

## PROGRAM NOTES

### String Quartet No. 4

GRAŻYNA BACEWICZ

b. February 5, 1909, Łódź, Poland

d. January 17, 1969, Warsaw, Poland

#### Premiere

September 21, 1951, Liège, Belgium

#### Performance Time

23 minutes



Grażyna Bacewicz studied violin, piano, and composition at the Warsaw Conservatory, then went on to Paris, where she studied composition with Nadia Boulanger and violin with Carl Flesch. Bacewicz quickly developed into an outstanding violinist: she gave concerts throughout Europe, was a prizewinner at the 1935 Wieniawski Competition, and served for three years in the 1930s as concertmaster of the Polish Radio Orchestra. In 1954, Bacewicz was so seriously injured in an automobile accident that she had to give up performing, and she devoted the rest of her career to composing and to teaching composition at the Łódź and Warsaw conservatories. Bacewicz's talents were multi-dimensional: she was also a fine pianist, and she was a writer – she left behind (in manuscript) a novel, short stories, and a dramatic sketch. She died in Warsaw just a few weeks before her sixtieth birthday.

As a composer Bacewicz was extremely prolific. She wrote seven violin concertos, two cello concertos, as well as concertos for piano and for viola, plus four symphonies, seven string quartets, five violin sonatas, and a vast amount of chamber music, piano music, vocal music, and two ballets. As might be expected of a student of Boulanger, Bacewicz wrote with clarity of texture and form, and she has inevitably been classified as a neoclassical composer, though she disliked that term. After the cultural thaw of 1956 brought more freedom to Polish music life, Bacewicz experimented with serial music and avant-garde techniques, but – unlike Lutosławski, Gorecki, and Penderecki – she did not evolve far from her pre-war idiom. Her music is only now, fifty years after her death, being gradually discovered in this country.

In 1950, the Polish Composers Union commissioned a string quartet from Bacewicz that would be entered in the International String Quartet Competition the following year in Liège. Bacewicz composed her String Quartet No. 4 in 1950, and its premiere in Liège on September 21, 1951, was so successful that the quartet was awarded first prize. The Polish premiere took place the following month, and the Fourth remains one of Bacewicz's most popular quartets and one of her most frequently performed compositions.

The Fourth Quartet is in three movements, all of them in classical forms and all of them beautifully written for strings. The quartet opens with a long, slow introduction that occasionally flares up with unexpected tensions before the music takes wing at the *Allegro molto*. In sonata form, this contrasts its dramatic, energetic opening with more relaxed secondary material. The central *Andante*, in a general three-part form, is expressive and sometimes quite intense; Bacewicz takes some of the material through brief fugatos before the movement comes to a quiet close. The tensions of the first two movements

relax in the last, for Bacewicz rounds the quartet off with an aptly-marked *Allegro giocoso* (“happy”). This rondo-finale does indeed dance happily, its progress interrupted by differing episodes, one played entirely pizzicato, another based on Polish folk music. But the rondo theme always makes an agreeable return, and at the end it propels the Fourth Quartet to a most emphatic conclusion.

## String Quartet in G Major, Op. 77, No. 1

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN

b. March 31, 1732, Rohrau, Austria

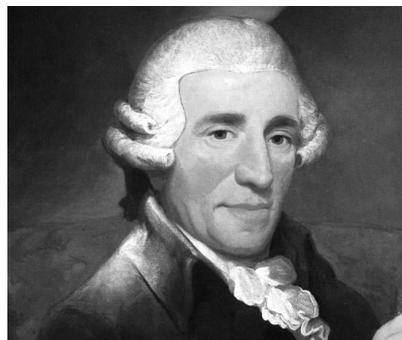
d. May 31, 1809, Vienna, Austria

### Premiere

Circa 1802

### Performance Time

24 minutes



Haydn turned the string quartet into a great form. Music for two violins, viola, and cello had been written for years – usually as background or entertainment music – but in his cycle of 83 quartets Haydn transformed the quartet into an ensemble of four equal partners, wrote music that demanded the greatest musicianship and commitment from all four performers, and made the quartet the medium for some of his most refined expression. His quartet-writing, however, came to an end in the late 1790s. Haydn had just returned from two quite successful visits to London, and now – in his mid-sixties – he was losing interest in purely instrumental music. He would write no more symphonies and would instead devote his final years to vocal music: from these last years came his oratorios *The Creation* and *The Seasons*, as well as the great masses.

