

About the Music.

Tonight's program, *Inflection Points*, focuses on societal changes every hundred years through the lens of music. We begin in the eighteenth century: If Joseph Haydn is affectionately called the "father of the string quartet," then perhaps **Alessandro Scarlatti** could be called the grandfather.

Scarlatti wrote the **Sonata a quattro No. 4 in D Minor** as part of a collection of four sonatas for quartet in 1725. In a marking unusual for the time, these pieces were specifically labeled *senza cembalo* ("without harpsichord"). Scarlatti is largely remembered today for his opera and vocal music; these quartets were written in the last decade of his life. At the time it would have been very common for the setting of these pieces to be changeable. There are figured bass notations in the cello part (which is actually labeled "bass"), implying the addition of continuo. It also would have been possible to play a small orchestral arrangement or an arrangement with a solo part.

Scarlatti developed the reputation in his later instrumental music for writing difficult cello parts because of his association with a particularly virtuosic player named Francischiello. It is interesting to think about how such individual players shaped the course of music history; these very early precursors to the string quartet may exist because Scarlatti met Francischiello, just as Clara Schumann's pianistic virtuosity had an impact on her own music, and Beethoven's relationship to

violinists Ignaz Schuppanzigh and Joseph Böhm and the Prince Galitzin influenced the writing of his late quartets.

Written in 2019, *Clara's Ascent* is **Augusta Read Thomas's** homage to Clara Schumann on the occasion of her 200th birthday. In an interview about the piece, Thomas spoke about her personal connection to Clara and her music, saying, "It's beautiful, it's sensitive, it has a sense of proportion and meaning and eloquence, and I think that for myself, I feel that the best thing I can do is to try and write a really good piece — write a piece where I have sculpted all the nuances, cared for every dynamic, every bowing and ... put it forth ... in memory of Clara Schumann."

Music was a part of Thomas's life from when she was a small girl. Her mother was a kindergarten teacher and art was an integral part of their household. Thomas's siblings are and were poets, band members, potters, dancers, and more. Like Clara Schumann's, Thomas's musical education started very young. She wrote her first short, unfettered, playful compositions from underneath the piano.

In this eight-minute piece, the cellist serves as the protagonist: Clara. Starting in the lowest range of the instrument, over the course of the piece the player rises until "almost off the fingerboard," as Thomas puts it. She has said that although she and Schumann share many values and similarities, being a female composer

in 2026 is a vastly different experience than it was in Clara Schumann's time. Schumann had to fight for her music to be performed; she was her own greatest champion. In this sense, her ascent is even more inspiring.

Leoš Janáček wrote his **String Quartet No. 1 in E minor** for the Czech Quartet in 1923, at the request of his friend Joseph Suk, and it premiered at the Prague Mozarteum on October 17, 1924.

Janáček was fascinated by speech in music, what he called "speech melodies." He said, "We quote the speed of speech, the tonal register, the melodic rise and fall, and thus convey the expression of various states of mind." One can be sure, then, that when Janáček subtitled this first string quartet "**Kreutzer Sonata**," the literary allusion to Tolstoy's novella by the same name was quite direct.

It might seem that the clearer connection would be to Beethoven's Ninth Violin Sonata, also known as the "Kreutzer." And there is a connection here beyond the name: Janáček modified the second theme of Beethoven's first movement to become the canon between the outer voices in the third movement of his quartet. But the most pertinent connection is to Tolstoy's novella. Listening to this piece feels like watching a silent film — words spoken may not be clear, but emotions are very much so.

In the first movement one imagines an exaggerated wooing between

Tolstoy's characters of Pozdnyshv and the wife he will go on to murder, with their oscillating bouts of rage and passion. The second movement is full of bickering, jeering, and the entrance of the violist Trukachevsky, who spurs a wild jealousy in Pozdnyshv.

The third movement features pizzicatos that have the quality of strength while in Beethoven's sonata, but in Janáček's quartet they take on the quality of hen-pecked stabs. Perhaps the opening of the fourth movement is the intimate conversation between the wife and violist Trukachevsky that Pozdnyshv interrupts in a rage. An incessant galloping rhythm in the inner voices takes on the role of rising adrenaline and a quickly beating heart, until the second violin becomes the one murdered in the end; her voice is abruptly cut.

It surely must have been concerning for the first performers of **Beethoven's Opus 127 String Quartet** when Beethoven preemptively asked them to sign a document saying, "Each one is herewith given his part and is bound by oath and indeed pledged on his honor to do his best, to distinguish himself and to vie each with the other in excellence." As is often the case with Beethoven, it is hard to tell what was a result of what he called his "unbuttoned" mood (joking, crass, even vulgar) and what came from genuine, true passion and feeling.

In 1822 the Prince Galitzin offered to pay Beethoven a handsome fee to write a few new string quartets; Beethoven even agreed to write an

especially favorable cello part, as the prince was himself a cellist. Though the composer agreed, the prince would have to wait three years to hear the results of his commission. After writing the Ninth Symphony and the *Missa Solemnis*, it took Beethoven a long time to feel that he had the artistic focus to begin on the quartets.

The initial premiere of Op. 127 was unsuccessful — first violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh apparently did not live up to his oath — but after subsequent performances the work was recognized as a masterpiece, a revolution both in form and scope of the string-quartet genre.

Adolph Bernhard Marx, a critic and theorist largely responsible for defining sonata form, writes of Beethoven's reception following his Ninth Symphony, "As long as Beethoven followed Mozart he received [the audience's] applause. But in that period whenever they suspected the distinctive qualities of his music ... it was considered to be an aberration or some kind of excess." Marx concludes, "Those arbiters stayed where they were, but art didn't, nor did Beethoven."

— *Annie Jacobs-Perkins*