracting attention abroad. Long fascinated by Christian mysticism, Schnittke converted to Catholicism in 1982. In 1985, he suffered the first of a series of strokes, which severely lim-

ited his composing. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, he moved to Hamburg in 1990, where he died eight years later.

All four of Schnittke's string quartets pay homage to the Viennese quartet tradition in some way, but his Third String Quartet in particular seems to embody it in a unique way. Composed in 1983, the Third String Quartet was described by one musicologist as a "three-part essay on music history." To that end, the piece begins with a kind of postmodern collage: in its opening bars, Schnittke quotes three composers who each have personal significance to him. The first is a distinctive phrase ending from the *Stabat Mater* by the Renaissance composer Orlando de Lassus (ca. 1530-1594); this is followed by a statement of the subject of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* for string quartet, which in turn leads into Dmitri Shostakovich's famous four-note "DSCH" motive (corresponding to notes D, E-flat, C, and B), which featured prominently in his Eighth String Quartet, among other works. These fragments from the sixteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries combine in novel ways to form the musical material of the brooding *andante* first movement. The *agitato* second movement, which follows without pause, introduces a recurring neoclassical scherzo theme that gets deconstructed at every turn by the traces of Lassus, Beethoven, and Shostakovich. This frenetic music is twice interrupted by fleetingly stable chorales, and once by an ominous tremolo passage, before heading into the *pensante* third movement. This dirge-like finale again draws most of its melodic material from the three quotations, serving as a kind of deconstructive antithesis to the first movement as it dramatically builds and then fades away.

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## Ludwig van Beethoven

Born December 17, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

String Quartet No. 7 in F Major, Op. 59, No. 1

Composed in 1806; duration: 38 minutes

By 1805, Ludwig van Beethoven's career was in full ascent. Five years earlier, he had successfully matched wits with his old teacher, Joseph Haydn, when he published his six Opus 18 string quartets. He had drawn accolades as one of the most formidable pianists in Vienna in three stunningly virtuosic piano concertos. And he had not only established himself as a successful symphonist with his First and Second Symphonies, but he had revolutionized the genre for all time with his "Eroica" Third. Yet at the same time, Beethoven was harboring what he believed to be a dark secret: he was going deaf, probably as the lingering aftereffects of a childhood illness. Rather than giving in to despair, however, Beethoven had resolved to begin composing in an entirely new way, which is what prompted his unprecedented run of increasingly monumental compositions.

It was a Russian count named Andrei Razumovsky (1752-1836) who brought the string quartet back to Beethoven's attention half a decade after his Opus 18 set. As Russia's

diplomatic envoy to the Habsburg court, Razumovsky had integrated himself thoroughly into the city's musical scene, becoming a skilled amateur violinist and a popular concert host. He even bankrolled his own professional string quartet, with the renowned Ignaz Schuppanzigh as first violinist. In 1805, Razumovsky commissioned Beethoven to write three new quartets that would challenge his skilled musicians and, at the same time, pay homage to his Russian heritage in some small way. Beethoven certainly honored the first of these conditions: all three of the "Razumovsky" quartets would have pushed the technical limits of even the best professional musicians of the age. But the headstrong young composer merely paid lip service to Razumovsky's request for Russian flourishes, including them in only two of the three quartets.

When the second violinist complained to Beethoven about the difficulty of his new Opus 59 quartets, the composer responded, "they are not for you, but for a later age." These three pieces were certainly much more advanced than the Opus 18 quartets Beethoven had composed just six years prior. Many of their innovations can be heard in the first of the three, Beethoven's String Quartet No. 7 in F major. At nearly twice the length of any of his previous quartets, it is truly symphonic in scope. It also features the novelty of linked movements, foreshadowing a trick Beethoven would later deploy in his Fifth Symphony. Perhaps most unusually, Beethoven chose to set each of the Seventh Quartet's four movements in sonata form, the rigorous development-oriented template that is typically used only in opening movements.

The F-major quartet begins with a sprightly *allegro* theme presented first by the cello then passed to the violin; this is soon contrasted by a gentler second theme in close harmony. Traditionally, this thematic exposition would be repeated, but Beethoven uses this expectation to play a trick on the listener: he feigns a repeat of the first theme in the cello, but immediately transitions to something new. This is how Beethoven sets up the movement's outsized development section, which incorporates several different styles – including a brief fugue – before recapitulating the opening themes. The *allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando* second movement is, remarkably, based not on a melody but on a rhythm intoned by the cello at the outset; from this simple material, Beethoven is able to weave his most complex and intricate scherzo yet. The third movement, marked *adagio molto e mesto*, recalls a funeral dirge in its somber tone, and indeed a note in Beethoven's sketches for this movement suggests it may have served as a requiem for a friend. This poignant music culminates with a brief violin cadenza, but the expected coda is cut short when the cello seems to start the last movement early. For the *allegro* finale, Beethoven borrows the melody from a Russian folk song, recasting it from a slow dirge to a swift dance; a brief *adagio* respite near the end hints at the Russian tune's origins before launching into a rousing coda.