Program Notes

Luigi Boccherini
Quintet in G minor for Two Violins, Viola, and Two Cellos, G. 318, Op. 29, No. 6

- Born February 19, 1743, in Lucca
- Died May 28, 1805, in Madrid
- Composed in 1779

Luigi Boccherini was one of the greatest cellists of the 18th century. He was famous for his ability to play fluently in the upper range of the instrument by bringing the thumb of the left hand around from behind the cello's neck and using it as an additional finger in passagework. He was so adept at getting around up high that he would occasionally play violin music at pitch, filling in for violinists who had to drop out of a concert at the last minute. Piercing, flute-like virtuosic figurations and stratospheric melodic lines appear in his many sonatas for cello and continuo and in his solo cello concertos.

He started writing quintets for two violins, viola, and two cellos in the 1770s, while he was employed in the court of Infante Luis Antonio, younger brother to Charles III, the king of Spain. Don Luis had an excellent string quartet at his disposal, consisting of the violist Federico Font and his sons, and it was likely for performance with them that Boccherini conceived his quintets for this hitherto uncommon combination of instruments.

The first-cello parts in Boccherini's quintets are always technically demanding, but these pieces are decidedly not concertos for cello and string quartet. Indeed, in the third movement of this 1779 G-minor String Quartet, a serious *Preludio* that oddly doesn't come first in the sequence, the two cellos play in unison for almost the entire time. Boccherini instead seems to be interested in writing true chamber music in which a lone cellist occasionally competes with the first violinist for prominence among the other voices. In the opening *Allegro moderato assai*, the first violin's severe gestures dominate the initial section, while both cellos diligently serve accompanimental roles. Then, rather suddenly, the first violin is joined by the first cello for a fluttering major-key duet played in close harmony. In the middle of the movement, the first cellist breaks out into an almost comical sequence of arpeggios that ascend to the very end of the fingerboard, then humbly returns to more responsive chamber music fare.

At the very end of the movement, the first cello has a sequence of broken chords that are rapidly rolled across several strings, while the other instruments enjoy some

light, almost mechanical-sounding offbeats. The cello's incessant arpeggios create a delicate, recognizable texture that reoccurs throughout piece. We hear it again in the contrasting trio of the second movement, supporting a mournful variation on the chipper G-major minuet found in the outer sections of the movement. He also uses this texture to bookend a high cello solo in the middle of the closing *Rondo*, a movement that is otherwise led by the first violin. Repeating and varying specific instrumental techniques is one of the main methods that Boccherini uses to create coherence in his pieces. This is certainly a different means of binding together a work than developing melodic fragments, rhythms, and harmonies—the preferred compositional adhesives of many of Boccherini's contemporaries like Joseph Haydn and W. A. Mozart. But physical, performed unities like the string-crossing arpeggios used in this quintet can be an equally effective way to support vibrant contrasts across the separate parts of a large-scale piece of chamber music.

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Ludwig van Beethoven
Trio in G major for Violin, Viola, and Cello, Op. 9, No. 1

- Baptized December 17, 1770, in Bonn (likely born December 16)
- Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna
- Composed in 1797–98

Beethoven moved to Vienna in 1792 at the age of 21, and he quickly established himself as the next rising star on the music scene. While he wasn't yet the living legend he would eventually become, he had generous patrons (like Prince Karl Lichnowsky, who gave him lodging early on and was the dedicatee of his Op. 1) and great connections (among them Haydn and the celebrated violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh) that helped his career immensely. He dazzled audiences with his ferocious piano playing and bested his rivals in virtuosic piano duels. New compositions came slowly at first (he brought with him a number of works composed in his native Bonn) but after a few years he was consistently publishing sets of chamber music. He soon helped his two younger brothers move to Vienna and begin supporting themselves. The future looked bright.

As soon as he arrived in Vienna, Beethoven began studying with Haydn, then the most famous composer in Europe. Haydn was well-known for his string quartets, among other things, and Beethoven put off writing quartets in order to delay direct comparisons between them. In fact, just as the

aristocracy enjoyed Beethoven's piano duels, they also relished a sort of quartet composition duel; when Beethoven finally agreed to write six quartets, the commissioner, Prince Lobkowitz, commissioned a set from Haydn at the same time. Haydn's health was starting to fail, however, and he only completed two.

