

DANISH STRING QUARTET

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

String Quartet in A minor D 804 “Rosamunde”

Allegro ma non troppo

Andante

Menuetto. Allegretto – Trio

Allegro moderato

(approx. 38 minutes)

Intermission

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

String Quartet No. 12 in C minor D 703 “Quartettsatz”

Allegro assai

(approx. 10 minutes)

ANNA THORVALDSDÓTTIR (b. 1977)

Rituals

(approx. 21 minutes)

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

***Gretchen am Spinnrade* Op. 2 D 118**

(arr. Danish String Quartet)

(approx. 4 minutes)

Franz Schubert

String Quartet in A minor D 804 “Rosamunde”

Schubert’s String Quartet in A minor (1824) is a hauntingly melancholy work that lives a hushed world of restrained lyricism and delicate tonal shadings. All of its four movements begin *pianissimo* and *pp* is by far the most frequent dynamic marking throughout. It’s almost as if Schubert is whispering to us, seeking to draw us in closer by making us listen harder and more attentively to his musical thoughts.

The first movement opens – like the piano introduction to his lied *Gretchen am Spinnrade* and the tremolo strings leading to the first theme of his *Unfinished Symphony* – with a murmuring preamble of softly foreboding harmony circling round a minor triad, like an anxious soul pacing back and forth in a waiting room.



Into this scene already in motion his first theme enters, full of descending lines and downcast melodic gestures, reinforced in its mood of resignation by long pedal points and a persistent fateful drumroll of 16ths in the bass. These form the major musical motives developed in this movement: the opening melody, the quavering 8ths, and the drumroll 16ths, along with a trill motive introduced by the placid second theme in the major mode.



Note how this passage maintains the pedal tone in the bass and wavering chordal figuration in the middle register, linking first and second themes together texturally as variations of the same musical thought.

The development section begins as if it were a repeat of the exposition, just in another key, but soon finds itself tearing at ever shorter scraps of the opening theme in contrapuntal opposition until the drumroll 16ths lead back through a harmonic maze to the movement’s opening to begin the recapitulation.

In keeping with Schubert's volatile musical imagination this first movement does contain moments of disruptive turbulence – in the transition between first and second themes, for example, and at the climax of the development. But these merely represent a dialed-up intensity of the concern expressed by the disquiet smouldering beneath the uneasy serenity of the movement as a whole.

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The second movement *Andante* provides this quartet with its nickname. The opening 16 bars are taken from Schubert's incidental music for the play *Rosamunde*, which premiered at Vienna's Theater an der Wien in December of 1823.



The rhythmic regularity and even pace of this eminently whistle-able melody evokes the mindset of a simple soul without a care in the world. And if this opening sounds familiar to pianists, that may be because Schubert also went on to use this same motto opening in his Impromptu No. 3 in B-flat major from his Four Impromptus D 935 of 1827.

But as congenial as the mood of this movement is, it is not all hugging plush toys and sniffing daffodils. Schubert structures it as an 'abbreviated' sonata movement and makes up for the lack of a development section with a quasi-symphonic intensification of the musical rhetoric in the recapitulation in which the first theme's gentle toe-tapping dactylic rhythms (LONG short-short) become echoing hammer blows, run up to with exhilarating arpeggiations.



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The third movement *Menuetto* returns to the emotionally ambivalent atmosphere of the first movement and like that opening movement it begins with a minimalist preamble that sets the scene with a repeated figure.

The repeated introductory motive in this movement is a dotted rhythm intoned spookily in unison by all instruments, resting stone cold on the single pitch 'E'. The eeriness of this figure may derive from Schubert's quoting it from his 1819 lied setting of Friedrich Schiller's poem *Die*

Götter Griechenlandes, a poem that contrasts the desolation and joylessness of the Christian age with the vitality of pagan antiquity.



The principal minuet theme, when it arrives, adopts this dotted rhythm as its own, occasionally enhanced by a little on-rushing upbeat, and these two motives together echo throughout the minuet. This dotted rhythm provides the minuet with its dance-like character while frequent use of pedal tones and long-held bass notes gives a slightly rustic feel to the proceedings.



This drone-tone ‘country’ feel is even more prominent in the minuet’s central Trio section, which nonetheless features some elegantly decorative arabesques in the first violin.



In the *Allegro moderato* finale we find ourselves at the heart of rural music-making with a jolly and gentle village dance characterized by simple harmonies, call-and-response phrases, numerous sectional repeats, drone tones in the bass and gypsy-style ornamentation in the melody line.



The episodes in this rondo feature a toe-tapping march in the minor mode and some thrilling filigree provided by the 1st and 2nd violins as accompaniment to the various tuneful goings-on.

This finale announces that the clouds of psychological ambivalence that had hovered over previous movements have cleared. And no part of this finale communicates that message better than the little ‘skippy’ figure (derived from the minuet’s on-rushing upbeat) that keeps popping up wherever the music goes.



