

South Bay Chamber Music Society
January 18 & 20, 2019

Pasadena String Quartet
Aimee Kreston, violin
Elizabeth Hedman, violin
Andrew Picken, viola
Andrew Cook, cello

Program Notes by Boglárka Kiss, D.M.A.



The string quartet

As a chamber music group, the string quartet consists of four instruments: two violins, a viola, and a cello. From its humble beginnings in outdoor serenades, the string quartet rose to become one of the most prominent chamber ensembles in classical music. Austrian composer Joseph Haydn is credited with elevating the genre of the string quartet in the mid-18th century, having written over sixty of them. Indeed, writing for a string quartet demands utter skill from composers: There are only four parts to write for, all of which have closely related sonic characters, and the medium requires logic and transparency of design within which to bring the musical drama to life. Since Haydn's time, practically all major composers have written string quartets, and the genre now boasts a vast repertoire. Today's program provides a sampling of string quartets from three distinct eras.

String Quartet No. 21 in D Major, K. 575

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)



Seeking new commissions, Mozart journeyed to Germany in the spring of 1789. He received an audience with King Frederick William II of Prussia, who was an amateur cellist. Little is known about their encounter, but what is for certain is that soon after, Mozart returned to Vienna with a plan to compose six string quartets. Of the six, Mozart completed only three, and as a set, they are known as the “Prussian” or “Berlin” quartets.

The quartet on today’s program was completed in June of 1789, but the set of three were published only after the composer’s death in 1791, to critical acclaim. Critics at the time noted the technical and musical demands placed on each of the parts in these quartets, but in particular on the cello. It is possible that Mozart was trying to flatter the Prussian king by writing music that, according to many at the time, was beyond the abilities of amateur musicians.

Overall, the piece may be considered an expanded duet between the first violin and the cello (*concertante*), with the second violin and viola providing musical commentary and intricate counterpoint. The cello is first featured when it presents the second theme of the opening movement, and thereafter, it remains a prominent voice throughout the work.

The second movement, which is aria-like, showcases the violin and the cello, while the third, a menuetto, features the cello in the central trio section. The finale opens with the cellist playing a simple melody, but the movement soon breaks out into bravura passages growing contrapuntally richer, making use of a variety of complicated compositional techniques. Mozart clearly intended that this music be carefree and fun, but not simple or easy to play.

To hear a rendition of this work, please click here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSMYgZiu518>

String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 10

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Reacting against the dominant influence of late 19th century Germanic music, Claude Debussy forged a wholly new musical and aesthetic path. He sought a new expression of color, sensation, fleeting mood and relaxed form that would be distinctively French, as well as distinctively his own. His subsequent compositional output influenced both classical and popular music immensely.



Debussy composed his String Quartet in G minor in 1893, only a year before the *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, which, according to many, was a seminal achievement in the history of western music. Debussy's only string quartet exhibits many traits that made the *Prelude* such an important work in the repertoire. Although the quartet is set in the traditional four-movement structure, it explores novel sonorities and unconventional harmonies, and features a spontaneity that stems from a never-before-heard approach to musical time and rhythm.

Aside from the novel sounds Debussy elicits from the ensemble, the work is also remarkable for its economy of thought and concise design: The first theme of the opening movement recurs throughout the work, undergoing various transformations. The piece presents seemingly disparate elements, sometimes forcing the listener to concentrate on textures, rather than on linear musical thoughts, only to reveal in the last movement that the opening gestures have altered themselves and coalesced to produce an organic and unified musical statement.

Initial reactions to the work ranged from praise to bewilderment and scorn, including such revealing sneers as “orgies of modulation” and “rotten with talent.” Today, it is one of the most admired string quartets in the repertoire.

Listen to this work here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7f7u3TbY84>

String Quartet No. 1 in D Major, Op. 11

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)



Tchaikovsky is best known for his large-scale works such as symphonies, operas, and ballets. Even though he wrote quite a bit of chamber music, these works have not reached the same level of critical acclaim or popularity as his dramatic works written for large musical forces. There is one notable exception in his chamber music output: The String Quartet in D Major, Op. 11. Remarkably, it was Tchaikovsky's first chamber work—he wrote it when he was 31—and has been popular since its debut. The quartet is the first noteworthy work of Russian chamber music, it contains one of Classical music's greatest hits, and, according to Tchaikovsky's own diary, it moved Tolstoy to tears.

The first movement is in traditional sonata form with two song-like main themes. The second movement is one of Tchaikovsky's most beloved compositions and is often heard arranged for string orchestra. The first melody is a simple, melancholy folk song that Tchaikovsky is said to have learned from a carpenter. The second is original, played initially by the first violin over the cello's descending, chromatic pizzicato notes.

The third movement matches the heartfelt folk song of the slow movement with a vigorous peasant dance, heavy with unison playing and strong rhythmic accents. The finale is full of energy and drama, often with a Russian flavor. At the same time, the movement is remarkable for its balance and concision, reminiscent of the music of Tchaikovsky's musical idol, Mozart, bringing today's program full circle.

You may find a recording of this piece here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tauVO8_S8vk

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