

**Program Notes**  
**October 17 and 18, 2009**  
**By Chris Morrison**



**George Frideric Handel**

**b. February 23, 1685, Halle, Germany**  
**d. April 14, 1759, London, England**

George Frideric Handel is one of the most beloved composers of music's Baroque era. He held early posts in Germany as church organist and violinist before moving to Italy to learn about Italian opera at first hand. His successes there attracted the attention of the Elector of Hanover, who brought him back to Germany as his court composer. When the Elector became King George I of England in 1714, Handel followed him to London. The Italian-language operas Handel subsequently wrote for the London stage – *Giulio Cesare*, *Alcina*, and many more – made him famous, as did his concertos and works he wrote for the King like *Water Music*. But when the audiences for Italian operas diminished by the early 1740s, Handel won even greater fame composing religious oratorios like *Messiah* (the source of the ever-popular “Hallelujah” Chorus), *Israel in Egypt*, and *Judas Maccabeus*. Decades after Handel's death, Ludwig van Beethoven, who thought Handel the greatest of all composers, said of him “I would bare my head and kneel at his grave.”

**Concerto Grosso in G major, Op. 6/1**

**Composed: 1739**

**Duration: 11 minutes**

The concerto grosso form, so popular in the early eighteenth century, was marked by the contrast between a small group of soloists (the concertino) and the entire orchestra (the tutti). For many years the most popular such works were the twelve Concertos, Op. 6 of 1714 by Italian composer Arcangelo Corelli. During his early years in Italy, Handel got to know and work with Corelli, and the influence of the older composer's work was evident when Handel finally wrote his own concertos. The twelve Op. 6 Concerti – officially titled “Twelve Grand Concertos in Seven Parts” – were composed in one month late in 1739, and quickly became some of the most popular orchestral works of their time. Their reputation hasn't flagged: in recent years *The New Grove Dictionary of Music* has ranked Handel's Op. 6 with Bach's Brandenburg Concertos as “the twin peaks of the Baroque concerto.”

The first concerto of Op. 6 is in five movements. It opens with a stately, slightly swaggering *Allegro* tempo giusto, featuring brief conversations between the two solo violins. The lively second movement is propelled by quick repeating notes in the continuo accompaniment. The meditative *Adagio* moves between elegance and sorrow, and the Concerto concludes with a pair of *Allegros*: the first contrapuntal in texture, the second in an energetic and insouciant 6/8 rhythm.



## **Dmitri Shostakovich**

**b. September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg**

**d. August 9, 1975, Moscow**

There are many who now call Dmitri Shostakovich the greatest composer of the twentieth century, his music a moving personal testament as well as a portrait of some of the seminal events of the century. His early works, such as one of the most accomplished First Symphonies ever (written at age 19 for his graduation from the Leningrad Conservatory), betray the influence of his fellow Russian composers Prokofiev and Stravinsky, as well as a brash and often sardonic sense of humor. That brashness could get Shostakovich in trouble, as with the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, which outraged Stalin and led to serious criticism in the Russian press. Works like the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies, the latter inspired by the 1941 German invasion and known as the “Leningrad,” brought him worldwide renown. He continued to suffer from artistic repression in his homeland, however, including the famous 1948 government denunciation of Shostakovich and other prominent Russian composers. Some of his subsequent music sought to curry favor with the Soviet government, although he continued to write more serious works “for the desk drawer.” His last decade was marked by ill health, and an increased level of melancholy pervades the music of those years.

### **Chamber Symphony in F major, Op. 73a (after the String Quartet No. 3)**

**Composed: 1946**

**Duration: 32 minutes**

The fifteen string quartets of Shostakovich comprise one of the most, if not the most, impressive bodies of such works by any composer since Beethoven. They are comparatively late works in his output: the String Quartet No. 1 was written after the Fifth Symphony, and nine of the quartets date to 1960 or later (as opposed to just four of the symphonies).

