Summer Staycation 2016  
Program notes by Dr. David Cole  
Mozart: Serenade in G major, K. 525, “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik”

In Mozart’s time, *serenade* denoted a multi-movement work for an instrumental ensemble. These works were light entertainment music – something to be played as dinner music, or for some special occasion such as a wedding or the birthday of a patron. Serenades and *divertimenti* (another name for the same sort of piece) would have been considered “throwaway” music – unlikely to be heard beyond one performance. That said, it is somewhat remarkable that more than thirty of Mozart’s serenades and divertimenti have survived to our time. Most of these “occasional” pieces transcend the bounds of light entertainment music and are notable for their beauty and profundity.

While Mozart’s “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik” is almost annoyingly extant in our own time, we know nothing of its origins. Its rather coy title suggests that it was written for some sort of evening soirée, but that could have been anything from a formal court occasion to a billiards and skittles party for Mozart and some of his Viennese friends who played string instruments. It was entered into his catalog of works on August 10, 1787 without comment; the date might suggest entertainment music for a pleasant summer evening.

Eine Kleine Nachtmsik can be seen as either a symphony for strings or an expanded string quintet (string quartet plus double bass) and may have originally been played by only five musicians. The piece is cast in the standard four-movement format for symphonies and string quartets. The opening *Allegro* opens with a unison phrase, answered by a similar phrase, sounding like a question and a response – a deftly simple introduction to the movement. This first movement is in sonata form, with the development section almost obsessively concerned with the chirpy third theme of the exposition. The second movement *Romanze*’s elegant lyricism is briefly interrupted by a mysterious and slightly sinister interlude, punctuated by a three-note figure tossed back and forth from the violins to the cellos and basses. These nervous string figures eventually dissipate, and the songful opening section returns to conclude the movement. The robust *Menuetto* is constructed of the simplest of rhythmic materials, but Mozart throws in a few rhythmic twists that threaten to throw the dancers off their timing. In the contrasting *Trio* section, the first violins spin their seamlessly gossamer melody over quietly murmuring second violins and violas with gentle punctuation from the cellos and basses. The energetic *Finale* brims over with the type of quicksilver wit and musical sleight-of-hand often found in the music of Mozart’s friend and mentor Joseph Haydn and in the ensembles of Mozart’s own operas. The overall impression is of a witty conversation between musical friends, by turns clever and vigorous. The movement’s high spirits rule the day, bringing the serenade to a joyous conclusion.

Joseph Haydn: Piano Concerto in D major, Hob. XVIII: 11

A composer’s work environment often influences his or her powers of invention. Some composers have no trouble producing music of the highest quality on demand. Rossini, for example, claimed that he could “set a laundry list to music.” Closer to our own time, Cole Porter famously quipped that “My sole inspiration is a phone call from a director.”
Other composers, however, learned their craft through diligent work, slowly perfecting their technique apart from the petty politics of the opera house or church. While Joseph Haydn’s earliest music displays occasional flashes of his unique beauty, wit and craftsmanship, there is not much to truly distinguish it from other music of its time. It was during the period when he served as Kapellmeister to the princes of Esterházy (1762 – 1790) that Haydn’s distinctive musical voice gained confidence and depth, and with it developed the clarity of what we now know as the Classical style in music. We credit Haydn with developing the form and content of the Classical symphony and string quartet, and doing so with very little active interaction with other composers of his time. He seems to have created his compositions almost entirely from an inner sense of logic, appropriating existing melodic and harmonic practices and deftly adapting them to create balanced, satisfying and entertaining works. As he himself memorably wrote of his time serving the Esterházy family, “I was cut off from the world…there was no one to confuse or torment me, and so I was forced to become original.”

Haydn’s music for Esterházy could be considered what became known in the 20th century as Gebrauchsmusik, literally “music for use,” music as an integral part of everyday life. The Esterházy princes were wealthy enough to be able to afford a sizeable musical retinue of some of the best musicians in Europe, and Haydn kept the talents of these virtuosi in mind when writing music to entertain his noble patrons. We know that his concertos for horn, oboe, violin and cello were composed for soloists within the court’s musical entourage and his early symphonies abound with instrumental solos written specifically for his own musicians.

With Haydn’s piano concertos, the case for attribution of a specific soloist becomes murkier. The Concerto in D major was published in Vienna in 1784, but there is no evidence as to when or why it was written. It might have been written for a performance by either one of the court’s musicians or by a guest artist traveling from Vienna to another European cultural center, like Prague or Berlin.

While it might lack both the rapid-fire instrumental interplay and the subtleties of light and shadow found in Mozart’s mature piano concertos, Haydn’s D major concerto abounds in sunny good humor and witty energy. The opening movement displays Haydn’s characteristic frugality of melodic material and equally characteristic invention and fantasy in developing that material to its fullest extent. In the stately and serene slow movement, the piano gently ruminates over a discreet string accompaniment; such musing is not without its occasional moments of passion, angst and self-doubt. The effervescent “Hungarian” finale bustles along with irrepressible panache, the rondo theme given a slightly exotic flavor from the wide leaps that appear in almost every bar. The contrasting sections of the movement are stormy, lyrical, or brooding, but it is the buoyant energy of the rondo theme that wins the day, dashing to the final bars in uninhibited exuberance.

