

Reno Chamber Orchestra presents
The 20th Nevada Chamber Music Festival

Opening Night; with Dvořák & Balourdet
December 31, 2023
7:30 pm

Al-Zand: *Strange Machines* (String Quartet No. 4)

Composed: 2022
Duration: 12 minutes

The works of Karim Al-Zand range from scores for dance, to compositions for young people, to multi-disciplinary and collaborative works, drawing inspiration from sources including graphic art, myths and fables, folk music of the world, film, spoken word, jazz, and his own Middle Eastern heritage. He was born in Tunisia, raised in Canada, and educated at McGill University in Montreal and Harvard University. Since 2000 he has taught composition and music theory in Houston at the Shepherd School of Music, Rice University. He has received a number of awards, including the "Arts and Letters Award in Music" from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Strange Machines, otherwise known as Al-Zand's String Quartet No. 4, was written for the Balourdet Quartet, with financial support from a Chamber Music America Commissioning Grant. Al-Zand has written this about his work: "*Strange Machines* imagines three quirky musical automata. In *Alberti Machine* we encounter a steam-punk music box, its buttons, levers and dials adjusting a familiar accompanimental pattern until the machine breaks. Bach meets Rube in *Goldberg Machine*, a contraption that careens between variations in a musical chain reaction. *Mannheim Machine* is a cliché-bot, an unhinged device that furiously spits out distorted musical tropes from the dawn of the symphony."

Mozart: String Quartet No. 15 in D minor, K. 421

Composed: 1783
Duration: 28 minutes

In the early 1780s, a friendship developed between Mozart and Franz Josef Haydn. They met often in Vienna, and occasionally performed music together at Mozart's apartment. Mozart saw the older composer as a mentor, and Haydn was unstinting in his praise of the younger man, calling him "the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name." In 1781 – the year Mozart moved to Vienna – Haydn, who is generally regarded as the father of the string quartet form, published his six Op. 33 quartets. Mozart studied them with great care, and soon set to work on his own set of six quartets, including the present D minor Quartet. Composed over the years 1782 to 1785, the six quartets were dedicated to Haydn, whom Mozart addressed on the published dedication page: "A father who had resolved to send his children out into the great world took it to be his duty to confide them to the protection and

guidance of a very celebrated Man, especially when the latter by good fortune was at the same time his best Friend. Here they are then, O great Man and dearest Friend, these six children of mine.”

The Quartet in D minor's first movement begins almost hesitantly, with a sigh. Its quick, somber initial theme features somewhat irregular phrasing. A graceful second idea eases into the major, adding some decorations from the first violin over pulsations from the other instruments. The development section works at the opening phrase of the first theme for a time, building tension and exploring some surprising harmonic areas. Rising phrases characterize the graceful opening theme of the slow second movement. At the time that Mozart was writing this work, his wife Constanze was pregnant with their first child Raimund, and she later stated that those rising figures corresponded to her cries while in labor in the adjoining room! As the melody unfolds, it takes some poignant turns. A new theme is introduced, with the first violin again providing some additional flourishes. Momentary storminess intrudes briefly on the musical flow.

While technically a Menuet, the outer portions of the third movement have a darker profile, with more than a hint of defiance, even aggression. By contrast, the central section, with its *pizzicato* accompaniment, is sweet and delicate. The main theme of the fourth movement – serious, but with a gentle rocking 6/8 rhythm – is the basis for a set of variations. The first adds decorations from the first violin, and the second is propelled forward by rhythmic stabs from the viola and cello as the two violins take turns in the lead. The third variation moves tentatively, the viola for a time taking the melody over. Suddenly the major mode emerges again in the graceful fourth variation. But urgency returns in the work's final moments, its dramatic phrases culminating in a “picardy third” that resolves the work in the major.

Dvořák: Piano Quintet No. 2 in A major, Op. 81

Composed: 1887

Duration: 40 minutes

Early in his career, at the beginning of the 1870s, Dvořák composed a Piano Quintet in A major, giving it the opus number 5. Not entirely happy with the work, Dvořák didn't bother to have it published. But by the late 1880s, when he was one of the best-known composers of the day and there was a considerable demand for his music, Dvořák thought about revisiting Op. 5 and getting it published. In the end, though, rather than revising the old work, he set about writing an entirely new Quintet in the same key, completing it in October 1887 after three months of work.

The cello starts the Quintet off, presenting the well-known opening melody over piano arpeggios. After this upbeat opening, though, the composer moves quickly into the minor mode, and the tension between the charming major key music and the darker minor key explorations continues throughout the first movement. The second movement is a Dumka, a style of ballad or lament in several sections, with a repeating refrain – here an elegiac theme introduced by the piano – alternating with other sections of clearly contrasting moods. (Not long after this Quintet, Dvořák wrote an entire trio made up of nothing but Dumka-style

movements, the “Dumky” Trio, Op. 90.)

Czech folk music also provides the basis for the third movement Furiant, a dance in which the rhythm changes quickly, usually between groups of three and four. In the first section, the first violin carries the melody over rhythmic *pizzicati* from the viola and cello. After a slower section based on a variant of the opening theme, the faster music returns. Opening with a string of eighth notes over syncopation from the piano, the Finale is lively and exuberant, with a contrapuntal passage at its center, and a sort of chorale (or hymn tune) at its end. Paul Stefan sums up: “Several of his best friends have maintained that this Quintet provides a virtually lifelike portrait of Dvořák: his joy in nature and his love of melody, his feeling of communion with the world, his quickly changing moods.”

Program notes by Chris Morrison