

St. Petersburg String Quartet

Saturday, November 15, 8 pm, 2003
First Congregational Church

Alla Aranovskaya, violin
David Chernyavsky, violin
Aleksey Koptev, viola
Leonid Shukaev, cello

PROGRAM

Zurab Nadarejshvili Quartet No. 1 (1983)
Andante
Allegro vivace
Ad libitum (quasi adagio)

Alexander Borodin Quartet No. 2 in D Major
Allegro moderato
Scherzo: Allegro
Nocturne: Andante
Finale: Andante – Vivace

INTERMISSION

Dmitri Shostakovich Quartet No. 9 in E-flat Major, Op. 117 (1964)
Moderato con moto
Adagio
Allegretto
Adagio
Allegro

The St. Petersburg String Quartet appears by arrangement with
Lisa Sapinkopf Artists, www.chambermuse.com.

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Quartet No. 1 (1983)

Zurab Nadarejshvili (b. 1957)

Zurab Nadarejshvili was born in 1957 in the town of Poti, Georgia. While studying engineering at the Georgian Polytechnical Institute, he began to take a keen interest in music and started lessons with the composer Shugliashvili.

From 1979 to 1982, Nadarejshvili studied in the Music College in Poti, and in 1982, he entered the Tbilisi Conservatory, where he studied composition under Professor Kvernadze. He now lives in Tbilisi, where he teaches Music Theory at the Conservatory.

His works include a piano quintet (which was given its world premiere at Columbia University's Miller Theater by the St. Petersburg String Quartet and pianist Justin Blasdale in 1997); a quintet for guitar and string quartet commissioned by the St. Petersburg Quartet and guitarist Paul Galbraith, which received its world premiere at Stanford University in March 2003; a symphonic poem; variations for piano and orchestra; psalms for chamber orchestra; music for 13 string instruments; two string quartets; a wind quintet; various other chamber and instrumental pieces; as well as music for a number of cartoons and theater performances.

Quartet No. 1 received First Prize at the Young Composers Competition in Moscow in 1987. It is a musical reflection of the emotional experience of the Georgian people during the period of Stalinism and World War II. Georgia is renowned for its ancient musical culture of spirited dances and marvelous distinctive polyphonic choral music. The 1st movement (Andante) of the Quartet No. 1 is based on ancient Georgian chants, contrasting with the second movement (Allegro vivace), which echoes the pseudo-folk songs of the 1930s. The third (and longest) movement (Ad libitum) is based on an authentic Georgian lament for the dead.

The Boston Globe has called the piece "vivid, gripping music," and The New York Times wrote: "The committed advocacy of great performers must be the fondest dream of any aspiring composer. . . the enterprising efforts of violinist Gidon Kremer . . . accelerated immeasurably [the renown of Schnittke and Arvo Pärt] in the West. Now the superb St. Petersburg String Quartet seems determined to do something similar for Zurab Nadarejshvili . . . a fresh and innovative voice. . . . His music should receive wider circulation, and undoubtedly will as the career of the splendid St. Petersburg String Quartet continues to rise."

—St. Petersburg String Quartet

Quartet No. 2 in D major

Alexander Borodin (1833–1887)

In June of 1881, Borodin was in Weimar trading compliments with Franz Liszt. Despite the gratification of this activity, Borodin was eager to return to Russia, where he was to meet his wife for a summer holiday in Zhitovo at the country estate of his friend, the composer Nikolai Lodyzhensky. The stay was to be a welcome, two-month respite for Borodin from the strenuous duties of his career as one of the country's leading researchers and teachers in chemistry and medicine. In addition to spending time with his wife, Catherine ("Catherine the Great," he sometimes chided her), he could also compose uninterruptedly, a luxury he rarely enjoyed. So little time did his schedule leave him for creative work, in fact, that he accurately labeled himself a "Sunday composer." In 1875, he wrote to an acquaintance,

"In winter, I can only compose when I am

too unwell to give lectures. So my friends, revising the usual custom, never say to me, 'I hope you are well,' but 'I do hope you are ill.' At Christmas I had influenza, so I stayed home and wrote the 'Chorus of Thanks' in the last act of Prince Igor." Given leisure and a

halcyon summer setting at Zhitovo, he completed his String Quartet No. 2 during

July and August 1881, virtually his only important work finished in a single session. The new piece was premiered by the Galkin–Degtyerev–Rezvetsov–Kuznetsov Quartet at a concert of the St. Petersburg branch of the Imperial Russian Music Society on January 26, 1882.