To prepare for the eventual scrutiny his quartets would see, Beethoven wrote five string trios in the 1790s. Toward the end of the decade, he switched to writing quartets and never composed string trios again. His first two trios, Op. 3 and 8, were both in the style of serenades, much like Mozart's stunning Divertimento in E-flat major, K. 563. With six and five movements respectively, Beethoven's two early trios are light, tuneful, and have two dance movements apiece. The first trio was written soon after Mozart's divertimento was published in 1792 and was closely modeled on it. Op. 8, probably written a few years later, is more of a crowd pleaser and was very popular in its day. The three string trios that comprise Op. 9 are different—they're each in the four-movement standard for serious works at the time (and which all of Haydn's later quartets and Beethoven's earlier quartets employed).

This piece opens with a tentative, slow, and slightly coy introduction before the first theme pulls itself together and gets moving. The rest of the movement is early Beethoven at its best—rhythmically propulsive, with lots of collegial interplay between the instruments (especially the violin and cello), and a sneaky modulation to the minor mode. The slow movement, marked *cantabile* (singing), looks forward to Beethoven's later works in its barely restrained emotion. A sturdy, lively *Scherzo* leads to an off-the-chain final movement. The main theme of the last movement is a fiery fiddling tune that each instrument plays separately, and when all three come together the music drops into a sort of deranged hoedown that leads to an explosively energetic ending.

Program note by Laura Keller,

Jean-Baptiste Barrière Sonata in G major for Two Cellos

- Born May 2, 1707, in Bordeaux
- Died June 6, 1747, in Paris
- Composed after 1742

In a prototypical Baroque sonata, there was a solo voice or voices, a cello holding down a bassline, and a harpsichord or other chordal instrument that doubled the bottom line while filling out the harmonies according to numerical instructions in the score (so-called "figured bass"). In mid-18th-century France, writers of sonatas began to adopt a practice of freeing the accompanimental cello from its bassline duties and allowing it to play middle voices. This approach to continuo writing is quite prevalent

in the 24 cello sonatas of Jean-Baptiste Barrière: the second string player is regularly given "tasto solo" lines, which jump up to harmonize with the solo voice in pleasing thirds and sixths. Barrière, a cellist himself, seemed to love the flavor of two cellos playing together in the sweet tenor range. In the slow movement of Sonata No. 4 from his third collection (1739), he actually asks a third cellist to pop in to create a three-part cello harmony above a continuo line. And in the fourth sonata in his fourth collection, which was most likely published sometime after 1742, he goes even further, dispensing with the harpsichord altogether and writing a virtuoso work for two dueling cellists alone.

The first few measures of this "Duo" Sonata in G major (Livre 4, Sonata 4) show Barrière balancing the cello's twin identities as singer and accompanist. The voices play in closely harmonized rhythmic unison for two bars. Then, the second cellist jumps to the bottom of the instrument to bounce around on a bassline as if it had never been tempted by soloistic dreams, while the first cellist plays a melodious, scalar line. The distribution of roles is anything but predictable: the next melodic gestures belong to the second cello, and the first cello accompanies, getting lower and lower. The jobs switch constantly over the course of the movement, except at select moments where Barrière dispenses with having a bassline altogether, allowing the instruments to relish playing in melodious thirds and occasional canonic counterpoint.

The short slow movement, an *Adagio* aria, restores a soloistic role to the first cello. It begins with flowing, improvised gestures, which can't possibly fit into the ordinary time span of a counted bar. The pulse eventually grows steadier, and the two players explore some quite touching harmonic regions. The return of the improvisatory gestures marks a move to end the movement, which includes an affecting, final moment of harmonic tension where the cellos play cadential figures in thirds above their open D-strings. Barrière is stretching the harmonic potential of the cello to its natural limits here, suggesting that even without the keyboard, the two string players are capable of chordal richness.