The String Quartet No. 3 was written in 1946, in the wake of the last work in Shostakovich’s symphonic trilogy of responses to World War II, Symphonies Nos. 7-9. The Symphony No. 9 of 1945 was at first intended to be a choral epic celebrating the Russian victory over Nazi Germany. What resulted, instead, was a much lighter work in what Shostakovich described as “a transparent, pellucid, and bright mood” that led to his censure by the Soviet hierarchy for the symphony’s “ideological weakness” and failure to “reflect the true spirit of the people of the Soviet Union.” Just after that censure, Shostakovich composed the Quartet No. 3, which was also denounced for its dark tone and ambiguous ending.

The orchestral arrangement of the quartet was made by Shostakovich’s friend and student Rudolf Barshai. Founding violist of both the Borodin and Tchaikovsky Quartets, Barshai (1924- ) has also won world renown as a conductor. He is regarded as an expert interpreter of Shostakovich’s symphonies, having recorded all fifteen and led the world premiere of the Symphony No. 14 in 1969. In 1955 Barshai founded the Moscow Chamber Orchestra, and it was for that group that he

made, with Shostakovich's approval, orchestrations of five of the composer's string quartets (Nos. 1, 3, 4, 8, and 10). Barshai's arrangement of the Quartet No. 3 calls for strings along with flute, oboe, English horn, clarinet, bassoon, and harp.

For the premiere performance of the Quartet No. 3, given in Moscow by the Beethoven Quartet (to whom the work is dedicated) in December 1946, Shostakovich created descriptive titles for the movements. Although they were never published and are seldom used nowadays, they do give a hint as to the character of the music:

I: "Calm unawareness of the future cataclysm"

II: "Rumblings of unrest and anticipation"

III: "The forces of war unleashed"

IV: "In memory of the dead"

V: "The eternal question: Why? And for what?"

The first movement strikes a light-hearted and playful tone (with an overlay of darker emotions), in a perfectly traditional sonata-allegro form complete with exposition repeat. The development section is contrapuntal, gaining intensity as it progresses. The tempo increases for the closing moments of the movement, culminating in a charming final cadence.

What was humorous in the first movement, however, turns acrid and menacing in the second, a grim waltz that moves unrelentingly to a peaceful but emotionally desolate coda. Rostislav Dubinsky, violinist of the Borodin Quartet, described the third movement as "the wild triumph of evil." It is angry, violent music, somewhere between a scherzo and a march, and combining 3/4 and 2/4 time signatures. The fourth movement – in the form of a passacaglia, with its repeating bass line – opens with a forceful, intense declaration from the strings. The answers from the winds are lonely, even desolate. With the tread of a funeral march, the bassoon takes up the main theme over repeating notes from the strings.

The finale was described by Dubinsky as "a sorrowful and moving story about Shostakovich himself and his pain and anxiety about the future of humanity." This is music that provides no easy answers to the anger and pain of the preceding movements. Low strings begin with a meandering theme punctuated by the harp. The mood briefly lightens as a jolly, sardonic tune in the winds takes over. The strings join in and the intensity builds, then recedes to near silence. The music seems to spiral downwards with a series of descending chords, drifting to an eerie coda with strums from the harp that may or may not provide some final consolation.



## **Ludwig van Beethoven**

**b. December 16, 1770, Bonn**

**d. March 26, 1827, Vienna**

One short biographical sketch on Beethoven begins “The events of Beethoven’s life are the stuff of Romantic legend, evoking images of the solitary creator shaking his fist at Fate and finally overcoming it through a supreme effort of creative will.” Those biographical details, however, such as the deafness that plagued his last three decades of life, his stormy love affairs and his famous ill temper, are dwarfed by his artistic output, which is one of the monuments of music history. He literally mastered and transformed all the musical forms of his day, and extended the range and depth of expression available to composers. Beethoven was no Mozart-like prodigy, although even in his teens he was composing and playing in orchestras. But by his twenties – after studies with the likes of Franz Josef Haydn and Mozart’s legendary nemesis Antonio Salieri – both his compositions and piano playing had garnered considerable attention. It was around the age of 30 that Beethoven first noticed his encroaching deafness, but soon thereafter began the second, or “middle,” of his creative periods, which included groundbreaking works like the “Eroica” Symphony, the “Appassionata” and “Waldstein” piano sonatas, and the opera *Fidelio*. After a period of relative musical inactivity in the late 1810s, he entered his so-called “late” period, highlighted by the Ninth Symphony and the late string quartets and piano sonatas, in which his music gained a new, very personal depth and freedom.