Franz Schubert

String Quartet No. 12 in C minor D 703 “Quartettsatz”

Schubert's early quartets were written as *Hausmusik* for performance at home by his father, his two brothers and Schubert himself. But in 1820 he began work on a new type of quartet, meant to be played by professional musicians, a quartet with the kind of dramatic intensity and wide range of expression that would come to characterize his mature style. He only finished the first movement and so this *Quartettsatz* (quartet movement) remained unpublished until the manuscript came into the hands of Brahms, who arranged for its first performance in 1867 and publication in 1870.

The spirit of Beethoven hovers over this *Quartettsatz*, and not just in Schubert's choice of key, C minor, the key associated with Beethoven's most turbulent works such as the *Pathétique* Sonata and the Fifth Symphony. There is a Beethovenian energy present from the very opening bars, which outline in tremolo the movement's first theme in a rising series of imitative entries that work their way up to a grand climax on a chromatic harmony (a Neapolitan 6th on D flat).



This is the opening salvo in a movement that will see harmonic colour as an important expressive resource in its unfolding drama. Indeed, the normal key relationships of a sonata-form movement yield in this work to Schubert's willful buoyancy of harmonic interests, no better exemplified than in his choice of A flat major (instead of G major) for the blithely 'Schubertian' second theme.



This triadic melody in the 1st violin, supported by a pillow of gentle sighs in the middle strings, contrasts vividly with the mischievously creeping chromatic lines of the first theme.

These two themes play out in a series of harmonically colourful variations on their principal motives – anxious wavering semitones alternating with carefree singable chordal skips – throughout the movement.

The juxtaposition of nervous energy and serene lyricism in this movement prompted Sir Roger Scruton to describe the work as an “outpouring of love and life in the midst of apprehension.”

Anna Thorvaldsdóttir

Rituals

Anna Thorvaldsdóttir (b. 1977) is a leading member of the astonishing cohort of musicians from her native Iceland (pop. 388,000) who have gained international recognition in recent years. This is a cohort that includes BAFTA-award-winning composer Ólafur Arnalds (b. 1986), *Gramophone Magazine* Artist of the Year pianist Víkingur Ólafsson (b. 1984) and Academy-Award-winning film composer Hildur Guðnadóttir (b. 1982).



Widely praised for her command of musical textures and sonorities, Anna Thorvaldsdóttir has had her orchestral works performed by the Philharmonic Orchestras of Berlin, New York and Los Angeles, and featured at concerts in London, Paris, and at Carnegie Hall in New York.

Rituals was commissioned by the Danish String Quartet, with support from the Vancouver Recital Society along with other organizations and was premiered by the Danes in Copenhagen on March 19, 2023.

This deeply emotional work is structured in 11 parts or ‘rituals’. There is a solemnity, a dignified sense of purpose in the way that each of these sections moves forward and this ritually slow pacing allows the ear to settle into the sonorities created, to take them in one by one and process them aurally. The composer’s musical gestures are scaled to the human ear, with melodic phrases often repeated until their intent has been absorbed.

For much of the work long drone tones in the cello provide a stable foundation of sonic resonance for the gestures occurring and textures forming above. The tone colour is mostly dark and a ceremonial sadness hovers over the work’s slow progress, in large part due to the regular recurrence of pure minor triads that hang in the ear between less serene sections.

Franz Schubert

Gretchen am Spinnrade Op. 2 D 118 (arr. Danish String Quartet)

In the single afternoon of October 19, 1814, a seventeen-year-old Franz Schubert composed a song with a text from Goethe's *Faust* that single-handedly established the lowly German *Lied* as a worthy vehicle for the highest level of artistic expression.

In Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade* (Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel) we catch Gretchen, the central female character in Goethe's play, in a kind of soliloquy as she considers her uncertain future after being seduced by the knowledge-seeker Faust, who has sold his soul to the Devil.

The most striking feature of this work is the new level of pictorialism and psychological realism it brought to the artform by means of its piano accompaniment, which vividly depicts the physical spinning of the wheel and the tapping of Gretchen's foot on the treadle as she spins, while also depicting the myriad thoughts whirling through her head as she sings.



The work is structured in three parts. In the first Gretchen bewails her downcast state (*Meine Ruh' ist hin* / My peace is gone) but then her mind wanders to pleasant memories of romantic encounters with her lover Faust.

This second section arrives at its emotional climax with her ecstatic remembrance of *sein Kuss* (his kiss):



After which she starts up the spinning wheel again and her anxious thoughts return to take her in the final section of the work to a sad realization of the life path that awaits her.

The clearly delineated four-part texture of this work – with its long fateful pedal tones in the bass, its spinning wheel depiction in two voices of the mid-range and vocal melody in the highest register – makes it ideal for transcription to the medium of the string quartet.