Just as he was embarking on these new directions, Haydn completed the two string quartets of his op. 77 (and actually began one more, destined to remain unfinished). Commissioned by Prince Lobkowitz, who would later be Beethoven’s patron, the two op. 77 quartets of 1799 represent the culmination of a lifetime spent developing and refining the form: the quartet in G major performed on this concert is widely considered one of Haydn’s finest, and that is saying a great deal. Audiences might best approach this quartet by listening for the many signs of a master’s touch: the liberation of all four voices, the rapid exchanges of melodic line between them, and the beautifully idiomatic writing for all four instruments – including the often-neglected viola.

The opening *Allegro moderato* is in the expected sonata form, though with some original thematic touches: the main subject is a genial march-like tune – the steady 4/4 pulse of this march strides along easily throughout the movement. The second subject is hardly a theme at all, just a flowing two-measure figure that moves between the two violins – it is a measure of Haydn’s mature mastery that he can find so much in such simple material. The *Adagio* is built on a single theme, which is then repeated, growing more elaborate with each recurrence. The brisk minuet (its marking is *Presto!*) sends the first violin soaring from the bottom of its range to the very top, while the trio makes a surprising leap from

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## PROGRAM NOTES

the minuet's G major to the unexpected key of E-flat major, which in turn slides into C minor as it goes. The finale, also marked *Presto*, is a miniature sonata-form movement that blisters along at a pace that makes it feel almost like a perpetual-motion. Some suspect that Haydn derived its central theme from a Hungarian folksong, but – whatever its origin – this movement is a real showcase for the first violin, and Haydn demands sparkling, athletic playing from all four players throughout.

### String Quartet No. 3 in A Major, Op. 41, No. 3

ROBERT SCHUMANN

b. June 8, 1810, Zwickau, Germany

d. July 29, 1856, Endenich, Germany

#### Premiere

September 13, 1842

#### Performance Time

30 minutes



Schumann's marriage to the young Clara Wieck in 1840 set off a great burst of creativity, and curiously he seemed to change genres by year: 1840 produced an outpouring of song, 1841 symphonic works, and 1842 chamber music. During the winter of 1842, Schumann had begun to think about composing string quartets. Clara was gone on a month-long concert tour to Copenhagen in April, and though he suffered an anxiety attack in her absence Schumann used that time to study the quartets of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. Clara's return to Leipzig restored the composer's spirits, and he quickly composed the three string quartets of his op. 41 in June and July of that year; later that summer he wrote his Piano Quartet and Piano Quintet. Writing string quartets presented special problems for the pianist-composer. The string quartets are his only chamber works without piano, and – cut off from the familiar resources of his own instrument – he struggled to write just for strings. Though he returned to writing chamber music later in his career, Schumann never again wrote a string quartet.

The Quartet in A major, composed quickly between July 8 and 22, is regarded as the finest of the set and shows many of those original touches that mark Schumann's best music. The first movement opens with a very brief (seven-measure) slow introduction marked *Andante espressivo*. The first violin's falling fifth at the very beginning will become the thematic "seed" for much of the movement: that same falling fifth opens the main theme at the *Allegro molto moderato* and also appears as part of the second subject, introduced by the cello over syncopated accompaniment. Schumann's markings for these two themes suggest the character of the movement: *sempre teneramente* ("always tenderly") and *espressivo*. Schumann's procedures in this movement are a little unusual: the development treats only the first theme, and the second does not reappear until the recapitulation. The movement fades into silence on the cello's *pianissimo* falling fifth.

The second movement brings more originality. Marked *Assai agitato* ("Very agitated"), it is a theme-and-variation movement, but with a difference: it begins cryptically – with an off-the-beat main idea in

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3/8 meter – and only after three variations does Schumann present the actual theme, now marked *Un poco adagio*. A further variation and flowing coda bring the movement to a quiet close. The *Adagio molto* opens peacefully with the soaring main idea in the first violin. More insistent secondary material arrives over dotted rhythms, and the music grows harmonically complex before pulsing dotted rhythms draw the movement to a close.

Out of the quiet, the rondo-finale bursts to life with a main idea so vigorous that it borders on the aggressive. This is an unusually long movement. Contrasting interludes (including a lovely, Bach-like gavotte) provide relief along the way, but the insistent dotted rhythms of the rondo tune always return to pound their way into a listener's consciousness and finally to propel the quartet to its exuberant close.

— Program notes by Eric Bromberger

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