

Program notes adapted from notes provided by The Vermeer Quartet.

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)

Quartet in Bb Major, K. 589 (1790)

Allegro

Larghetto

Menuetto & Trio: Moderato

Allegro assai

Mozart's last three quartets (K. 575, 589, and 590) were written for Frederick William II, King of Prussia, a rather exceptional cellist, between mid-1789 and mid-1790. Accordingly, the cello is in some measure favored throughout, but Mozart does not upset his quartet design nor disturb the equalization of the voices. The king may play the largest instrument in this quartet, but the first violin remains in command.

The opening movement is rather straightforward. Mozart goes 'all out' with the unilateral cello in the second movement, wherein it not only announces the first theme, but is used for the springboard to impanel the ornaments from the theme itself.

The Minuet is all-important. In many quartets, this movement is the relaxing pivot between the intensity of the slow movement and a preparatory neutral ground for the propulsive quality of the finale. Composers gradually abandoned the minuet in favor of the scherzo, but it has a strange persistence. It can be enlarged beyond its social origins, or concentrated to deliver a surprising punch. The tempo is moderate, and the greatest change is made in the Trio, which has two sections similar to the main body of the entire movement and, further, is much longer. There is no relaxation, no simplicity in this Trio, normally a "breather" in the middle of a Minuet. Wide imposing sweeps of the violin, dramatic accents, and the like form a three-part organism on top of the entire Minuet.

The finale is in the manner of Haydn with his joke book – very close to the older master's methods, but with Mozart's unmistakable charm.

FRANK BRIDGE (1879-1941)

String Quartet No. 1 in E minor (1906)

Adagio — Allegro appassionato

Adagio molto

Scherzo: Allegretto grazioso

Finale: Allegro agitato

The compositions of Frank Bridge, one of the most beloved and influential English musicians of the early 20th century, have regained some of their former prestige in recent years. Born in Brighton, Bridge inherited from his father William, a professional lithographer and accomplished violinist and conductor, a love of string instruments.

Following graduation, Bridge performed in theater orchestras and with a variety of string quartets. His original compositions from these early years, not surprisingly, also favored chamber ensembles. In fact, Bridge's enormous lifetime output – including two dozen works for string quartet – make him perhaps the most prolific English chamber music composer from the first half of the 20th century.

Bridge wrote his *String Quartet in E minor* "in under a month" before Oct. 31, 1906, the closing date for submissions to an international composition competition in Bologna (he won an honorable mention and had to wait three years for the

score to be returned to him). The English String Quartet, with Bridge as violist, gave the world premiere on June 16, 1909 in London. This was Bridge's first work heard in America, performed in 1922 at the Berkshire Chamber Music Festival.

Bridge employ here a unique blend of formal technique, adventurous chromaticism and an instinct for audience appeal. An important thematic fragment emerges in the sliding half-step motion and disjunct rhythms of the slow, melancholy cello soliloquy. Two full chords follow, then there is a passionate outburst as the first violin introduces a faster version of the opening theme. Expressive intensity steadily builds, but a viola melody lends new calm. Bridge develops both themes, with particular emphasis on the lyrical second. The composer further reshapes his main melodies in the recapitulation; he abbreviates the dramatic opening theme, but compensates by casually extending the contrasting melody into all four string parts. The coda restates the opening theme fragment.

A heartfelt *Adagio molto* — described by some as a “song without words” — comes next. The initial section contains two thematic ideas: three chords leading to a plaintive first-violin line, and a viola melody written beneath a syncopated accompaniment. Following a change of key, a tonally meandering lyrical theme inaugurates a series of quasi-variations that grow increasingly more impassioned. Bridge returns to his original thematic pairing in the final section.

The *Allegretto grazioso* is a scherzo imbued with a Mendelssohnian lightness, enhanced by the danceable *siciliano* rhythm. A dotted-rhythm pattern soon emerges, recalling the opening movement. Pizzicato lower strings support a first-violin melody (alternating duplet and triplet rhythms) in the trio, then the scherzo music returns at a *pianissimo* dynamic level.

The work concludes with an *Allegro agitato* sonata movement. Rhythmic and chromatic reference to the “kernel theme” emerge in the violin, shadowed in parallel motion by the second violin and viola. The first violin also introduces a contrasting theme above throbbing offbeats in the cello. A sense of musical suspense builds in the development, then the two main themes return in mildly varied form. The coda boldly alternates thematic fragments from the first and final movements. This work concludes with a reappearance of the cello soliloquy heard in the opening of the first movement.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)

Quartet in E minor, Op. 44, No. 2

(1837)

Allegro assai appassionata

Scherzo: Allegro di molto

Andante

Presto agitato

Mendelssohn completed this quartet in 1837, after a long gap in the composition of quartets. (His first two quartets had been composed in 1827-29). The composer tackled the central problems of form exactly where he had left off when composing his more youthful works. Thus the opening movement of the E minor Quartet presents two rhythmically similar and melodically related themes, landmarks along a lyrical path rather than first and second subjects in the classical sense. Contrast is provided by an extensive central episode and a concluding section with a strongly marked dotted rhythm, with a quotation of the main theme above an eighth-note figure in the inner parts. The development section and coda consist mainly of motives from the transitional and episodic passages.

For the second movement, the expression ‘fairy music’ springs immediately to mind: we hear agile running figures, delicately poised melodic fragments, a constant rhythm but with unexpected accents. The music's apparent simplicity conceals a complicated formal structure, however — a subtle balancing act between the forms of “sonata-rondo” and “scherzo and trio.” The classically-trained listener becomes perplexed as the course the music takes departs further and further from the expected form. Instead, we are in an unfamiliar and unreal world, peopled by strange spirits.

In the slow movement, another formal problem is tackled: how to combine the melodic character and regular metrical structure of a “song without words” with two-section sonata form, dispensing with a development

section but including allusions to subsidiary subject matter. Once again there is an ambiguity of intention: is this an attempt to introduce song-like elements into a movement based on classical formal models, or is it, alternatively, an attempt to refashion the structure in accordance with the melodic character of the music? These formal questions may perplex the experts, but should not deter an audience's pleasure at the movement's sheer songfulness.

The *Finale* is a mature example of a sonata rondo, balancing contrasting elements while the music flows swiftly and regularly along in taut rhythmic patterns. The lyrical second theme, marked by a leap of a seventh, stands out. Certain motives and rhythmic figures of this finale derive from ideas in the opening movement. The subtle formal structure is full of concealed and sometimes ambiguous relationships. It is movement of much variety, not just "hurried" *perpetuum mobile* music. The composition ranges from the simplest accompanied melody to an elaborate *concertante* interplay of all four instruments.