

Fine Arts Quartet Summer Evenings of Music Festival

Program IV - Sunday, June 28, 2009

Haydn, String Quartet in B-Flat Major, Op. 76 No. 4 (“Sunrise”)

In about 1796 Haydn received a commission from Hungarian Count Joseph Erdödy for a set of six string quartets. He set to work, writing all or most of the music in 1797, and the set was published in 1799. Appropriately, these celebrated quartets have come to be known as the “Erdödy” Quartets. Here, in the last years of his creative powers—he turned 65 in 1797—the extraordinary originality and craftsmanship of his compositional skill was still at full force. Writing the Op. 76 quartets, Haydn drew upon nearly fifty years of compositional experience, and the result was a group of works long treasured in the chamber music repertoire.

The fourth Erdödy quartet earned the nickname “Sunrise” from its quiet opening that features a rising figure in the first violin part. This first movement is monothematic, in that its secondary thematic material is closely related to the opening; however, where the violin ascended at the beginning, here the cello descends. The second movement is a sonata form without development that uses sarabande rhythm in its main theme, i.e., a slow triple meter with emphasis placed on the second beat. The minuet follows the traditional form, with a minuet in two parts, each repeated, a trio section that proceeds in the same manner, and a return to the initial minuet section. But in this quartet, Haydn elides the end of the minuet, rather than leaving a silence between it and the trio. And the trio is a quaint and enigmatic section, a fine example of the richness of Haydn’s creativity. The finale is cast in an A-B-A shape, in which the B section is in a minor key. But after A returns, there is a substantial coda that recalls elements of both A and B. As it begins, the tempo increases, and then it turns even faster, yielding a thrilling finish. This particular sunrise began a remarkable day.

Debussy, L’Isle Joyeuse

L’Isle Joyeuse (“The Joyous Island”) was composed in 1903 and revised and published the following year. The pianist Ricardo Viñes, who actively performed Debussy’s works during the composer’s lifetime, gave the premiere. The piece was conceived as the third of a set of three piano pieces, but in the end, Debussy published them separately. He understood the challenges that the work poses; he wrote in September 1909 to the publisher Jacques Durand “My God! It’s hard to play . . . This piece seems to me to bring together every different way of striking the piano, since it unifies force and grace.” Composed in the same period as the great orchestral score *La Mer*, L’Isle Joyeuse

contains passages that suggest the label of “impressionistic.”

The work begins with a passage marked “quasi una cadenza” that starts with a faint trill, which gives way to a section marked “moderate and very supple”: Debussy’s tempo is flexible, and sometimes he notates rubato in the score. A slower middle section presents an arching melody in right-hand chords over an arpeggiated left-hand accompaniment, a texture quite uncharacteristic of Debussy. From here the work builds to a tumultuous climax, ending with very loud broken chords and an arpeggiated descent to the piano’s lowest register.

Debussy, Pour le Piano

Debussy’s piano works reached a new level of advancement in the first years of the twentieth century, exhibiting confidence, depth of reference to earlier music, as well as an increased sense of drama. The chief work that inaugurated this new level of profundity was *Pour le Piano* (“For the Piano”), completed in 1901. It was premiered in January 1902 by Viñes and published the following year.

Pour le Piano is a suite in the Baroque sense, i.e., a collection of dance movements. The first is a Prelude, an impressive work that features long pedal points, fortissimo chords, and dazzling glissandi. The second movement is the Sarabande, which was composed earlier, in 1894, originally to be part of a different collection. At times its parallel block chords are in the distinctive rhythm of the sarabande, as we can find it in the music of Bach: a slow three-quarter time, with stress on the second beat. The exciting Toccata is among his most difficult piano works, again utilizing parallel chords and the coloristic sorts of harmonies that render Debussy’s music so endearing.

Dvorák, Piano Quintet in A Major, Op. 81

Bohemian composer Antonín Dvorák’s fame grew considerably during the 1880s, largely as a result of his nine visits to England, beginning in 1884. His successes in the British Isles encouraged him to return again and again, and he felt free to compose using Czech materials. This was not so on the continent where, particularly in German-speaking regions, anti-Bohemian sentiments limited his success. The use of Czech subjects in his works came naturally to Dvorák, and his work for England freed him from the prejudices of the other side of the English Channel. His increased fame led to increased wealth, enabling him to purchase a country property in the south Bohemian village of Vysoká. He lived there with his family in the summers, enjoying nature and composing.

The Piano Quintet was composed from August 18 to October 3 of 1887, a period when he

was mainly occupied with his opera *Jakobín*. This work, in A major, has been viewed as Dvorák's attempt to "improve upon" his piano quintet of 1872, also in A. He revised the earlier work but was still dissatisfied with it, and apparently responded by starting a new one, the Op. 81, a very fine work that has long been a beloved favorite in the chamber music repertoire. It stands easily among the other great piano quintets of the Romantic era written by such masters as Schumann, Brahms, and Franck.

The work received its first performance on January 6, 1888, and was published later that year. The first movement, in sonata form, opens with a dreamy melody in the cello that soon gives way to a highly contrasting section; such quick changes of style are characteristic in this work. The second movement is a good example of the *dumka*, a kind of Czech folk music that contrasts more somber music with lighter music of a dance character. The energetic scherzo is labeled as a *furiant*, another type of Czech folk dance, though this movement is not highly characteristic of that dance. And the optimistic finale, with portions written in strict counterpoint, closes the work brilliantly.

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.