



Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston

Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2021-2022 chamber music season

chamber series 2: a legacy of fearless song

Saturday, November 20, 2021, 8 PM at First Church in Boston

Sunday, November 21, 2021, 4 PM at First Church in Boston

Program:

Ludwig van Beethoven, Cello Sonata No. 5 in D Major, Op. 102, No. 2

Pavel Haas, String Quartet No. 3, Op. 15 (1937-38)

Shen Yiwen, *Guo Shang* “Hymn to the Fallen” for flute, clarinet, violin, cello & piano

Arvo Pärt, *Spiegel im Spiegel* for clarinet & piano

Dmitri Shostakovich, Piano Trio No. 2 in e minor, Op. 67

Program notes by Gabriel Langfur Rice

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) was the son and grandson of professional musicians, both employed in Bonn, Germany at the court of the Electorate of Cologne. Surprisingly few details of his early years are known, but he displayed enough talent performing on both the violin and piano that he was compared to the young Mozart by a visiting teacher. He visited Vienna in 1787 and probably met and had one or more lessons with Mozart, but only stayed for two weeks due to the fatal illness of his mother. In 1789 Beethoven effectively took over the care of his family, petitioning the court for half of his alcoholic father’s salary. In 1790 he met Haydn, and with the help of the Electorate of Cologne moved to Vienna to study with him beginning in November 1792. The relationship, though cordial, was not entirely happy, and – likely to Beethoven's relief – Haydn left in early 1794 to London for one of his extended stays. Beethoven now sought instruction from Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, a master of contrapuntal techniques, and also studied for a time with Antonio Salieri, particularly regarding setting Italian texts to music. By 1796, he had established a renowned career as Vienna’s leading virtuoso pianist and was beginning to travel on concert tours, playing his own music and that of others, and often improvising to great acclaim.

But all would not continue happily; as early as 1801 he began to share the information of his increasing deafness, and he suffered to the point of despair with the condition for the rest of his life. Beethoven’s individualistic, headstrong, often rebellious nature was only heightened by the social isolation of deafness, and his personal relationships were never smooth. Family troubles continued as well, and in 1813 he became guardian of his nephew Karl despite protracted legal

battles with the boy's mother. The relationship with Karl was perpetually marked by drama, taking enormous amounts of time and energy. In 1814, at the height of his fame, Beethoven gave his last public performance as a pianist; he could no longer function as a performer, and his loneliness and isolation only increased. As his personal struggles intensified, however, his music only reached deeper and deeper into his own soul, and plumbed further the extreme, sometimes violent, sometimes almost divine emotions of the individual human life. His great achievement as a composer can be summed up as the appropriation of the classical forms of Haydn and Mozart's generation for the new age of Romanticism, showing the world how the expression of the intensely personal can become the expression of the universal.

Beethoven was the first major composer to showcase the cello in sonata repertoire as an independent voice, and his five sonatas for cello and piano span the three major periods of his career. The two Op. 5 sonatas were composed in 1796, Op. 69 in 1808 during the "heroic" middle period, and the two Op. 102 sonatas in 1815 when he was nearly completely deaf, writing music purely from his vivid imagination. Op. 102 was dedicated to Countess Marie von Erdödy, a very good pianist and stalwart supporter of Beethoven even late in his career as his music was becoming more abstract and losing public appeal. She and cellist Joseph Linke gave the premiere at her country estate.

The D Major Sonata we will hear today, Beethoven's final work for solo instrument and piano, is in a fairly traditional three-movement form with many compositional elements clearly borrowed from the Baroque, but that is where tradition stops. The energetic allegro first movement is full of rapid figurations coming in odd and unpredictable phrase structures. The lyrical slow movement – the only one like it in all of Beethoven's cello sonatas – is profound, even hauntingly funereal, with evocative tone-painting in the bass register of the piano enhancing the dark mood. The fugue in the finale is so full of dissonance and surprising turns that it was completely baffling to listeners of the time, a precursor to the *Grosse Fuge* string quartet, Op. 133, and clearly a call to the future beyond.

Pavel Haas (1899-1944) was born to a wealthy Moravian-Jewish family in the city of Brno, the capital of the Moravian region of Czechoslovakia. He studied at the Brno Conservatory, eventually joining the composition masterclass of Leoš Janáček, who was a major influence on his style. Haas was a skilled and accomplished composer by his early 20s, busy with scores for the stage and for the thriving Czech cinema, in which his brother Hugo was a prominent actor. In the 1930s he composed several important works, including the opera *The Charlatan* and the second and third string quartets, and began work on a symphony. As the Nazi occupation became inevitable, Haas divorced his wife in the hopes of sparing her and their young daughter from persecution, and in 1941 he was deported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp at Terezín.

