



The String Octet

Borromeo & Verona
String Quartets
Friday, September 27
Greenhill Center for NC Art

Two Pieces for String Octet

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Dmitri Shostakovich was a Russian born composer, most known for his powerhouse symphonies and fifteen string quartets (his Quartet No. 8 is probably his most famous, but I hold his Quartet No. 1 close to my heart). The vast majority of his works were written under close scrutiny under the Soviet Union's strict standards for the arts, which often resulted in their use for USSR government propaganda.

String chamber music has settled primarily into a traditional string trio (3 performers) or quartet (4 players). However, *Two Pieces for String Octet* essentially uses two string quartets combined. The resulting ensemble is four violins, two violas, and two cellos.

Two Pieces for String Octet was composed in 1925, when Shostakovich was in his late teenage years, and includes two parts: 1. Prelude. Adagio; and 2. Scherzo. Allegro Molto. The Prelude is a slower piece that grabs the listener's attention with a slower and hauntingly beautiful melody before moving onto an exciting and faster moving section.



The second piece, Scherzo, can easily be described as frantic. The piece uses fast and virtuosic passages, plenty of dissonance (the "crunchy" sounds of music... not necessarily pleasant but very cool!), and extended techniques, such as glissando, or sliding the finger down the string.

You are absolutely sure to love this piece. Sit back, close your eyes, and as my old symphony director used to say... "Embrace the dissonance!" Find a recording of *Two Pieces for String Octet* [here](#).

String Octet in C Major, Op. 7

George Enescu
(1881-1955)



Romanian born George Enescu was a violinist and composer, and was best known during his time for his incredible interpretations of the solo works of the famed J.S. Bach.

Enesco was only seven years old when he began attending the Vienna Conservatory to study the violin!

In 1895, he moved to Paris to attending the Paris Conservatory to study violin and composition. He later became a touring virtuoso violinist and well known composer and conductor.

Coming in at an astounding 40 minutes of performance time, it took Enescu nearly a year and a half to complete this monumental work that is divided into four movements. Enescu stated:

“I wore myself out trying to make work a piece of music divided into four segments of such length that each of them was likely at any moment to break. An engineer launching his first suspension bridge over a river, could not feel more anxiety than I felt when I set out to darken my paper.”

Enescu wanted each of the four movements to be reminiscent of the movements of a symphony, with an introductory first movement, exciting and energetic second movement, a slow and introspective third movement, and a finale to bring the work together. Similar melodies are reused, reworked, and played with throughout the entire work, making this composition a true masterpiece. [Check out a recording here.](#)

String Octet in E-flat major, *Op. 20, BWV R 20*

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Wrapping up this concert is quite possibly the “granddaddy” of all string octets, the *String Octet in E-flat Major* by German-born Felix Mendelssohn.

Mendelssohn wrote this monumental work when he was only 16 years old as a birthday gift for his violin instructor at the time!



Mendelssohn’s string octet follows standard chamber music structures, with four movements. The first, *Allegro Moderato con Fuoco*, introduces a soaring melody found in the first violin. This energetic (fuoco meaning ‘fire’) movement sets the tone for the rest of the piece. The second movement, *Andante*, slows the momentum a bit and falls on a beautifully lyrical melody. The third movement, *Scherzo: Allegro Leggerissimo*, is extremely fast paced and playful - which makes sense considering that a ‘scherzo’ is a musical joke! The final movement, *Presto*, is amazingly fast. The movement starts in the lowest part, Cello II, and gradually moves up until the first violin enters with the melody.

This piece is a delight, and has been described as “one of the wonders of the nineteenth century.” It’s easy to see why! The piece as a whole clearly reflects Mendelssohn’s youthful teenage energy. [Give the piece a listen here.](#)

Matt Wilson, Program Notes

Matt Wilson, the author of the program notes that you hopefully found illuminating and inspiring, is a violinist and violist from South Carolina. He received a Bachelor's in Music Education from Appalachian State University in Boone, NC, before teaching in the public schools for several years. He received a Master's in Music Education from UNC Greensboro and is a Doctoral Candidate in Music Education at the University of Kansas (KU) in Lawrence, KS. Rock Chalk! He is an active researcher and presenter at the state and national levels, focusing on issues of gender and sexuality in music education.

Matt has served in several leadership roles in the NC Music Educators Association - Orchestra Section. He is a member of the National Association for Music Education and the American String Teachers Association (ASTA). He is currently the Chair of ASTA's National Student Advisory Committee.

