



**CURTIS ON TOUR**  
**The Viano Quartet and Roberto Díaz**

**Saturday February 18, 2023 2 PM**  
**Performance Insights 1 PM**  
**Bethel United Methodist Church Hall**  
**Lewes, Delaware**

**PROGRAM**

*String Quartet No. 15 in D Minor, K. 421*

*Allegro Moderato*

*Andante*

*Menuetto and Trio. Allegretto*

*Allegretto ma non troppo. Theme and Variations*

Wolfgang Amadeus  
Mozart  
(1756 - 1791)

*String Quartet No. 3, Sz. 85*

*Prima parte: Moderato ~ Seconda parte: Allegro*

*~ Ricapitulazione della prima parte: Moderato*

*~ Coda: Allegro molto*

Béla Bartók  
(1881 – 1945)

**INTERMISSION**

*String Quintet No. 2 in G Major. Op. 111*

*Allegro non troppo, ma con brio*

*Adagio*

*Un poco allegretto*

*Vivace, ma non troppo presto*

Johannes Brahms  
(1833-1897)

*-Program Subject to Change-*

## Program Notes

### MOZART

*String Quartet No. 15 in D Minor, K.421 (1783)*

When Mozart arrived in Vienna in 1781, Haydn held a reputation as the most celebrated composer of his age. Though Mozart never formally studied with Haydn, the latter's music exerted a profound influence on him. This was particularly evident in the field of string quartets, which Haydn had pioneered as a genre. Haydn's most recent quartets impressed the young Mozart, as they were written in a new way that made the four instruments equal participants in the musical discourse.

Mozart set about to compose his own six quartets between late 1782 and early 1785, known collectively as the "Haydn" Quartets, since they were dedicated to his esteemed mentor. Mozart's dedication describes them as "the fruit of a long and laborious study", as he entrusts them "as children to a father". Unusual for the time, these "Haydn" Quartets were written solely on the basis of inspiration, not commission; dedicating these to a friend instead of an aristocrat underscored the special bond shared by the men, 34 years apart in age. When they first met, the two had immediately struck up a friendship and regularly played in quartets together.

K. 421 is the second of the series of "Haydn" Quartets. Many years later the 67 year old Constanze Mozart stated in a letter to friends that her husband was writing this quartet while she was in labor with her first child, Raimund; this would put its composition date around June 17, 1783. Matching its inception at such an emotional moment, K.421 is unrelentingly dramatic. The work owes much of its individuality to its tonality: it is the only one of the series in a minor key. As the primary key of a quartet, minor keys were used sparingly lest their severity overwhelm.

The first movement begins with a *sotto voce* brooding main theme which paints a serious mood, very different from what we usually expect from the ebullient Mozart. This almost ridiculously beautiful beginning is like a hushed sigh. The movement's more lyrical second subject is in a brighter contrasting key, though its accompaniment maintains the sense of urgency and premonition of the preceding music.

The second movement *andante* is wistful, starting out as a gentle, halting dance, initially in the traditional relative key of F Major, but reverting much of the time to the darker D Minor. Constanze Mozart claimed that the rising string figures in this movement corresponded to her cries from the other room where she was giving birth. The music is lyrical and the movement has a gloomy but tender quiet dignity.

The minuet enters in a more strident tone, recapturing the turbulent emotion of the first movement. Here Mozart pushes the minuet form far beyond its origins as a stately dance, exploring contrasts of texture, mood and rhythm. The trio is a pleasant Viennese serenade, complete with plucked accompaniment, reminiscent perhaps of a guitar.

The finale is a set of variations on the sad melody of a *siciliano*, an Italian pastoral dance. Brisk, dark and angry, it showcases each of the four instruments with virtuosic solos.

A performance of this work at his son's Vienna lodgings in the presence of Haydn was subsequently reported with pride by Leopold Mozart in a letter to his daughter.

## **BARTÓK**

*String Quartet No. 3, Sz. 85 (1927)*

Bartók's third string quartet was written in Budapest, when the composer was in his mid-forties. At this point in his life, he was internationally recognized, not just as an important composer, but also as a serious ethnomusicologist: he collected and catalogued folk music from several Eastern European countries, and even ranged as far as North Africa in his research. To Bartók's thinking, folk music was of more than scientific interest; it was the life-giving seed without which there was no way forward in musical creation. Whereas for Brahms writing a Hungarian Rhapsody meant to flavor his essentially personal composition with a light aura of Hungarian rhythms or harmonies, Bartók aimed to absorb completely the folk melodies he collected, to a point where his own compositions were the natural result.

