

ARTARIA STRING QUARTET 2022-23

November Program

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quartet in C Major, K. 465, “Dissonance”

Adagio; Allegro

Andante cantabile

Menuetto: Allegro

Allegro

Composed: 1785

Approximate duration: 29 minutes



As Haydn forged the Classical Period and Beethoven pushed it towards Romanticism, Mozart consolidated it in a way unmatched by any other composer. To it he brought not only the elegance and grace we associate with the earlier Baroque Period, but also the brilliance, power, and clarity that define the Classical Period. So, too, was Mozart a melodic and harmonic innovator. His death at thirty-five has left us with endless unanswered questions of where he would have taken his profound effect on Western music. Despite the brevity of his life, he produced a catalogue of works that defined opera, the Mass, the symphony, the piano concerto, and the piano sonata. To chamber music he brought his rich array of duo sonatas, string quartets, and quintets that never dull in their many performances. Those who play his music will quickly attest to its singular virtuosic challenges based on a demand for absolute clarity.

Four days after finishing the K. 464 Quartet, Mozart completed the C Major K. 465, “Dissonance” Quartet, the last of his six quartets composed between 1782 and 1785. Its incongruous nickname stems from the opening twenty-two measures that offended the 18th century sensibility—so much so that audiences insisted they heard wrong notes and players asked the publisher for corrected scores. Haydn reportedly commented, “Well, if Mozart wrote it, he must have meant it.” All this merely points to the inventive and groundbreaking quality of the “Haydn” quartets and, in particular, to the “Dissonance” Quartet, as it was called.

Indeed, the opening *Adagio* is disturbing even to modern ears, not on the basis of its dissonance but certainly because of its ominous nature suggested by the repeated notes of the cello and the pervading dark tonality. Without warning, we are thrust into tragedy. Twenty-two bars later, Mozart bursts into the brightest of C major merriment. We are left astounded.

The second movement *Andante Cantabile* is one of Mozart’s most rapturous songs. The rapture, however, is underscored by profundity. A four-note theme is passed among the instruments followed by a curious duet between the highest and lowest sonorities of the string quartet, the first violin and cello.

Contrast again marks the third movement in what could be best described as horizontal versus vertical music. The gentle *Menuetto* flows along in canon style until the Trio section where we hear the upward and downward leaps in melodic line, a technique for which Mozart is famous. The minor key of the Trio also contributes to the sense of contrast dominating this movement that is so filled with Mozart’s imprints.

All thoughts of darkness are dispelled in the last movement *Allegro* which exudes all of Mozart’s glorious wit, charm, and good humor as well as his great compositional skills, including his use of counterpoint. A brilliant coda brings this adventure to a glorious end.

Elizabeth Maconchy (1907-1994)
String Quartet No. 3
In one movement

Composed: 1938

Approximate duration: 12 minutes



Elizabeth Maconchy was a composer of great versatility, amply deserving of a British critic's description of her as "one of the most substantial composers these islands have yet produced." Born to Irish parents in Hertfordshire on 19 March 1907, she grew up in rural Ireland, playing the piano and writing music from the age of six. She studied at the Royal College of Music with Vaughan Williams, who remained a lifelong friend, but she was attracted less by English traditionalism than by the central European modernism of Bartók and Janáček. She completed her studies with K.B. Jiráček in Prague. In the post-war era, Maconchy was greatly in demand as a composer among the leading professional ensembles, orchestras and soloists of the day, while also writing for amateurs and students, and was recognized as a leader of her profession.

She chaired the Composers' Guild of Great Britain, was President of the Society for the Promotion of New Music, and in 1987 was appointed Dame of the British Empire. She lived in an Essex village with her husband, the scholar and medical historian William LeFanu. The younger of their two daughters is the composer Nicola LeFanu.

If Maconchy's String Quartet No. 3 is new to your ears on this program, you will wonder why on hearing it. If its modernity is the cause of the delay, you may find yourself taking a whole new appreciation of new music. In a single movement, the work offers a very moving opening with virtuosic demands shared by all four instruments. A repeated theme leads to a dramatic development. Intensity persists but in a way that offers remarkable variety. Dominant throughout the brief twelve-minute work is a tragic sense.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)
String Quartet No. 1 in D Major, Op. 35
Andante sostenuto; Allegro vivo
Allegretto con slancio
Andante calmo
Molto vivace

Composed: 1941

Approximate duration: 25 minutes



Benjamin Britten's music defies the questionable notion that English composers are hindered by a certain country gentlemanliness. His operas such as *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and *Death in Venice* as well as his monumental *War Requiem* attest to this, but so do his three string quartets. The first two were written in 1941 and 1945, respectively. The third was composed in 1975 and premiered by the Amadeus Quartet on December 19, 1976, after Britten's death two weeks before that.

Despite his larger world view, Benjamin Britten was thoroughly English in his loyalties and in many of his musical interests, particularly the works of Henry Purcell. He graduated from London's Royal College of Music in 1933 but earlier came under the influence of Frank Bridge and his experimental style that reflected the works of Bartók and Schoenberg. Just prior to World War II, Britten became one of the outstanding composers, conductors, and pianists in the British musical scene. He is universally regarded for his compositional technique and his work that is both intellectually challenging and emotionally engaging.

Benjamin Britten's pacifism led him to leave his beloved England for America where, in 1941 in Amityville, Long Island, he composed his First String Quartet under a commission from the famous American musical patroness, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge. The work was premiered in Los Angeles in September 1941 by the Coolidge String Quartet and later awarded a Library of Congress Medal.

A certain humor infuses the Op. 35 Quartet despite an opening dissonance. In the first movement, we next hear a rhythmically and melodically lively section followed by a more delicate one and then an alternation between the material of the slow opening and the robust first theme. The delicacy of the second movement is interrupted by the viola, and there seems to be almost a humorous struggle to keep that instrument in its place. The third movement *Andante calmo* does not remain “calm,” as suggested by the tempo marking, but instead incorporates a faster middle section and some thematic material from the dissonant opening of the Quartet before it closes quietly. Britten reveals his compositional skills in the last movement with a complex fugue which, in turn, is interrupted by a slow second theme. We are brought, however, to a lively conclusion fulfilling the *Molto vivace* tempo marking of the movement.

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