

Schubert

Quartet Number 15, D 887

In 1826, when Schubert was 29 years old, he composed his final, enormous string quartet, hence the nickname “The Great G Major.” Perhaps it is the length that partially explains why it is rarely heard. Edward Dusinberre, the Takács Quartet’s first violinist commented, “it has tremendous technical challenges. I think people are a little scared of it!” (The Boston Globe: February 2011) Amazingly, Schubert penned the work in only ten days from June 20 to 30. This is the first performance of Quartet No. 15 for Ensemble Music Society in our 69 years of presenting concerts.

In his book “Schubert, The Music and the Man”, Brian Newbould writes: “The G major quartet stands among the heights of compositional endeavor a quarter of the way through the nineteenth century. It occupies a lone pinnacle, facing the ridge of Beethoven’s late quartets on the opposite side of a valley. It does not meet those works on their own ground, in that Schubert eschews their radical transmogrification of the genre, in which the number and types of movements are diversified, and is less concerned than Beethoven with the twin third-period forces of fugal counterpoint and variation. The most radical step taken by Schubert is of quite a different kind: he elevates the opposition of major and minor to the status of a theme.”

D 887 premiered on December 8, 1850, in Vienna with the Joseph Hellmesberger Quartet. It was not published

however until 1851. If you saw Woody Allen's 1989 film "Crimes and Misdemeanors" the first movement is used as the background when a woman's assassin (arranged by a spurned lover) is introduced.

The first movement, *Allegro molto moderato*, has a strange beginning: major and minor slashing chords, sudden changes in dynamics, create an instability which is not relieved until a lyrical theme is presented at bar fourteen from the first violin. Note the tremolando chords and shaking individual tones that pervade the movement, giving an unsettled sound throughout. A second theme features syncopated rhythms, and is first displayed by the violin. The cello repeats the second theme, accompanied by pizzicato support, before the viola gets a turn, again with pizzicato accompaniment and high commentary from the first violin. The development section is complicated, intense, highlighting the minor/major modal shifts, moving again in sudden scary dynamic shifts, and rapid passagework. The effect is rough and shocking, quieted only by occasional tenderness from the first violin. The ending is sealed by seven heavy chords.

The second movement, *Andante un poco moto*, opens with a wild chord before the cello sings a slowly paced lament. As the violin offers high contrasting embellishments, the other three members gradually emerge to enhance the cello's presentation. The slashing chord idea rushes in from time to time to shake up the serenity; tremolando chords also re-appear: there is no rest or

reprieve from insistent threats. Such unprepared alternations of dynamics and contrasting moods create a personality of uncontrolled bi-polar passion and manic stress. There is a peaceful close.

The third movement moves into a fast paced D major Scherzo. Herein, Schubert writes playfully, with light, graceful music in soft dynamics. Its mid-section trio pairs the instruments in a succession of duets and individual singing, closing quietly. The skittering opening is recalled to complete the traditional ABA format.

The fourth movement, Allegro assai, produces a whirling tarantella in rondo structure. All forces are on deck to present the congenial opening theme. From that point on, there is general camaraderie among all parts, no more frenzy. The first violin is clearly the leader throughout the setting, a nice romp for all. Gradually, dynamics sink amid rapid-fire passages: down to a pianissimo as the quartet approaches the finish line. Not to let the quartet drift into nothingness, Schubert provides two forte chords, suddenly turning the quartet off in a brusque, affirmative goodbye.