# UNIVERSITY MUSICAL SOCIETY

## BORODIN STRING QUARTET

Mikhail Kopelman, Violinist
Andrei Abramenkov, Violinist
Dmitri Shebalin, Violist
Valentin Berlinsky, Cellist

Tuesday Evening, February 18, 1992, at 8:00
Rackham Auditorium, Ann Arbor, Michigan

## PROGRAM

Quartet in C minor, Op. 51, No. 1 . . . . . Brahms
Allegro
Romanze: poco adagio
Allegretto molto moderato e comodo, un poco più animato
Finale: allegro

INTERMISSION

Quartet No. 15 in E-flat minor, Op. 144 . . . . . Shostakovich
Elegy: adagio
Serenade: adagio
Intermezzo: adagio
Nocturne: adagio
Funeral March: adagio molto
Epilogue: adagio, adagio molto

The Borodin Quartet is represented by Mariedi Anders Artists Management, San Francisco.
The University Musical Society is a member of Chamber Music America.

Activities of the UMS are supported by the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs and the National Endowment for the Arts.

## Quartet in C minor, Op. 51, No. 1

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

The musical manner that Brahms adopted as a young man and the skill that he showed when he was only 20 years old, led Schumann to proclaim him "a musician chosen to give ideal expression to his times." Even when he was young, Brahms had found his own eloquent language, which he would use consistently and well until the end of his life.

Brahms was reticent about producing his first symphony and worked long over it. What was true of his symphonic writing was also true of his quartet writing. Ever since Schubert remarked early in the nineteenth century how difficult it was to write anything after Beethoven, that great shadow hovered over every classical-minded composer, perhaps most of all, over Brahms. Piano quartets and a piano quintet, a horn trio, sextets, and a cello sonata all came from his pen before he allowed himself to publish anything for the more usual ensemble of four stringed instruments. The two quartets of Opus 51 were written in the summer of 1873, during his vacation spent on a charming lake near Munich. Although they were the first quartets to be published, by all accounts they were not the first to be written, as can be surmised from the polished quartet style of the second, in A minor — a model of its kind in this medium. (Brahms told someone he had destroyed "at least a score" of quartets before these two were written).

The Quartet in C minor, Op. 51, No. 1, is a somber but passionate work. The *Allegro* first movement may be derived from one of the early discarded works, but it is in his familiar expressive language, speaking here of tense drama. The opening theme will be referred to in all the later movements except the Scherzo. In the second movement, it is transformed into the principal subject of a calm Romance, *Poco Adagio* — a simple three-part song of great beauty in the distant key of A-flat. The third movement, *Allegretto molto moderato e comodo,* is in the traditional scherzo form, but with none of the original Italian meaning of the name, which is "joke." It may be interpreted as a gracious dance or as an uneasy, sinister, shadowy one. The contrasting central trio section, *Un poco più animato,* is a folklike tune accompanied by unusual sounds from the open strings of the second violin and viola. In the *Allegro* finale, Brahms refers again to the Scherzo, but the musical materials are most closely related to those that open the Quartet, and the whole is presented with a concentrated force that recalls and balances the entire opening movement.

## Quartet No. 15 in E-flat minor, Op. 144

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)

Dmitri Shostakovich was born in St. Petersburg and at the age of 10 began his musical studies with his mother. His father died in 1922, after which the family came close to poverty. For a time, Dmitri tried to eke out a living by playing the piano for silent films, but his persistent glandular tuberculosis forced him to abandon this. By now, he had enrolled at the Petrograd Conservatory, studying piano (he was awarded a diploma of honor at the 1927 Chopin International Piano Contest in Warsaw) and composition with Glazounov, Sokolov, and Maximilian Steinberg. His graduation piece, in 1925, was his first symphony, which immediately received worldwide acclaim. Thereafter, his musical language became more and more progressive, while his ideological message remained strongly Bolshevik: "There can be no music without ideology . . . Music cannot help having a political basis." In January 1936 came the now infamous official attack on his modernistic tendencies, resulting in a self-appraisal and consolidation of his compositional idiom. Further confrontations followed in 1948 and 1962, but during the last decade of his life, he was revered to a degree not previously enjoyed by any Soviet musician. Sadly, this latter part of his life was heavily clouded by more ill-health: first, a muscular disease that caused him to give up playing the piano, and later, he suffered a road accident, a stroke, and heart attacks, all of which left him in a ravaged physical condition at the time of his death on August 9th, 1975.