### **Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58**

**Composed: 1805-1806**

**Duration: 34 minutes**

By all accounts, Beethoven was one of the great pianists of his time. His pupil Carl Czerny vividly described his playing style: “Beethoven’s manner: characteristic and passionate strength, alternating with all the charms of a smooth cantabile, its outstanding feature ... Beethoven drew entirely new and daring passages by the use of the pedal, by an exceptionally characteristic way of playing, particularly distinguished by a strict legato of the chords, and this created a new type of singing tone and many hitherto unimagined effects. His playing did not possess that clean and brilliant elegance of certain other pianists. On the other hand, it was spirited, grandiose and, especially in adagio, very full of feeling and romantic.”

Beethoven’s last public appearance as a pianist before deafness ended that part of his career was at the concert that introduced his Piano Concerto No. 4: the famous Akademie concert of December 22, 1808 at Vienna’s Theater an der Wien. This four and a half hour performance featured, along with the Concerto, the premieres of the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies and the Choral Fantasy, along with three excerpts from the Mass in C major, the concert aria *Ah! perfido*, and a piano improvisation by Beethoven. The hall was unheated, the concert presented with insufficient rehearsals – from which Beethoven had been barred due to his demands and temper – and there were all manner of breakdowns and problems throughout the evening. The Piano

Concerto No. 4 puzzled that first audience: they were taken aback by the work's unconventionality, lyricism, and surprises in construction and content.

The first of those surprises comes at the very beginning of the work. Until this time, concertos had begun with the orchestra presenting the melodies that would provide the material for the rest of the movement. The soloist, if heard at all, would simply play along with the orchestra's material. Only after that would the solo instrument be heard by itself, taking the lead as it elaborates on those same melodies. Here, however, Beethoven has the pianist open the concerto unaccompanied – and quietly! Those five soft measures introduce one of the first movement's important melodies and a characteristic rhythm, three downbeats of equal value and a longer fourth note – a gentle cousin, perhaps, to the famous rhythm from the first movement of the Fifth Symphony (which Beethoven was also working on as he composed this concerto). Then the orchestra enters, also quietly, and in the distant key of B major, working its way back to G major while elaborating on that opening melody and a second, vaguely melancholy, phrase. A joyous outburst leads to the return of the piano which, with its arpeggios, trills, and other display, works its way once again, in tandem with the orchestra, through the main themes. Beethoven introduces some new ideas in the course of the subsequent development, including a couple of quiet, mysterious interludes in distant keys that provide additional contrast. The recapitulation of the main themes is much varied, and the solo cadenza features the same combination of lyricism, energy, and virtuoso display as the rest of the movement. After its gentle re-entry, the orchestra joins forces with the piano in the dramatic crescendo that closes the movement.

Beethoven has another surprise in store with the second movement, which takes the form of a dramatic dialogue between the orchestra and the piano. According to Beethoven biographer A.B. Marx, Franz Liszt, and others, this music relates to the legend of Orpheus taming the wild beasts with the music of his lyre. The orchestra is forceful, imperious, even frightening. The piano's answers are conciliatory: gentle, songful, and richly harmonized. But as the movement progresses, the orchestra's resolve seems to weaken, and it grows quieter. The piano's cadenza includes some unusual chord progressions and trills that introduce a note of anxiety. Downward runs and more trills lead to a mysterious coda.

The quiet opening of the Rondo finale barely hints at the outburst of energy to come. Trumpets and timpani, which had not been heard in the first two movements, here assert their presence, and divided violas likewise lend to the richness of the orchestral sound. The rambunctious scurry of the main theme contrasts with the laid-back nobility of the second idea. After the energetic development of these ideas, marked by considerable bravura display from the soloist, the orchestra builds to a crescendo, leading to a short but forceful cadenza by the pianist. Once again, as in the first movement, the orchestra re-enters quietly. Trills from the piano lead to the decisive conclusion of this innovative and brilliant concerto.