

Fine Arts Quartet Summer Evenings of Music Festival

Program II - Sunday, June 21, 2009

Chopin, Mazurka in D-flat Major, Op. 30 No. 3

In the late 1830s, Chopin was actively teaching, performing in salons, and composing. He gave some, albeit infrequent, public performances, and while they were well-received, he sometimes refused invitations to perform. Increasingly, Chopin was viewing himself not as pianist-composer but just as composer. It was also the period when his famous affair with novelist George Sand began; they met initially in 1837, and their love blossomed when they encountered one another again the next year. It was a highly prolific period for Chopin, one that yielded numerous important compositions, including the three works we hear this evening.

Chopin, of Polish birth, wrote more than fifty mazurkas, and his are surely the best known—though Szymanowski would write more than twenty in the 1920s and 1930s. A mazurka is a type of Polish folk dance. It is set in triple meter, often with prominent accents on the second or third beats, extended pedal points, and with some use of the raised fourth degree (in the manner of the Lydian mode). For Chopin, the mazurka was a stylized, expressive, fashionable piece for the salon, and at the same time it was one way the composer paid homage to his native land.

The present mazurka, composed in 1837, is the third in a set of four. It is cast in an A-B-A scheme. Within the A section, which is repeated, there is a remarkable and very soft echo passage that reharmonizes the two measures that precede it. While B functions as a middle section, standing in contrast to the appearances of A that begin and end the piece, it is in fact a progression of three different ideas, each heard twice, that lead to a transition back to A. This mazurka couples alternation of the major and minor modes with alternation of loud and soft passages, and Chopin decides the question of mode—in favor of the major—only in the final chord.

Chopin Mazurka in C-sharp Minor, Op. 41 No. 1

The first of the four mazurkas that comprise Op. 41 was composed in 1839. Its opening idea, made up of a repeated dotted figure and initially just an unharmonized line, is accompanied in the manner of a waltz. The melody line contains the raised fourth, a modal gesture that is a distinctive feature of mazurkas in general. A soft arrival point on A major in the middle of the piece contains some imitation between the hands, and serves as a transition back to the music of the beginning, albeit now harmonized. The work ends

quietly in the low register with recollections of the dotted rhythms of the opening.

Chopin, Waltz in A-flat Major, Op. 42

Chopin composed 17 waltzes for piano, writing them fairly steadily from 1829 until his death in 1847. 3/4 meter and a melody with “oom-pah-pah” accompaniment are hallmarks of the waltz, and they are present in at least some passages in all of Chopin’s waltzes. Because of the predictable metrical nature of the genre, composers sometimes toy with that regularity, and tonight’s example is just such a piece.

The Waltz Op. 42 is a large work with an intricate structure, laid out in the form A-B-C-D-A-C. In A, after an introductory trill, the theme is duple (essentially 2/4) in the right hand and triple in the left. As A closes, a new section of continuous rising and falling eighth notes enters. This is not B, but rather a refrain that is heard between each of the waltz’s sections. D serves as a mid-section, leading (via the refrain) to the return of A.

Cherubini, String Quintet in E Minor

Luigi Cherubini, a composer whom Beethoven declared the greatest alive, was a prominent figure in the musical world during his long lifetime. Born in Florence and working in France, he became director of the Paris Conservatory in 1822, and proceeded to reorganize it, reducing the number of students through examinations. Cherubini created new courses at the Conservatory in instruments not previously taught, e.g. the bass and the trombone, and established a new system of annual prizes. By 1828 he gained further prestige as he was named honorary president of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, an organization that gave orchestral concerts that was particularly famed for its performances of Beethoven’s works. Cherubini resigned from the Conservatory in 1842, in his early eighties, and was soon made Commander of the Legion of Honor. He died some six weeks later.

Cherubini was a prolific composer of opera, sacred music, and chamber music, one whose works are not frequently heard today. His chamber works for strings include six quartets, the last four of which were composed in old age in the period 1834-37. He also planned a series of string quintets, but completed only one, the present cello quintet, written in 1837 at the age of 77. It was first published in 1890. It is noteworthy that Cherubini turned to the string quintet late in life, after having completed his output of quartets, much the same as Mozart, Schubert, and Brahms did. The first movement begins with a slow unison introduction, followed by an Allegro comodo that begins with an operatic melody. After a slow movement in theme and variations form, the lively scherzo includes a trio section in which the instruments are muted. And the main theme

of the finale is extensively developed and presented in several forms.

Mendelssohn, Piano Trio No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 49

Mendelssohn was an active conductor, in a period when conducting in the modern sense was still quite new. In 1839, at the height of his fame, he conducted the premiere of Schubert's "Great" Symphony in C major. He also conducted at music festivals, e.g., at Cologne in 1838 and Düsseldorf in 1839. And amidst his busy conducting schedule, he continued to compose. The late 1830s saw the composition of the *Ruy Blas* overture, his First Cello Sonata, and some of his Songs without Words for piano.

The first of Mendelssohn's two piano trios also arose in this period. Completed in 1839, it has come to be one of the most beloved of chamber music works, and rightly deserves its great fame. Robert Schumann wrote of the trio that it is "The master trio of today, as in their day were those of Beethoven in B-flat [Op. 97] and D [Op. 70 No. 1]; as was that of Schubert in E-Flat [D. 929]; a lovely composition that, years hence, will still delight our grandchildren and great-grandchildren."

The first movement begins with a great, singing theme, begun by the cello and taken up by the violin, as the piano accompanies. The cello also presents the noble, arching secondary theme. Set in a traditional sonata form, it is a movement of great beauty and considerable piano virtuosity. In the slow movement, the piano presents a song-like melody, and then the strings enter and repeat it with piano accompaniment. The piano then gives us the second strain of the melody, and again the strings enter to restate it. (Beethoven uses this same approach in the slow movement of his "Archduke" trio.) The third movement is one of Mendelssohn's exquisite scherzos. Quick and light, it is in 6/8 meter and in sonata form, not structurally in keeping with the classical minuet. The D-minor rondo finale's melody is developed extensively over the course of the movement, and remains present in the brilliant major-mode conclusion.

by Dr. Timothy Noonan

Dr. Timothy Noonan earned his bachelor's and master's degrees at UWM, studying Music History and Literature, and went on to earn his Ph.D. at UW-Madison in 1996. While he works with and teaches the whole spectrum of Western art music, his specialization is in the Classical and Romantic eras, particularly Classical instrumental music, Haydn, Boccherini, and Beethoven. Working in the UWM Music Department since 1996, he currently teaches courses in music history, serves as Graduate Advisor, and coordinates the department's Convocation concert series.