Shostakovich's 15 string quartets do not span his entire creative career, so they cannot therefore be looked upon as a complete record of his development as a composer. Such a claim can, however, be made for the 15 symphonies, the first of which was completed when he was 19. After the end of the war, he composed six symphonies and 13 quartets, whereas, up to that time, he had produced nine symphonies and only two quartets. The fact that the composition of the first quartet (1938) took place after that of the Fifth Symphony shows that Shostakovich the young Socialist Revolutionary never found expression in the medium of the string quartet. The Fifth Symphony marked a clear modification of style, so it can be seen that all of the quartets date from his real maturity, with experimentation in the past.

Since there is no "early" quartet, it is still possible to divide his quartets into groups, corresponding with the familiar "middle" and "late" periods of such composers as Beethoven and Mahler. The division is by no means equal, nor is it precisely clear-cut. But the last four quartets do seem to share common aspects, while the first 11 quartets are more wide-ranging and generally tend to be outward-looking in spirit, often robust and occasionally light-hearted. At the root of all this is an almost constant allegiance to classical form and structure. Unlike Beethoven and Bartók, Shostakovich never sought to strain the medium beyond its already existing limits: indeed, he accepted it for what it was, gradually refining and sublimating it.

The Quartet No. 15 was completed in the autumn of 1974 — less than a year before Shostakovich's death in August 1975. It was his last quartet, succeeded only by a sonata for viola and piano and two song cycles. It was first performed by the Taneyev Quartet on November 15, 1974.

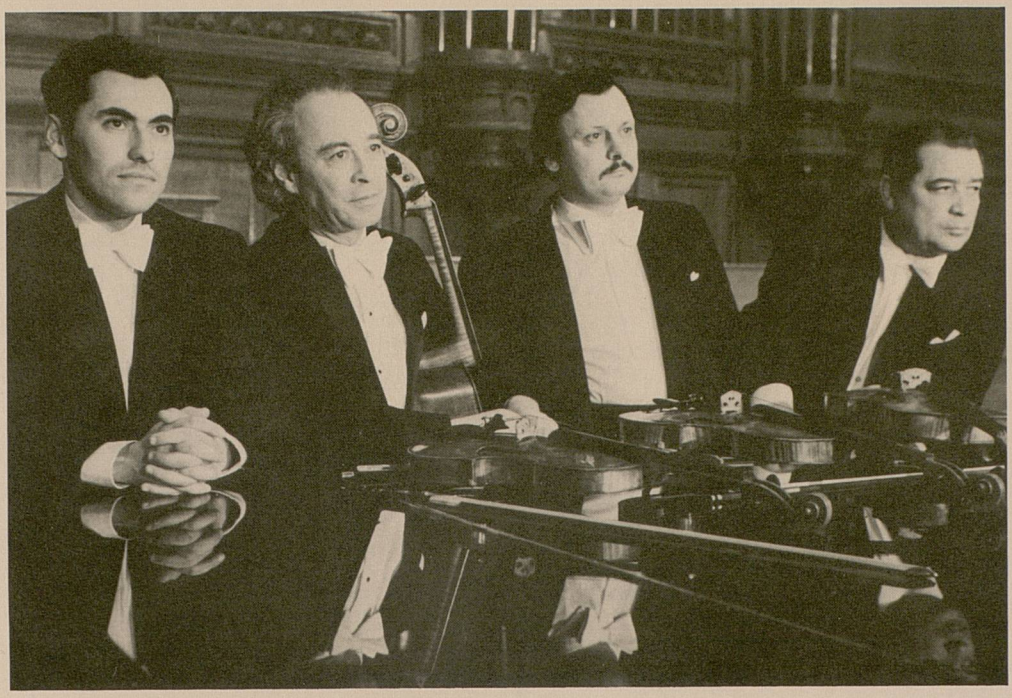
The work consists of six *Adagios*, all joined together, and although Shostakovich achieves a remarkable variety within the one tempo designation, there is little to relieve the all-pervading deathly gloom. Time almost stands still in the opening Elegy, which has a truly Russian intonation to its melody and harmony, sometimes recalling Mussorgsky and Tchaikovsky, with even a faint echo of the Russian Orthodox in its central section.

The second movement is heralded by a succession of shrieks from each instrument in turn, these alternating with a macabre serenade that limps along as if it had lost all sense of direction, eventually losing itself in a barely-audible pedal note on the cello. The Intermezzo explodes violently but subsides just as quickly, the cello having remained unmoved throughout, as if no longer conscious of what is happening around him.

Now follows the bitter-sweet Nocturne, its plaintive melody sadly weaving its way through gently undulating shadows; toward the end, an ominous-sounding rhythm is tapped out *pizzicato* by the violins, and this proves to be a premonition of the Funeral March, which is now emphatically announced by all four instruments together. But the main part of the movement is entirely solo, each strain being punctuated, like a refrain, by the march rhythm.

