

Huntsville Chamber Music Guild presents

**Robert McDuffie, violin**

with Margery McDuffie Whatley, piano

December 14, 2013

### *Program Notes*

In 1785, **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** was just 29 years old—yet he was at the height of his powers. His career in Vienna was flourishing, both as composer and pianist; the greatest evidence of this is the extraordinary series of twelve piano concertos he wrote between 1784 and 1786, all intended as vehicles to display his technical virtuosity and musical imagination. In 1786, he would write the first of three operas with libretti by Lorenzo Da Ponte—*Le Nozze di Figaro*, still among the most sublime and perfect stage spectacles ever created.

His *Piano Quartet in g minor* is a masterwork of this remarkable period. It also has the distinction of being the first great work for its particular instrumentation: violin, viola, cello, and piano. Haydn had penned many piano trios—the same ensemble minus the viola—and that formation had become very common. The added richness afforded by the viola may have inspired the seriousness and scope of this quartet and its companion piece, the E-flat major quartet composed the next year. The first movement of tonight's quartet is minor-key Mozart of the finest vintage, worthy to stand alongside the *c minor Mass*, the *d minor* and *c minor piano concertos*, the most hair-raising passages of *Don Giovanni*, and the great unfinished *Requiem*. As in these other works, there is a tautness to the writing, verging on austerity, that makes the music especially powerful and dramatic. This quality is evident from the opening gesture, a striking unison declamation answered theatrically by the piano.

The second and third movements turn to major keys—yet signs of the foregoing darkness remain. The beautiful *Andante* seems to offer consolation, but every corner is colored with aching regret. The concluding *Rondo* may seem to be a play of Haydnesque high spirits and wit; but the falling contours of its main melody suggest that this is a hard-won joy—or, to borrow a phrase more often applied to the music of Schubert, a sense of smiling through tears.

The next few pieces on Mr. McDuffie's program are smaller and lighter in character. A quick glance through the titles reveals a unifying thread: the golden age of violin virtuosity, exemplified by Kreisler, Heifetz, and Sarasate. The first transcription is of an interior movement from one of Mozart's serenades—sprawling sets of short pieces assembled for parties and public functions. So, while this *Rondo* creates a nice continuity with the preceding quartet, it is also of a fundamentally different character: brilliant and *galant*, maybe even a tad frivolous, rather than profound and probing.

The *Romantic Piece* by **Dvořák** and the transcription from **Gershwin's** *Porgy and Bess* together highlight one aspect of the violin: its ability to imitate the expressive nuances of the human voice—though Dvořák's expansive romanticism and Gershwin's casual, jazzy manner are entirely different worlds. **Sarasate's** Spanish-tinged *Navarra* is a classic violin show-piece, but with a twist: it's not for one violin, but for *two*, so all the spectacular cascades of notes have to be carefully coordinated—making the piece both twice as hard and twice as dazzling.

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Certain works in the Classical canon are so well-known that it's hard to hear them afresh. One example is Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*—its opening is so etched into our collective cultural consciousness that it's nearly impossible for us to imagine how arresting and bold it must have seemed when it was first played. **Antonio Vivaldi's** *The Four Seasons* is a similar case. It is music that not only is wonderful on its own terms, but also significantly transformed the expressive capacities of a major Baroque genre, the concerto. Yet how easy it is to hear its familiar tunes and write it off as clichéd!

This set of four concertos was published in 1725 as part of Vivaldi's Op. 8, fancifully titled *The Trial of Harmony and Invention*. The entire Op. 8 is composed of twelve concertos, and *The Four Seasons* are not the only pieces in the collection with imaginative titles: others include *The Storm at Sea*, *Pleasure*, and *The Hunt*. What sets *The Four Seasons* apart is their unified program, spelled out explicitly by “illustrative sonnets” that were printed in the first edition. The authorship of these sonnets is uncertain, though many attribute them to Vivaldi himself; they are uninteresting as pure poetry, but fascinating in how they match the sequence of musical events. This matching is at its best in *Winter*, where almost every individual line of the sonnet corresponds to a particular figure in the concerto. For instance, the first movement moves clearly through four distinct ideas that reflect each of the following images:

To shiver, frozen, amid icy snows,  
at the harsh wind's chill breath;  
to run, stamping one's feet at every moment;  
with one's teeth chattering on account of the excessive cold.

Sometimes the image behind the music is surprising; it's hard to understand why *Summer* seems so afflicted by lassitude without reading the first lines of its accompanying sonnet:

Beneath the harsh season inflamed by the sun,  
Man languishes, the flock languishes, and the pine tree burns.

Listening through *The Four Seasons* with the sonnets on hand is a delight; Vivaldi's powers of evocation are a marvel.

But the truly incredible thing about the piece is the way Vivaldi balances this play of fantasy and tone-painting with a tight control of form and structure. The Op. 8 concertos are paradigms of the Baroque concerto as it had developed in the first decades of the 18th century. The form is always in three movements, fast–slow–fast, and they are organized around a strict interplay of *tutti* and *solo* sections. (*Tutti* is an Italian term meaning “all”—the two types of sections either involve the whole group working democratically, or feature the soloist joined by just a couple other instruments.) Each concerto opens with a *tutti* that immediately announces the main musical material and character of what will follow—they set the stage, in effect, and the *solos* provide detail. For instance, the opening *tutti* of *Spring* proclaims that “Spring has arrived,” as the sonnet puts it; and we might imagine the general lushness and greenery of the scene. But the solo calls our attention to a tiny feature, the “birds hailing [Spring] with happy song.” As in a great landscape painting, the dialogue of *tuttis* and *solos* in *The Four Seasons* finds room for both grand sweep and ornamental finesse.

*Notes by Daniel Pesca*