PROGRAM NOTES

STRING QUARTET IN F MINOR, OP. 95 "SERIOSO"
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

By 1809, ten years after he arrived in Vienna, Beethoven found himself in a state of turmoil, both personal and political. In the early months, his fortunes seemed to be on the rise when three Viennese aristocrats (Archduke Rudolph, Prince von Lobkowitz and Prince Kinsky) pooled their resources to provide him with an annuity, assuring him of an annual income of 4,000 florins. His income secure, Beethoven's thoughts now turned to marriage. He proposed to his teenage pupil Terese Malfetti, but her family rejected his suit. Devastated, Beethoven wrote to a friend in Freiburg for help in finding a wife. Meanwhile, Napoleon's army was marching on Vienna to occupy the capital for the second time in four years. As they advanced, the imperial family, including Beethoven's close friend and patron Archduke Rudolph, fled to the town of Ofen. In July, Beethoven wrote to his publisher, "What destructive, barren life around me here, nothing but drums, cannon and human misery of every kind".

Clearly, it was difficult for Beethoven to compose under such conditions, but he doggedly set to work and filled his notebook with no fewer than 30 pages of notes and sketches. The French occupied Vienna in May, and Beethoven remained throughout the summer to devote himself to composition. It was a productive time, for by September he completed several piano works, the *String Quartet Op. 74* ("The Harp") and the *String Quartet in f minor, Op. 95 ("Serioso").*

Many of the titles of Beethoven's works ("Moonlight", "Harp" et. al.) were coined by critics and scholars long after the composer's death. "Serioso", however, was devised by Beethoven, who used it in the tempo mark for the third movement of Op. 95: *Allegro assai vivace, ma serioso*. It describes the prevailing melancholy of the first three movements, and it is also consistent with Beethoven's gloomy state of mind at this time in his life.

Beethoven was hesitant to publish this quartet (hence the late opus number), perhaps because he feared it would be misunderstood. It was certainly stylistically ahead of its time, and modern commentators consider it a harbinger of the late quartets. One characteristic often cited is its compression. In the last two quartets of his middle period (Opp. 74 and 95), Beethoven packs in a wealth of musical ideas, a wider range of dynamics and occasional dramatic silences. This is particularly the case in the densely textured first movement of Op.95, in which on two occasions the music is suddenly brought to a jarring halt. Although it is not marked as such, the second movement serves as a slow movement, offering a brief respite from the intensity of the first. The third movement, which continues without pause, is a *Scherzo* marked *Allegro assai vivace*, ma non troppo (a very lively Allegro, but serious). Its middle section may merit the term *serioso*, but it opens and closes in the same stormy mood as that of the first movement. A dramatic introductory passage leads to the *finale*, which establishes an atmosphere of ominous foreboding, as if heralding the approach of a summer storm. The *finale* is a study in thematic contrasts, alternating tempestuous outbreaks with periods of restless calm. In this movement, Beethoven's quartet writing approaches an orchestral quality that will eventually flourish in the late quartets.

The *Quartet in f minor, Op. 95* was composed in 1810 and published in Vienna in 1816. It was dedicated to Nicklaus Zuneskall, an official of the Hungarian Chancellery and a long-time friend of Beethoven's. He was the first non-aristocrat to receive a dedication from Beethoven.

-James Cannon

FIVE MOVEMENTS FOR STRING QUARTET, OP. 5
ANTON WEBERN (1883-1945)

Along with other disciples of Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern developed his tutor's theories into a system of composition called serialism, and Webern's music eventually became a rallying point for the young European composers of the post-World War II era. His compositions were avant-garde, but his other musical endeavors were quite traditional. His interest in Renaissance music led him to a doctorate degree in musicology, and in his successful career as a conductor he won praise for his sensitive interpretations of Wagner, Brahms and Mahler.

As a composer, he developed a disciplined and highly controlled style and sought to achieve the contrapuntal texture and formal elegance of the Renaissance masters he had studied at the beginning of his career. He was also extremely self-critical. Of all the works he produced up to his death in 1945, he published only 31 with opus numbers. It would take only a little more than three hours to play all of them. In each composition, he tried to achieve utmost brevity and to distill each musical statement to its essence. Because of his passion for brevity and his avoidance of repetition, some of his movements are unusually short.

The works Webern composed prior to World War I are atonal, but he had yet to adopt Schoenberg's 12-tone system of composition. Langsamer Satz (Slow Movement) was published without an opus number in

PROGRAM NOTES

ANTON WEBERN (CONT.)

1905. Along with this fragment, he also composed several other early chamber works, including a completed string quartet and a piano quintet. His principal early chamber work is the Five Pieces for String Quartet, Op. 5, which dates from 1909. Although it follows a strict formal design, it appears to wander from key to key, and its characteristic sound is based on tonal relationships rather than the sustained melodic lines of conventional music. In the first movement of this work he achieves special tonal effects, instructing the players to produce sounds "with the wood of the bow" and "on the bridge". The second movement consists of a musical statement of only 13 measures, and the third movement lasts a mere 35 seconds. The fourth movement, a terse statement equal in length to the second, is based on a four-note theme introduced by the first violin. The final movement presents a series of melodic fragments offering an occasional reminiscence of material from previous movements, and the piece quietly fades away.

STRING QUARTET NO. 15 IN G MAJOR, D. 887
FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

Music publishers paid scant attention to the instrumental works of Franz Schubert while he was alive, and he rarely heard any of his chamber works in public performance. Many of his greatest compositions lay unperformed until the mid-19th century. It is probable, though, that he heard the first movement of his String Quartet No. 15 in G Major, Op. 161, D. 887 in March 1828 as part of a 'Franz Schubert Invitation Concert', a public concert devoted entirely to Schubert's works and the only such concert presented during Schubert's lifetime.

Schubert's 15th and final quartet was composed during a ten-day burst of creativity following several weeks of inactivity. It is in four movements in the accepted form inherited from the Classical tradition, but in its style and expressiveness it typifies the composer's deep-rooted Romanticism. Schubert's Romantic style is especially evident in the alternation of major and minor keys in the first movement and the finale. In such passages, Schubert demonstrates his unusual ability to mix sunshine with a sense of impending doom.

While earlier Schubert quartets make use of a leading idea, often a song, to unify the movements, the composer's quartet writing is now more dependent on itself, on the pure musical material and its treatment. He also relies less on the contrast between individual melodic lines, producing instead harmonies intended to be heard as chords and not as the product of part writing. Thus, the work has an orchestral quality that is largely absent in earlier quartets.

The chamber music left unpublished at Schubert's death came into the possession of his brother Ferdinand, who offered it for publication by Diabelli & Company. There the G Major quartet, along with many other masterpieces, gathered dust until 1850, when the entire quartet received its first public performance.

-James Cannon

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