The finale seems to be no longer of this world; it erupts like the Intermezzo, but amid a succession of weird mutterings, tappings, wailings, and tremblings, manages only to recall blurred memories of earlier parts of the work. The semitonal trill is an ever-present spectre, perhaps symbolizing the death-obsession that haunted virtually all the major works of the composer's last six or seven years. Eventually, it leads the way to the final chant, through it, and beyond it into nothingness.

— *Alan George*



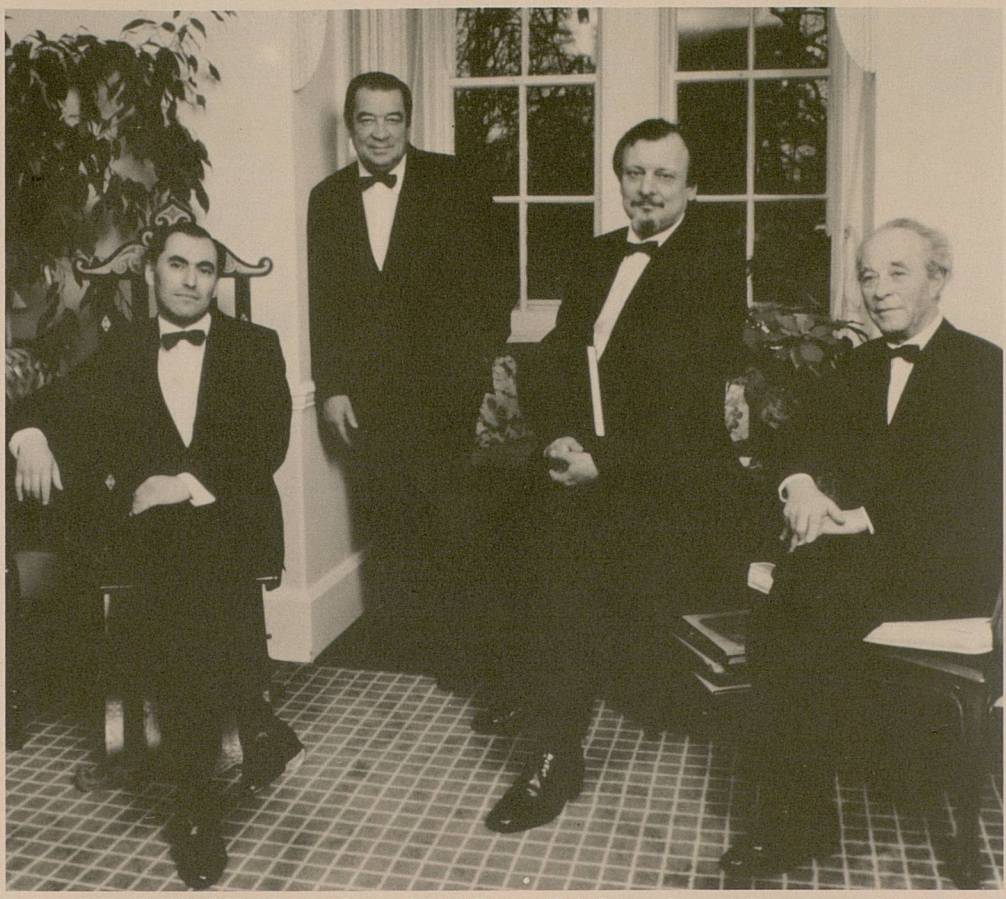
## About the Artists

The Borodin String Quartet is unquestionably one of the few great string quartets of the last 50 years. They regularly play to capacity houses on extensive tours outside their native country, whether performing the standard quartet repertoire, established Russian masterpieces, or the works of contemporary colleagues such as Alfred Schnittke, whose First Quartet was written for them.

Emerging from the Moscow Conservatory immediately after the Second World War, and known initially as the Moscow Philharmonic Quartet, they were to take the name Borodin Quartet in 1955. The father of Dmitri Shebalin (a founder-member of the Quartet with Valentin Berlinsky) was the composer Vissarion Shebalin. He was a close friend of Shostakovich, who taught at the Conservatory. Before its public debut in 1945, the Quartet played Shostakovich's First Quartet at the Conservatory under the composer's supervision.