The last movement is a flying, *Allegro prestissimo* show piece for the two cellists. Basslines are all but abandoned here, as the players chase one another around on virtuoso noodles. Suddenly, in the second half of the movement, the action halts, the musicians switch to an *Adagio* tempo, and the first cello brings about a B-minor cadence with melancholy passions reminiscent of the slow movement. Then, as if nothing has happened, the flurry of sixteenth notes continues and the cellists run each other off stage.

In 1758, the critic M. Maisonelle published a book of observations on the state of French music and musicians. In an entry on cellists and cello repertoire, he endorses Barrière, who had died in 1747, saying "he had as much caprice as talent" and "he has left some very good sonatas, which skilled players practice every day." In the sudden, melodramatic *Adagio* of the final movement of the G-major sonata, we get a taste of that capriciousness—and the rest of the movement gives both cellists something to woodshed in the practice room day after day.

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Alfredo d'Ambrosio
Suite for Strings, Op. 8

- Born June 13, 1871, in Naples
- Died December 28, 1914, in Paris
- Composed in 1900

Alfredo d'Ambrosio started his musical career studying violin and composition at the San Pietro a Majella Conservatory in Naples. He also spent time in London and in Madrid, where he worked with Spanish violinist Pablo de Sarasate, one of the greatest virtuosos of the 19th century. By the 1890s, d'Ambrosio had settled in Nice, where he taught, organized a concert society, played in a string quartet, and devoted time to composing. He mostly wrote violin repertoire, including two concertos and a large collection of violin-piano miniatures that proved popular among early 20th-century violinists. His output also included a ballet, an opera, and a few pieces for string quartet and quintet, which he likely wrote to play with his ensemble in Nice.

He wrote his Suite for Strings, Op. 8, by 1899 and published it the following year with a dedication to Antonio Gautier, a respected instrument collector in Nice. The suite is scored for string quartet with an extra cello. This so-called "cello quintet" instrumentation was used brilliantly by Franz Schubert in 1828, and the French composer George Onslow continued to write for these forces until the 1840s, but by the second half of the 19th century it was far more common for a string quintet to feature an extra viola. The Russian composer Alexander Glazunov, who himself played cello from time to time, brought the combination back into circulation with his 1892 Quintet. It is quite possible that d'Ambrosio had Glazunov in mind when writing his Op. 8 Suite. The first movement is a lovely *Andante*, which opens on a yearning gesture for solo cello that recalls the naked viola line that opens Glazunov's piece for these instruments. D'Ambrosio's musical language, in which he leverages thick textures to modulate at the drop of a hat, shares a great deal with the rich harmonizations that characterized Slavic composers at the turn of the century like Glazunov, Reinhold Glière, and Josef Suk.

The second movement has all the sparkle and dazzle of d'Ambrosio's violin show pieces, though it's the first cello that really gets to shine on a sassy, swagger-filled theme that must be popped out from the middle range of the instrument. In the center of the movement, the whole group barks orders and the first violin must flit and scamper around, attempting to fulfil these brusque commands. The third movement is a remarkably placid and serene *Berceuse*. There are several artfully designed passages in which the second cello repeats a plucked or bowed drone and the two violins croon far above with flexible lines that swing up and down in an unhurried manner. The bassline in the refrain involves a series of perfect fifths that lend the number an impressionistic sheen and serve as a reminder that the composer was a contemporary of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel.

The finale is the suite's most ambitious and formally complex entry. In the introduction, d'Ambrosio establishes a melody in the violin that is organized as a kind of "developing variation," the composition technique that Arnold Schoenberg attributed to Johannes Brahms in which a tune builds continuously in unexpected directions through the modified repetition of little contours. D'Ambrosio's Brahmsian melody becomes the main subject of a dense sonata form. He writes an enormous development section that changes tempo several times and introduces a new theme, and he also includes a rare, disarming reverse recapitulation section in which the sweet, major-key secondary theme is rehashed before the passionate subject that appeared first in the exposition section. D'Ambrosio wraps things up with a violent coda, cementing this movement's role as a sharp contrast to the lighter fare found in the other three entries in the suite.

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