Haas arrived to Terezín ill and depressed, and it was only because of the community of musicians he found himself in, including Viktor Ullmann, Hans Krása, and Karel Ančerl, and specifically because of the persistent encouragement of Gideon Klein, that he began composing again. Among the works completed at Theresienstadt were the *Four Songs on Chinese Poetry* for baritone and piano, a work for men's choir titled "Al s'fod" (his only work in Hebrew), and the *Study for String Orchestra*, which was premiered with Ančerl at the podium.

The Nazi regime presented Theresienstadt to the world as a model for their vision of a separate society, creating a ghetto of prominent Jewish artists and intellectuals and allowing them to put on concerts and the like. They even filmed some of these events for propaganda, but in reality the living conditions were brutal and the camp was a way station for their murder facilities elsewhere. In 1944, after the propaganda was no longer useful, the Nazis sent 18,000 prisoners, including Pavel Haas, to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. Much of the musical history of Theresienstadt is only known to us now because Karel Ančerl was spared execution; according to his account, the severely ill Haas was standing next to him and began to cough uncontrollably, leading Mengele to choose him instead.

The String Quartet No. 3 was composed over the course of several months between 1937 and 1938, punctuated by the turbulent events of the time. The first movement comes from October 1937, a relatively happy time in Haas' life, and the first and second themes of its sonata form were derived from his opera *The Charlatan*. Before he could continue, however, his daughter was born, he required surgery on his stomach, and Hitler's annexation of Austria made it clear that his homeland was in danger. The second movement appears to reflect the troubling and uncertain circumstances with a sort of prayer. Again, he put the quartet to the side for a few months, to be inspired again by the hopeful enthusiasm of the Sokol rally in the summer of 1938. The finale is in variation form with a masterly fugue and an optimistic ending.

Shen Yiwen (b. 1986) is a Chinese conductor, composer, and pianist, and he currently serves as the assistant dean of performance activities at The Tianjin Juilliard School. Shen made his conducting debut in China with the National Ballet of China Symphony Orchestra at the National Performing Arts Center in Beijing. In Europe, he has worked with North Czech Philharmonic, Karlovy Vary Symphony Orchestra, MÁV Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra of Magna Graecia, Royal Camerata, Bucharest Philharmonic, and Bucharest Symphony Orchestra. In North America, he has worked with the Juilliard Orchestra, Prince George's Philharmonic (MD), University of Maryland's Symphony Orchestra and Repertoire Orchestra, as well as the Monteux Festival Orchestra.

Shen's composition awards include the ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composers Award, Gena Raps String Quartet Award, and Arthur Friedman Prize; first prize from SCI/ASCAP Composition Commission; second prize from the First China Clarinet Composition Competition; winner of the Nashville Symphony's Composer Lab, Minnesota Orchestra's Composer Institute, and Albany Symphony's Composer to Center Stage Competition; two top prizes from Chinese National Composition Competitions, Chinese Golden Bell Award, and Distinguished Achievement of the Year in Music Composition in Shanghai. Other highlights include major orchestral premieres with the Minnesota Orchestra, Nashville Symphony, American Symphony, Albany Symphony, Beijing Symphony, Shanghai Symphony, Shanghai Opera House Orchestra, Juilliard Orchestra, and Bard Conservatory Orchestra for its first international tour of China. His full-length ballet, *The Crane Calling*, commissioned by the National Ballet of China, premiered in 2015, toured over 30 cities in China, and received its European debut in 2017 and North American debut in 2018.

His music has also been commissioned and performed by ensembles such as the Bowling Green Philharmonic, Aeolus String Quartet, Omer String Quartet, Colorado String Quartet, Da Capo Chamber Players, Music from China Ensemble, TALEA Ensemble, Dal Niente Ensemble, and The New York Virtuoso Singers, among others. As a pianist, he was a soloist with the Bard Conservatory Orchestra and New Juilliard Ensemble, and performed with Juilliard's AXIOM. Shen can be heard in the recording of Chinese bamboo flute master Tang Junqiao's *Magical Flute of China*, released by Channel Classics Records in 2007.

Shen holds a dual bachelor's in composition and German studies from Bard College and the Bard Conservatory of Music, a master's and doctorate in composition from Juilliard (where he taught from 2011 to 2016), and a master's in orchestral conducting from the University of Maryland.

