



'Where the biggies leave off...'

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Isles Ensemble presents Bruch, Haydn, and Shostakovich at Sunday, November 11, concert

By Michael Wilson

How fascinating and informative it would be to listen in on the planning session every spring when the musicians of the Isles Ensemble meet to put together the four concerts they'll be playing for us the following season.

The body of chamber music written for strings is vast and, taken together, the eleven Ensemble members, who come from the top tier of Twin Cities musicians, know a great deal of it. According to Ensemble members Laura Sewell and Leslie Shank, each of the eleven musicians arrives with a piece that they would particularly like to play. Much discussion ensues -- who would like to play one of the other parts, which pieces go best with each other -- and in the end, along with a twelfth piece that's a favorite of everyone, four programs with three pieces each are created.

On Sunday, November 11, at 2 pm at Lake of the Isles Lutheran Church, the Isles Ensemble will play their second program of the 2018-19 season featuring works by Bruch, Haydn, and Shostakovich.

Max Bruch initially planned his Romanze (Opus 85) for Viola and Piano, written in 1874, as the first movement of a concerto for violin and orchestra, which would have been his second. He found himself unable to progress beyond the first movement, however -- most likely, according to his biographers, due to an "affair of the heart" -- and decided, due to its favorable reception, to leave it as a stand-alone work. Tim Lovelace and Sifei Cheng will play the Romanze on November 11 in an arrangement for piano and viola.

Violist Cheng has a deeply personal connection to the Romanze. "When Tim first suggested the Romanze, I thought it was a timely piece, both on a professional and personal level," Cheng says. "Not only have I not performed a viola solo since college, but I had just gone through the dissolution of my 15-year marriage. I felt insecure about whether I can love or be loved again. To me, the Romanze mirrors a relationship, from calm to turbulent times, and it reminds me that even if it ends to never give up on finding love."

Haydn: great beauty and innovation.

Following the Bruch will be Haydn's String quartet, Opus 54, No. 2 in C Major. The esteemed musicologist Richard Wigmore calls this quartet the



Isles Ensemble members, from left: Sifei Cheng, viola; Ivan Konev, piano; David Leung, violin and viola; Laura Sewell, cello; Tom Rosenberg, cello; Leslie Shank, violin and viola; Thomas Turner, viola; Timothy Lovelace, piano; Helen Chang-Haertzen, violin; Stephanie Arado, violin; and Joanne Opgenorth, violin. Go to <islesensemble.org> to learn more about the musicians. (Photo: Leslie Shank and Sifei Cheng.)

most famous of all the Op. 54 and Op. 55 quartets, writing that "virtuosity is a key element in music of extraordinary force and rhetorical boldness." The Isles Ensemble virtuosos who will play the Opus 54, No. 2 are Joanne Opgenorth and Leslie Shank, violins; Tom Turner, viola; and Laura Sewell, cello.

"Haydn's string quartet in C, Op. 54 No. 2, written in 1788 while he was at Esterhaza, is a work of great beauty and innovation, and very gratifying to explore and enjoy," Opgenorth says. "In addition to Haydn's usual unexpected musical devices such as phrasing asymmetry and surprising harmonies, this quartet gives us a gypsy-like improvisation in the first violin over a brooding chorale in the second movement. And instead of the usual fast tempo in the last movement, it ends with a beautiful slow movement in the form of a song interrupted by a short presto."

An interesting fact about this quartet, Opgenorth adds, is that the librarian at Esterhaza used the tune of the minuet in a musical clock that he built.

The November 11 concert ends with Dmitri Shostakovich's Piano Quintet in G minor, Opus 57. Playing the Quintet for us on November 11 will be Stephanie Arado and Leslie Shank, violins; Sifei Cheng, viola; Tom Rosenberg, cello; and Tim Lovelace, piano.

"The Shostakovich piano quintet is one of his best known works," Shank says. "I have great memories

performing it at Marlboro Music Festival, and had never heard or played it before then. It was written in 1940 for the Beethoven Quartet, who premiered most of his quartets, and was premiered on November 23, 1940, at the Moscow Conservatory with Shostakovich himself at the piano. We tend to forget that he was also an accomplished pianist."

"I am struck by the melancholy of the slow movement," Shank continues, "which starts out with just cello pizzicato and violin, almost as if the cello were a bass in a jazz trio, and the violin is improvising above it. The piece is both intense and humorous, in a sardonic way, as are many of Shostakovich's works."

"I feel the Shostakovich Piano Quintet is the perfect synthesis of light and shadow," writes pianist Tim Lovelace. "The best-known Piano Quintets before Shostakovich's are ripely romantic with soaring themes and lots of passion. Shostakovich's is overall neo-classical and lighter. There are moments of great intensity and even sarcasm (as in the scherzo movement), but one doesn't leave a performance of this Quintet feeling totally drained. In fact, the last movement is uncharacteristically optimistic."

The musicians suggest a donation of \$20 (\$10 for students). A reception follows the concert. Go to <islesensemble.org> to learn more about these remarkable people who bring outstanding music right into the heart of our Hill and Lake neighborhoods.