

About the Music



Before Beethoven normalized the image of the solitary “artist-genius,” composers were often seen as public servants, fully expected to meet the vested interests of patrons, publishers, musicians, and audiences. For instance, when Franz Anton Hoffmeister commissioned three piano quartets from Mozart in 1785, the Austrian publisher hoped that Mozart would create a trio of works that were pleasing to the ear and accessible for the burgeoning amateur market (not to mention profitable). The first submission — a quartet in G Minor for violin, viola, cello, and piano — was neither. The Weimar-based *Journal des Luxus und der Moden* later reported that the piece “requires the utmost precision in all four parts, but, even when it is well played, it seems that only connoisseurs of music are able and intended to enjoy it...” Displeased with how poorly the work was selling, Hoffmeister ultimately canceled the order and paid Mozart an advance for the remaining two unwritten piano quartets. (Mozart only completed and published one other, K. 493 in E-flat Major.)

Opening with a forceful call-and-response between the strings and piano, the dramatic first movement of the **K. 478 Piano Quartet** immediately conjures associations of Mozart’s two stormiest symphonies (Nos. 25 and 40), both also set in the key of G Minor. It is not difficult to hear why the Quartet might have been unapproachable for the amateurs of Mozart’s day, as exposed solo moments and tricky flurries of notes are common to each part. The second movement offers an island of calm after the preceding tempest; the piano introduces a flowing song before gracefully handing it over to the strings. This eventually leads to a cheery third movement, a *Rondo*

set in the relative key of G Major. The opening earworm-of-a-tune only appears three times in full—perhaps a Mozartian joke—but the movement is still ripe with melodies and detours that surprise and delight.

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*To remember,
to let go.
To be haunted
then free.*

*Honoring our
ancestors*

*and the sacrifices
leading to this moment,
We commemorate a
will to thrive over centuries
And give respect to
the struggle
which proudly belongs to us all.*

Elegy is a 12-minute work mourning the souls lost to systemic racism. Rather than suffering in unsatisfying despair, it aims to honor human triumph through recognition of our painful history while commemorating how far we have come in this collective societal struggle.

A questioning melody slowly unfolds by the violin in the 5/4 adagio. The strings build to wailing before being sent on the Middle Passage. The ship rises and falls with flowing eighth notes in the piano, while the sound of rubbing ropes is played on the back of the viola by rolling the stick over loosened bow hair. A sailor whistles while the cello mourns being caught in an inescapable fate. Patterns symbolizing heroes and martyrs are introduced in the piano through call and response and developed in flowing tribute by the ensemble. The cello then states important dates, starting with 1863 in G minor (G G E-flat B-flat) gliding forward through time. A chorus of strings responds in lightness, progress and innovation while the bass

line falls and stalls via tremolo on a low D-flat. Clavé rhythms permeate the texture with taps of the string trio in drum-circle fashion, honoring and calling to our ancestors. The large 5/4 section ends with two abrupt pizzicati slaps symbolizing the year 2020 (D-flat rest D-flat rest).

The heart of the piece follows with the intervals of 1619 (G E-flat G A-flat) in G minor ensemble unison, while the piece is in C minor: “good trouble.” Development of 1619 suddenly stills in reference to Shostakovich’s Viola Sonata, which I heard as Russian tanks and artillery lined up along the Ukrainian border. The piano gets the last emotional word through an epilogue, building with hope toward a painful ending dependent upon and framed by time. The last four notes in the piano are based on the current year in G minor. So, the 2022 premiere sounds like A-flat rest A-flat A-flat. 2032 would be A-flat rest B-flat A-flat with flats at the discretion of the player, and 3022 would be B-flat rest A-flat A-flat.

I am deeply honored that the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio asked me to write *Elegy*. Heartfelt thanks to them, the Linton Chamber Series and supporting commissioners. It is with friendship, admiration, gratitude, pride and humility that I join them and respond to the call of the largest political movement in U.S. history following the summer of 2020’s reckoning. Sources of inspiration include a prior visit to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture with Fleur Paysour, and The 1619 Project created by Nikole Hannah-Jones and The New York Times, including articles by Ms. Hannah-Jones, Jamelle Bouie, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, Kendrick Johnson and Linda Villarosa. John Lewis’ encouraging Carry On gave strength to write into the next phrase, as did the

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