Composer's Program Note:

The inspiration for *Guo Shang: Hymn to the Fallen* and *Li Hun: Recessional* comes from *Jiu Ge* (Nine Songs), a poem selection from an ancient Chinese anthology of poems *Chu Ci (Verses of Chu)* by QU Yuan. *Guo* means state, country or kingdom; *Shang* is one who dies prematurely, fighting in the service of their country. *Li* means ritual; *Hun* refers to the spirit.

The *Jiu Ge* (Nine Songs) can best be described as religious drama, and *Guo Shang* represents the climax of the ceremony and shows the most lamenting emotion for fallen soldiers in any language, whereas *Li Hun* is a short concluding hymn or recessional at the end.

Excerpt from *Guo Shang*:

They went out never more to return:
Far, far away they lie, on the level plain,
Their long swords at their belts, clasping their Qin bows,
Head from body sundered: but their hearts could not be vanquished.
Both truly brave and also truly noble;
Strong to the last, they could not be dishonored.
Their bodies may have died, but their souls are living:
Heroes among the shades their valiant souls will be.

Excerpt from *Li Hun*:

The rites are accomplished to the beating of the drums;
The flower-wand is passed on to succeeding dancers.
Lovely maidens sing their song, free of worries;
Orchids in spring and chrysanthemums in autumn:
So it shall go on until the end of time.

Arvo Pärt was born in 1935 in Estonia, which was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1944. While a student at the Tallinn Conservatory he began working as a recording engineer for Estonian radio, and was soon composing music for film and theater. Pärt's earliest works were in the accepted neo-classical style, but he studied the forbidden serial techniques as he could find materials. Soon he was writing music that applied serialism to pitch, duration and rhythm, which of course earned him official rebuke. A fascination with J. S. Bach led Pärt to incorporate Baroque techniques with serialism in a type of collage style, culminating in *Credo* (1968), in which the C Major prelude of Book I of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* is transformed through a chain of fifths used as a 12-tone row. Now rebuke was replaced with outright scandal – not for the musical material so much as for Pärt's avowal of Christianity.

Between 1968 and 1976 Pärt suffered what can best be described as a crisis of creative conscience. His musical language had hardened to a point he described as “an amassment of violent power, straining at its own limits like an avalanche.” With the aforementioned *Credo*, he had effectively pitted the transcendent beauty of ancient music against the sounds of modernity, and he felt the conflict was unsustainable. During those eight years he studied Gregorian chant and the Franco-Flemish polyphony of the 14th-16th centuries, composing just a few transitional pieces before settling on the mature style he refers to as “tintinnabuli.” This method is nearly always a two-voice texture in which one voice moves around a central pitch, mostly by step, while the other sounds the related major triad. Such a simple device has given Pärt a distinctive sound over a wide range of instrumentation and text, and perfectly serves his spiritual subject matter. Of course, his now crystallized commitment to religious music made him completely unwelcome in the Soviet Union, and by 1980 it was clear that he and his family had to leave. They moved first to Vienna and then West Berlin, finally returning to Estonia in 2010.

Spiegel im Spiegel was composed in 1978, in the flurry of new works following the development of “tintinnabuli.” Written originally for the violinist Vladimir Spivakov, the instrumentation matters little to Pärt; “To me, the supreme value of music lies beyond timbre. A special instrumental timbre is part of the music, but not its most important part. Music must exist through itself...two or three notes. The mystery must be there, irrespective of each instrument.” The title translates to “Mirror in the Mirror,” reflecting Pärt's intention to present a continuously shifting view of the same object, in a similar manner to the Franco-Flemish polyphonists and the great composers of theme and variation, from Frescobaldi to Bach to Beethoven and Brahms, even to Webern. Pärt strives to create what he calls “ideal polyphony,” music that is “capable of creating ideal relations in every place and every thing,” doing so “in voluntary poverty.” He has found a way to write music that is, for him, the ultimate act of devotion, “unceasing prayer.”

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) was born in St. Petersburg to comfortable circumstances. His father, an amateur singer, was a senior inspector at the Palace of Weights and Measures, and his mother was a conservatory-trained pianist. He and his two sisters were well educated, and the family employed servants and a nanny. Music was played in the house constantly, and it soon became apparent that the young Dmitri had prodigious gifts, including absolute pitch and a remarkable musical memory. He enrolled at the Petrograd Conservatory in 1919, studying both composition and piano, with further studies in conducting and violin. As his studies progressed, Shostakovich sometimes pushed against the conservative musical culture of the Conservatory,

but ultimately he thrived under the strict demands for technical skill in harmony and counterpoint, and his mastery of compositional craft freed him to write not only highly creative and expressive music, but also to easily earn money when necessary with incidental film music, patriotic choruses, and the like.