The summer of 1881 was the twentieth anniversary of Borodin's meeting his wife. He dedicated the score to Catherine, and his biographer Serge Dianin thought that "it is logical to assume that this work is a memento of his love as a young man for her." As musical evidence for his theory, Dianin cited the unabashedly lyrical nature of the quartet, and the fact that Catherine was given to intense sentimentality over anniversaries with her husband. Dianin then went on to posit that the first movement represents Borodin's "growing love for Catherine"; the second, "a description of one of their walks" (the composer told his friend E.M. Braudo that this Scherzo "attempted to conjure up an impression of a light-hearted evening spent in one of the suburban pleasure gardens of St. Petersburg"); the Nocturne "is simply a love scene"; and the Finale "relates to their married life." It is a pleasant conceit and may not even be untrue, though Borodin left no evidence other than the score's dedication to support it.

The opening movement follows conventional sonata form, with its smooth, even-treading main theme given immediately by the cello; the more animated complementary melody is initiated by the violin above a pizzicato accompaniment. The second and third movements, a Scherzo and a Nocturne, will be forever linked with the 1953 Broadway musical *Kismet*, whose score was the result of unashamed raids upon Borodin's music by Robert Wright and Luther Davis. Though the artistic merits of such a practice are debatable, the popularity that Borodin's melodies gained in their theatrical transmogrifications is vivid testimony to his lyric genius. The closing movement juxtaposes two thematic strains in contrasting tempos as the bases for another sonata form, a technique that critic Andrew Porter suggested might have been indebted to Beethoven's Op. 135 Quartet, whose finale grew from the musical rendering of the exchange, "Muss es sein? Es muss sein!" ("Must it be? It must be!").

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Quartet No. 9 in E-flat Major, Op. 117 (1964)
Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975)

In 1948, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and many other important Soviet composers were condemned for threatening the stability of the nation with their "formalistic" music. Through Andrei Zhdanov, head of the Soviet Composers' Union and the official mouthpiece for the government, it was made known that any experimental or modern or abstract or difficult music was no longer acceptable for consumption by the country's masses. Only simplistic music glorifying the State, the land, and the people would be performed: symphonies, operas, chamber music—any forms involving too much mental stimulation—were out; movie music, folk song settings, and patriotic cantatas were in.

Shostakovich saw the iron figure of Joseph Stalin behind the purge of 1948, as he was convinced it had been for an earlier one in 1936. After the 1936 debacle, Shostakovich responded with the Fifth Symphony, and kept composing through the War years, even becoming a world figure representing the courage of the Soviet people with the lightning success of his Seventh Symphony ("Leningrad") in 1941. The 1948 censure was, however, almost more than Shostakovich could bear. He determined that he would go along with the Party prerogative for pap, and withhold all of his substantial works until the time when they would be given a fair hearing—when Stalin was dead. About the only music that Shostakovich made public between 1948 and 1953 was that for films, most of which dealt with episodes in Soviet history (The Fall of Berlin, The Memorable Year 1919), and some patriotic vocal works (The Sun Shines Over Our Motherland and Song of the Forests, which won the 1949 Stalin Prize). The only significant works he released during that half-decade were the 24 Preludes and Fugues for Piano. The other compositions of the time—the First Violin Concerto, the Songs on Jewish Folk Poetry, the Fourth and Fifth String Quartets—were all withheld until later years.

With the death of Stalin on March 5, 1953 (ironically, Prokofiev died on the same day), Shostakovich and all of the Soviet Union felt an oppressive burden lift. The thaw came gradually, but there did return to the country's artistic life a more amenable attitude toward art, one that allowed significant works to again be produced and performed. Shostakovich, whose genius had been shackled by Stalin's repressive artistic policies, set to work on the great Tenth Symphony, and composed steadily thereafter until his death two decades later. The creations of his later years are sharply divided into two seemingly antithetical streams, though each reveals a fundamental aspect of Shostakovich as man and artist. One series of works, including the Symphonies No. 11 ("The Year 1905," extolling Lenin) and No. 12 ("1917"), cantatas, film music, patriotic marches and choruses, and instrumental scores in a popular vein (the Piano Concerto No. 2, for example), is for public consumption and the fulfillment of his duties as "People's Artist of the USSR," a title conferred upon him in 1954. Paralleling these noisy, jingoistic entries is a large repertory of pieces that are both profound and personal: the magnificent and disturbing last symphonies (No. 13, "Babi Yar," based on Yevtushenko's searing poem about the German army's massacre of 70,000 Jews near Kiev in September 1941; No. 14, settings of 11 texts dealing with death; and No. 15, one of the most stark and moving orchestral documents of the 20th century), the First Violin Concerto, the songs on verses of Alexander Blok and Michelangelo Buonarroti, and,

perhaps most significant of all, the last 10 of his 15 string quartets. As had Beethoven, Shostakovich used the medium of the string quartet as the bearer of his most intimate and deep-seated feelings, a musical window into his soul. The wealth of thought and the clarity of expression in these quartets is nothing short of staggering, and as an oeuvre they are matched in the 20th century only by those of Béla Bartók.