With the exception of his first and last quartets, Shostakovich's quartets were all premiered by the Beethoven Quartet, friends and former fellow students of the composer. However, as each new work emerged, it would be studied by the younger Quartet and played through with Shostakovich before they performed it themselves in public. This early association with one of the most important composers for the medium has certainly played a part in making the Borodin Quartet's performances so significant in today's concert life. This has been especially apparent from their performance of the complete Shostakovich cycle, which they have given in several major centers throughout the world.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Borodin Quartet gained a reputation as one of the most respected ensembles in the Soviet Union, and it became legendary in the West through the emergence of recordings that quickly acquired classic status. The quartet members have always worked regularly with many of their most celebrated compatriots, including Mstislav Rostropovich, Natalya Gutman, Yuri Bashmet, Eliso Virsaladze, and Sviatoslav Richter. Since the mid-1970s, when the two original members were joined by a new leader and second violinist — Mikhail Kopelman and Andrei Abramenkov — their reputation worldwide has continued to flourish with concert tours in many countries. In the 1980s, new recordings appeared



*Left to Right: Mikhail Kopelman, first violinist, Dmitri Shebalin, violist, Andrei Abramenkov, second violinist, Valentin Berlinsky, cellist*

on HMV/Melodiya, including a complete Shostakovich cycle that is widely regarded as definitive.

On November 1, 1990, the Borodin Quartet members took up their posts as Artists-in-Residence at Aldeburgh, England. The Quartet plays a prominent part in the year-round concert programs of the Aldeburgh Foundation, centered in the Snape Maltings Concert Hall. It also maintains a close association with the Britten-Pears School for Advanced Musical Studies, coaching the individuals and ensembles from around the world who attend the courses at Snape. Although the Quartet members keep their homes in Moscow, they and their families have second homes in Aldeburgh, which provides a base for their international touring activities. Over the next few seasons, this includes visits to every continent.

Since 1988, the Borodin Quartet has enjoyed an exclusive relationship with the Virgin Classics company, for which a complete recorded Beethoven cycle is well under way. Much of the Quartet's repertoire is recorded at the Snape Maltings Concert Hall.

The Borodin Quartet made its Ann Arbor debut in the Musical Society's 1967 Chamber Music Festival, in a concert that included violist Dmitri Shebalin and cellist Valentin Berlinsky. It returned again in 1990 with newer members Mikhail Kopelman and Andrei Abramenkov.

**Mikhail Kopelman**, born into a tailor's family in 1947 in the Ukrainian city of Uzhgorod, began learning the violin when six years old and subsequently went on to study in Moscow from 1960 with Yankelevich and Glezarov. In 1973, the year of his graduation from the Moscow Conservatory, he won second prize at the International Thibaud Competition in Paris. That same year, he joined the Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra and two years later was appointed concertmaster of the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra. In 1976, he was invited to become a member of the Borodin String Quartet. Since 1981, Mikhail Kopelman has been active at the Moscow Conservatory.

**Andrei Abramenkov** was born in Moscow in 1935. His background was very musical. His father played the viola in the Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra, his mother was a trained pianist, and as a boy, he was a treble singer in the Bolshoi Theatre Choir. In 1942, he entered the Central Music School, where he studied the violin with Yankelevich. Four years later, he went on to study at the Moscow Conservatory with Sibor and Mostras and, in 1956, was a prize-winner at the all-Soviet Competition. While still a student at the Conservatory, he was invited to join the Moscow Chamber Orchestra under the leadership of Rudolf Barshai and played with that ensemble for 17 years. Andrei Abramenkov has been a member of the Borodin Quartet since 1974.

**Dmitri Shebalin** was born in Moscow in 1930. He studied at the Central Music School at the age of seven and then studied conducting at the Moscow Conservatory, graduating in 1947. He was a founder-member of the Borodin String Quartet and, in addition to his enormous commitments with the Quartet, he has been teaching in the Moscow Conservatory for 25 years. His wife is also a professional violist and plays with the State Symphonic Kapelle (formerly the Orchestra of the Ministry of Culture of the USSR and then the Soviet Philharmonic) under Gennady Rozhdestvensky. His son, Feodor, studies the violin at the Central Music School in Moscow.

Born in 1925 in Irkutsk, **Valentin Berlinsky** began studying music at the age of seven with his father, who was a violinist, but the lessons did not last very long. Only when he was 13, did he start again, this time taking up the cello. He went on to study at the Central Music School and subsequently at the Moscow Conservatory, graduating from there in 1946. In that year, he began playing in the quartet that would later be known as the Borodin Quartet. He also began teaching, first in a music school (cello and quartet classes) and then in the Gnesinikh Musical Pedagogical Institute in Moscow, where he still teaches. His wife is a retired lawyer, and he has two children, Viktor and Ludmilla.