In 1925, before his 20th birthday, Shostakovich completed his first symphony. Critical response was moderate, but it became immediately popular throughout the world, with performances by, among others, Walter, Toscanini, Klemperer, and Stokowski. He received letters of congratulation from Alban Berg and Darius Milhaud. The next two symphonies were also received well, as was an opera (*The Nose*) and numerous other works. In 1930, he began work on another opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtensk*, and by 1936 it had received nearly two hundred performances in Moscow and Leningrad and had been heard in London, Zurich, Stockholm, Copenhagen and New York. In January of 1936, however, *Pravda* published a startling article denouncing the opera as “fidgety, screaming, neurotic, coarse, primitive and vulgar.” The warning was clear: such modernism would no longer be tolerated. Shostakovich completed but then withdrew his Fourth Symphony and set to work on the Fifth, widely considered to be his reply to the criticism of the authorities. Its unqualified success rescued his reputation, leading to teaching positions at the Leningrad and then Moscow Conservatories and greater – though still limited – artistic freedom.

The Seventh Symphony, begun during the siege of Leningrad by Nazi Germany and depicting its events, created another international sensation, and it seemed that Shostakovich’s place as the leader of Soviet musical culture was assured. A Party Decree issued on February 10, 1948, however, denounced his music and others’ for leading the culture astray with “formalism.” In a crushing blow, he was stripped of his teaching positions and his music was effectively blacklisted. Once again, Shostakovich was faced with the necessity to rehabilitate himself, which he did by offering his services to compose for patriotic choruses and propaganda films. In private he drank and smoked heavily, played cards and watched sporting events, and aged noticeably.

To add insult to injury, Stalin sent him abroad as a cultural envoy, tasked with delivering the message of the Soviet Union’s humanitarianism and social progress. In return, his concert music would be removed from the blacklist. Even so, such masterpieces as the 24 Preludes and Fugues for solo piano and the Tenth Symphony had to undergo hostile examination by a panel from the Composers’ Union before they could be released.

Stalin’s death in 1953 was followed by a softening of the cultural hardline, usually referred to as “the thaw.” Shostakovich’s rightful place as a leader of Soviet musical culture returned gradually, though not without difficulty. In 1960, succumbing to pressure, he joined the Communist Party. The tortured Eighth String Quartet, widely considered an obituary for himself, was composed around this time. He was invited back to teach at the Leningrad Conservatory in 1961.

Until his death in 1975, Shostakovich was relatively free to compose as he wished. Despite gradually failing health, he travelled widely within the Soviet Union and abroad, fulfilling the expectations placed on him as his country’s most famous composer. Even some of his earliest music, including the opera *The Nose*, was revisited despite having been banned for decades. It is impossible to know how much solace Shostakovich took in the recognition he received during

his last years. He was painfully careful to present a face to the world that betrayed no ill feelings towards the Soviet authorities, but the controversial book *Testimony*, published in 1979 by Solomon Volkov, presented a very different picture in the form of a memoir. The authenticity of Volkov's work is disputed, but the overall story of a man oppressed by a cruel authoritarian regime, forced to walk a creative tightrope as his works fell in and out of favor with the capricious tastes of a dictator, matches the historical record. Further, many of Shostakovich's friends and family, including his son Maxim, support Volkov and confirm the accuracy of the portrayal in the book.

Shostakovich's great legacy is inseparable from his circumstance. Forged in the furnace of great personal and political suffering, his music necessarily contained multiple meanings and layer upon layer of emotional complexity. His work of devastating impact, always expressed with flawless craft.

The Piano Trio No. 2 was completed in 1944 as the USSR was suffering the ravages of World War II. Shostakovich was in Leningrad during the first few months of the war while the city was under siege, and his Seventh and Eighth Symphonies are powerful expressions of the sufferings and horrors he witnessed. The epic, symphonic scope and deeply tragic character of the Piano Trio are clearly in the same vein, and the recent discovery of the Nazi death camps at Majdanek and Treblinka inspired Shostakovich's use of a Jewish folk dance tune in the last movement.

On a more personal level the trio is dedicated to the memory of Ivan Sollertinsky, a brilliant musicologist, critic, linguist, and Leningrad University professor who had suddenly died in Novosibirsk, where he and his family were living as evacuees from the besieged Leningrad. In a letter to Sollertinsky's widow, Shostakovich wrote: "I cannot express in words all of the grief I felt when I received the news of the death of Ivan Ivanovich...who was my closest friend...I owe all my education to him."

- *Gabriel Langfur Rice*

Shen biography and note provided by the composer, edited by Gabriel Langfur Rice
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