**Finzi: Eclogue for Piano and String Orchestra, Op. 10**

Gerald Finzi’s life seems to have been a series of contradictions and tragedies. Born to Jewish parents in Anglican Great Britain, he grew up an agnostic, but quite a number of his finest works were written for Anglican services and set Christian texts sensitively and dramatically. The loss of his father in 1908 and
the subsequent death of his first composition teacher, Ernest Farrar, on the battlefields of France in 1918 as well as the later death of his three brothers led Finzi to seek out texts for his music in which the innocence of childhood is tainted or destroyed by the follies of adults. Early in his career he moved to London to supplement his training, but found that he was better suited to life in the country (where he became an avid apple horticulturalist, and is credited with saving several species of rare English apples from complete extinction). And finally, just when he began to achieve wider recognition as a composer, he was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s Disease, which was untreatable at that time. He died from complications of the disease in 1956, the day after the first broadcast of his Cello Concerto on the BBC.

In the mid-1920s, Finzi had planned to write a piano concerto and had completed a number of sketches and drafts before he gave up on the project. After his death, his publisher edited and released the music as two separate pieces for piano and orchestra, the Grand Fantasia and Toccata, essentially the first movement of the abandoned concerto, and the Eclogue, which constituted the concerto’s slow movement. The titles were not Finzi’s own; his publisher amended them to each work.

The eclogue is a poetic form that dates back to Virgil; in the classical literary tradition it is a dialogue between shepherds or a soliloquy. Finzi’s dialogue between the piano and string orchestra follows this tradition, with the piano’s opening solo answered by the strings. Gradually the melodic lines of piano and orchestra intertwine in a rich and romantic contrapuntal tapestry, both intricate and expressive. The music surges to an impassioned climax and then retreats from it, leading into a lilting pastorale interlude in 12/8 meter. The interlude continues the dialogue between piano and orchestra until the opening music returns, softer and more wistful. This nostalgic atmosphere pervades the closing pages, with a heightened feeling of reminiscence as the tempo slows (Meno mosso) to the final quiet chord in the piano.

**Bloch: Concerto Grosso No. 1 for String Orchestra with Piano Obbligato**

The Swiss-American composer Ernest Bloch is defined for many listeners by the concert works inspired by his Jewish faith. The rhapsody for cello and orchestra Schelomo, the Avodath Hakodesh (Sacred Service) for chorus and orchestra, the Suite Hébraïque for viola, the Ba’al Shem Suite for violin, and the Israel Symphony all bear witness to Bloch’s faith and its musical expression.

Yet Bloch created a substantial body of music of an “absolute” variety, music for its own sake apart from any influence of text, religion or program. His five string quartets and two piano quintets are substantial contributions to the chamber music repertoire that acknowledge the influence of Richard Strauss, Debussy, Bartók and even Schoenberg while following their own distinctive paths. He was a great admirer of the music of Bach, writing a number of suites for solo string instruments (two for violin, one for viola, and 3 for cello) that pay homage to Bach’s sonatas, partitas and suites for solo violin and cello. While his music is often labeled “neoclassical,” Bloch’s output defies easy categorization – his more rhapsodic works still have a very strong sense of musical architecture, while his classically constructed music is often charged with strong, profound emotions.
After studies in violin and composition in Brussels (where his violin teacher was the great virtuoso Eugène Ysaïe), and brief periods of study in Frankfurt and Paris, Bloch immigrated to the United States in 1916. By 1917 he had been appointed the first professor of composition at the Mannes College of Music and in 1920 he accepted a position as the Musical Director of the new Cleveland Institute of Music. Later in life he held teaching positions with the San Francisco Conservatory and the University of California, Berkeley.

During one of his composition classes in Cleveland, a lively discussion broke out amongst the students about whether or not music could still be written employing the forms, structures and tonal harmonic language of the past. Bloch asserted that not only was it possible, but that much good music could still be written that way without compromising one’s own musical principles. In response to his students’ skepticism, Bloch wrote the Prelude movement of the Concerto Grosso No. 1 and conducted it in a rehearsal with the Cleveland Institute orchestra, who took to the music immediately and enthusiastically. At the end of the first reading, Bloch turned to his composition students and exclaimed “What do you think now?... It has just old fashioned notes!” After the success of the first rehearsal, Bloch completed the entire work over the next several months.

The Concerto Grosso No. 1 is in four movements. The first, Prelude, is in the manner of a Baroque toccata, featuring a recurring ritornello of explosive unisons and chords from the entire string section. Strings and piano weave energetic melodic lines between these punctuating chords. While the piano is given a few brief solo measures, Bloch employs it throughout the work in the manner of a Baroque continuo rather than as a solo instrument. The second movement, Dirge, is a heartfelt lament, with the influence of cantorial chant heard from the very opening. Though a feeling of great sorrow pervades the movement, Bloch contrasts solo instruments and small chamber groups against the full ensemble to create an atmosphere of mystery and intimacy. The third movement, Pastorale and Rustic Dances, dispels the gloom of the Dirge. Introduced by rhapsodic solos for violin and viola, the fragments of dance music heard faintly at the beginning gain momentum and swirl the orchestra into an ardent series of dances. The dancing ends only when the music slows at the end of the movement, building to an exultant peroration. The final Fugue combines the structure of the fugal process (including the use of the initial subject in inversion) with the solo and chamber ensemble passages of the Baroque concerto grosso in a tour-de-force of contrapuntal virtuosity. To unify the entire work, Bloch brings back a brief reminiscence of the music from the Prelude before the exuberant sprint to the final cadence.