Bartók's relationship to the string quartet was an intimate, life-long preoccupation. He wrote his first, unpublished quartet at the age of eighteen. His six mature published quartets span a period of thirty years, and he began preliminary sketches for yet another quartet shortly before his death. Bartók's music shows a dramatic stylistic evolution, with each quartet exploring a new terrain of musical thought. Like Beethoven, Bartók radically expanded the notion of the string quartet in nearly every dimension: form, technical means, tonality, rhythm and essential musical content. Finally, Bartók's quartet cycle is regarded as an intimate personal journal of a brilliant creative spirit, uncompromising and unrelenting in a search for new musical expression. Despite using what might at first appear to be an unrecognizable modern language, Bartók's quartets fit well within a continuous trajectory of exploration in the quartet genre.

*String Quartet No. 3* is Bartók's shortest. It is the only one written in one continuous movement, consisting of a first part (slow music); a second part (quick); a recapitulation of the first part; and a coda. The first part has the quality of an artist contemplating his materials, turning his motif over in his hands. At a moment of seeming completeness, the atmosphere dissolves in the space of a few short bars, and the work is catapulted into the second part, which is in every way different: quick rather than measured, continuous rather than fragmented, moving along scales instead of leaping, confident and single-minded rather than halting. The second part also sounds closer to folk roots, particularly in its rhythm and evocation of a stamping dance.

This portends the return of the first part, ushered in by a short but intense cello passage. In this "recapitulation", the slow first part is transformed almost beyond

recognition. The material is the same, but the energy and the pacing are quite different. Earlier, the music was contemplative but curious, filled with an energy to try moving in many possible directions. In this later incarnation, the energy is spent and desolate; appropriately for a recapitulation, the music seems to reminisce, to look brokenly backwards rather than forwards.

At this point, one is swept into the whirling, ghostly music of the coda. This final, brief section brings a return to the vitality of the second part, recapping its materials in an intense and effervescent manner, and culminating in a final salvo of brusque energetic unison gestures.

This quartet might not be generally accepted as “lovable” or “easily accessible” music. It is more harmonically adventurous and complex than Bartók's previous two string quartets and explores a number of extended instrumental techniques, including *sul ponticello* (playing with the bow as close as possible to the bridge), *col legno* (playing with the wood rather than the hair of the bow), *glissandi* (sliding from one note to another) and strong *pizzicati*. The piece is the most tightly constructed of Bartók's six string quartets, the whole deriving from a relatively small amount of thematic material integrated into a single continuous structure; it is Bartók's shortest quartet.

The work was dedicated to the Musical Society Fund of Philadelphia, and took shared first prize in an international competition for chamber music run by them.

## **BRAHMS**

*String Quintet No. 2 in G Major, Op. 111 (1890)*

After drawing the final double barline for this work, Brahms decided to retire. Though he was only 57 years old, he sent the manuscript to his publisher with a note: “With this letter you can bid farewell to my music—because it is certainly time to leave off.” He was living comfortably and his music was widely celebrated. He was a man with the instinct to step down from a height rather than to slip into decline. But rarely does a composer truly retire, and so it was for Brahms: after just a few months of rest, he was lured back to write several important clarinet works (quintet, trio, and two sonatas), which he followed with some assorted smaller pieces, and then in 1896 *Vier ernste Gesänge (Four Serious Songs)* as a gift for Clara Schumann as she was dying. Less than a year later, Brahms followed her, departing at age 63, though he had long resembled a much older man behind a thick grey beard.

The *String Quintet No. 2 in G Major* stands as a monumental “bookend” to Brahms' career. The piece's initial sketches were conceived as a possible fifth symphony, and the resulting chamber work, scored for string quartet with an added viola, feels almost symphonic. The additional middle register voice makes for extra tonal weight and depth. It is a breathtaking composition, creating the effect of far more than five instruments.

A bold statement by the cello launches the first movement. Fighting its way through the ecstatic, pulsating lines of the other instruments, this lowest voice asserts its presence. The second theme, introduced by the viola, relaxes into a lilting Viennese waltz rhythm. The movement's energy never really abates, despite much quiet material.

The *adagio* second movement begins with a viola duet propelled forward by the cello's *pizzicato*. This melancholy music unfolds as a set of mysterious and restless variations. The final bars drift into quiet repose. This movement is to be admired for its rich, bold harmonies and progressions.

As is typical of Brahms, the third movement is not a *scherzo* but, instead, a slower *intermezzo* in triple meter. Mysterious and autumnal, its gentle forward motion floats somewhere between a melancholy waltz and a minuet.

The joyful final movement erupts in wild Hungarian folk dances. It's the ultimate party music, reminiscent of the Hungarian Dances which were so commercially profitable for Brahms. The development section teems with brilliant fugal counterpoint. The final moments feel increasingly carefree, culminating in a coda which surges forward in a jubilant celebration.

Unsurprisingly, the first performance of this work in Vienna on November 11, 1890 was a sensational success.