The Ninth Quartet was composed quickly during the early summer of 1964, one of the busiest periods of Shostakovich's life. His 1932 opera *Lady Macbeth of Mzensk*, the work that provided the excuse for his condemnation in 1936, was enjoying a fine international success in its 1956 revision, and he traveled to London and Zagreb to oversee productions in those cities at the turn of the new year. Also in the early months of 1964, he continued his teaching duties at the Leningrad Conservatory, attended music festivals in Gorky and Tashkent, completed the background score for a film of *Hamlet*, took care of some affairs for the Soviet Composers' Union in Rostov-on-Don, met with Benjamin Britten during that composer's visit to Moscow, and composed. Following the May Day celebrations in Moscow, Shostakovich spent a week at his dacha in Zhukovka, recovering from his travels, enjoying the time with his wife, Irina, and beginning the Quartet No. 9. He completed the work at the end of the month (after two more weeks away from home), and dedicated the score to his wife. The premiere was given in the Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatory on November 20, 1964 by the Beethoven Quartet, the ensemble that introduced most of Shostakovich's quartets during their long musical alliance with him.

V. Shirinsky, first violinist of the Beethoven Quartet, wrote that the Ninth Quartet shows "grandeur, drama and a certain austerity." The work's five movements (fast-slow-fast-slow-fast) are unified by their sharing of thematic fragments and by their uninterrupted connection one with the next. The opening *Moderato* is based on two themes: a doleful, wandering motive introduced by the first violin above a murmuring figure that courses incessantly throughout the movement; and a slightly grotesque little march from the cello. An octave-leap figure is spun from the march melody and combined with the principal themes for the balance of the movement. The succeeding *Adagio*, using a melody of curious modal leadings, is a poignant dialogue between the first violin and the viola. The following scherzo is constructed in symmetrical "arch" form: A-B-C-B-A. The central trio, enlisting a dance-like strain chided throughout by soft trills, is flanked by music of quick rhythms shared by all the instruments (and played without mutes). The opening and closing sections (muted) are based on a cheeky tune with a goodly number of nose-thumbing, intentional wrong notes.

The fourth movement is music of stone and ice, and creates a certain bleak beauty at which Shostakovich was unexcelled. The lower strings give out a frozen chorale in octaves and thirds while the first violin emits timid, undulating sighs. The violin then posits a melody that tries to soar upward only to collapse back almost immediately upon itself to be met by the angry snappings of the second violin in a horrific transformation of the chorale theme. The process is repeated by the viola, but, despite the hollow howls of the lower strings, the first violin sings a brief, mournful incantation in its highest register before, drained of energy and enthusiasm, it again gives itself up to sighs and silence. The finale is a vast sonata form (main theme in fast triple meter; subsidiary theme in duple) incorporating motives from the earlier movements.

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The St. Petersburg String Quartet was founded as the Leningrad Quartet by Alla Aranovskaya and Leonid Shukaev, both graduates of the Leningrad Conservatory. The Quartet blazed a trail through international chamber music competitions, winning First Prize at the All-Soviet Union String Quartet Competition, the Silver Medal and a Special Prize at the Tokyo International Competition of Chamber Ensembles, First Prize and both Special Prizes at the Vittorio Gui International Competition for Chamber Ensembles in Florence (Italy), and First Prize and the "Grand Prix Musica Viva" at the International Competition for Chamber Ensembles in Melbourne, Australia.

When the city of Leningrad resumed its historic name, the Quartet changed its name to the St. Petersburg String Quartet. The ensemble has received a host of awards, including a Grammy

nomination, "Best Record" honors from both Stereo Review and Gramophone, and the Chamber Music America/WQXR Prize for Best CD of 2001. The Quartet held the position of quartet-in-residence at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music from 1997–2003.

In 2003, the St. Petersburg String Quartet proudly commemorates the 300th anniversary of its namesake city and will be performing around the globe in events honoring the arts of St. Petersburg. These occasions, however, are just one part of the renowned ensemble's busy season. The group premiered Rhapsody for String Quartet and Guitar by Georgian composer Zurab Nadarejshvili (co-commissioned with guitarist Paul Galbraith) at Stanford University; has over 50 concerts scheduled across the United States; appeared in London and Manchester, England, as well as in Berlin and Wiesbaden, Germany; and toured Ireland, Holland, Italy, Japan, and Mexico.

Audiences from Toronto to Tokyo, from Lithuania to London, and in music halls across the United States routinely give the St. Petersburg Quartet standing ovations, and no classical CD collection is complete without recordings by the acclaimed group. Avid collectors are already anticipating the St. Petersburg's completion of the works of Tchaikovsky for string quartet on Dorian, which follows the release of the complete Shostakovich cycle (Hyperion), and (for Delos) Prokofiev's two quartets, Nadarejshvili's String Quartet No. 1, and Glazunov's Quartet No. 5.

The St. Petersburg Quartet will return to the Bay Area to play in the inaugural "Chamber Music San Francisco" series on May 26 and 29, 2004.