

**Program Notes**  
**By Chris Morrison**

**Masterworks Concert No. 1**  
**Monday, December 28, 7:00 p.m.**  
**Nightingale Concert Hall, UNR**

**Mozart: Piano Quartet in E-flat major, K. 493**  
**(Composed 1786, 30 minutes)**

Mozart wrote the first of his two Piano Quartets (in G minor, K. 478) in late 1785, part of a commission for three such works from publisher-composer Franz Anton Hoffmeister. Hoffmeister didn't much care for the new Quartet, though, thinking it too dark and complex to sell well, and cancelled the commission. A few months later, in May-June 1786, Mozart went on to write the Piano Quartet in E-flat major anyway, possibly to perform himself in Prague the following year. Compared to the dramatic G minor Quartet, the Quartet in E-flat major – described by Mozart scholar Alfred Einstein as “bright in color, but iridescent, with hints of darker shades” – is more relaxed and genial, but no less difficult to play. In fact, when the latter became popular in Europe's salons, a columnist for a Weimar music journal of the day wrote humorously of performances by less accomplished amateurs, where “everyone yawned with boredom at the incomprehensible racket of four instruments that did not keep together for four bars on end.” By contrast, he continued, “What a difference when this oft-mentioned work is performed with the greatest accuracy by four skilled musicians who have studied it carefully, in a quiet room where the suspension of every note cannot escape the listening ear.”

With its relaxed yet purposeful stride, the first movement has several themes, probably the most important of which is a graceful tune that begins in the piano and is quickly taken up by the violin. This motto is heard some 37 times throughout the movement and dominates the central development section, with its keyboard runs and string dialogues. The beautiful, expressive slow movement is largely a dialogue between the piano and the strings, dominated by a melody that Alfred Einstein described as “the purest, most childlike and godlike melody ever sung.” Dominated by an idea heard first in three unison strings accompanied by syncopated piano, the third movement, like the first, concludes with a canonic statement of main theme.

**Tchaikovsky: Piano Trio in A minor, Op. 50**  
**(Composed 1881-1882, 46 minutes)**

Brothers Anton and Nikolai Rubinstein played prominent roles in the development of Russia's musical culture in the nineteenth century. Anton (1829-1894) – a prolific composer, virtuoso pianist, and the longtime director of the St. Petersburg Conservatory (where he taught the young Tchaikovsky) – was probably the better known of the two. But it was Nikolai (1835–1881) who became a mentor and close friend to Tchaikovsky. Soon after he became director of the Moscow Conservatory, Nikolai hired Tchaikovsky as a professor. Their close relationship was famously strained when Rubinstein delivered a scathing judgment on Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1. Yet, when Nikolai suddenly died in Paris on March 3, 1881, Tchaikovsky was grief-stricken.

Months later he poured his feelings into the Piano Trio in A minor, subtitled “To the memory of a great artist.”

The first movement, “Pezzo elegiaco,” begins with an expressive theme introduced by the cello over turbulent piano figures. The instruments takes turns with the melody, which is broken up into shorter motives, then reassembled as a new melody of a distinctively Russian cast is heard. The piano introduces more new material, and all the preceding themes are developed through intensive repetition of smaller fragments, a Tchaikovsky hallmark. Eventually the themes are repeated towards the end of a movement that Tchaikovsky described as having “a somewhat plaintive and funereal coloring.”

The lengthy second movement is a set of eleven variations, said to represent episodes from Rubinstein’s life, on a rustic theme that is introduced by the piano, then taken up by the strings. After a first variation that is essentially a restatement of the theme, for the second variation the cello takes up the theme in counterpoint with the other two instruments. Pizzicati mark the third variation, and the fourth emphasizes the theme’s Russian character. The piano seems to imitate a music box, or some kind of chimes, in the fifth variation. The lengthy sixth variation is a waltz, the seventh is dominated, like its predecessor, by the piano, and the eighth is a hearty fugue. The mood darkens with the meditative ninth variation, then brightens again with the dance-like tenth. The extended eleventh variation, a substantial episode in its own right, is in sonata-allegro form, leading to a lengthy, funereal coda, which incorporates the motto theme from the first movement.

**Mendelssohn: String Quintet in B-flat major, Op. 87**  
**(Composed 1845, 30 minutes)**

Composed during the summer of 1845 at Bad Soden, one of Mendelssohn’s favorite vacation spots near Frankfurt am Main, the String Quintet in B-flat major is a passionate work, calling to mind both the composer’s famous Violin Concerto in E minor (completed at Bad Soden the year before) and the amazing Octet that Mendelssohn had written twenty years earlier as a precocious sixteen year old. Towards the end of his life Mendelssohn’s focus moved away somewhat from the melodic richness for which his works had been known, focusing instead on rhythm, tonal effects, and the development of smaller melodic segments in works like the present Quintet.

An extraverted, even aggressive opening movement gives great prominence to the first violin, making parts of the movement sound almost like a virtuoso concerto. With its regular, dance-like motion, the brief second movement serves as something of an interlude between the opening movement and the third, a dark-toned slow movement with intimations of melancholy, even tragedy, that effectively combines lyricism and a forceful, almost orchestral conception. Despite some more laid back moments, the sparkling final movement returns to the energy of the first and makes for an exciting conclusion.