

Calgary Pro Musica Chamber Music Listening Club

Meeting #1 - Monday, November 8 at 7:30 PM



Quartet No. 14 in d minor, D. 810 “Death and the Maiden”

- Composer: Franz Schubert (1797 - 1828)
- Written in 1824
- The second movement is responsible for the nickname of this quartet, “Death and the Maiden,” since it is a set of variations on Schubert’s song of the same name.

About the Piece

One of Schubert’s most beloved chamber music works, written when he was 27, the d minor String Quartet is strongly characterized by stark musical juxtapositions, while maintaining a similar dark character throughout. It was written at a time when his health was a major concern and so the work is also permeated with programmatic subtexts on the theme of death. These ideas are mirrored in the text of the song (by Matthias Claudius) in which Schubert based the second movement.

The Maiden

*It's all over! alas, it's all over now!
Go, savage man of bone!
I am still young - go, devoted one!
And do not molest me.*

Death

*Give me your hand, you fair and tender form!
I am a friend; I do not come to punish.
Be of good cheer! I am not savage.
You shall sleep gently in my arms.*

This dialogue in this song has two clear moods; the terror and defiance of the young maiden and the consoling acceptance offered by death. We hear this dichotomy in the very opening of the work, where the foreboding opening measures are immediately answered with a lyrical reply. This pattern is seen throughout and on larger scales as well. For example, the Scherzo has been described as a frenzied “devils dances” while the trio section is a marked contrast of lilting delicacy.

The core of the work is the second movement, which is a set of variations on a theme taken from the piano part of Schubert's own lied from 1817. The theme is somber and sounds much like a funeral march. Schubert employs a brilliant range of varied colors, moods and textures in the five variations that follow. The final movement is a frantic and breathtaking rondo. The prevailing rhythmic pattern is that of a Tarantella (a traditional southern Italian dance used to cure the poison of a spider bite) and some say it represents the frenzied flight from death.

Recommended Recordings:

- **Ehnes Quartet:** Onyx Records (available on Apple Music, Spotify, PrestoMusic.com and others)
- **Pavel Haas Quartet:** Supraphon (available on Apple Music, Spotify, PrestoMusic.com and others)
- **Emerson String Quartet:** Deutsche Grammophon (available on Apple Music, Spotify, PrestoMusic.com and others)

Possible Discussion Topics:

- Are there other similarities between the song text and the music that you hear?
- Schubert was primarily a composer of songs. Despite the fact that he borrowed one of his songs for the second movement theme, are there other things about this music that resemble his songs?
- Despite the subtexts of death in the work, is this piece ultimately pessimistic or optimistic?