

Fine Arts Quartet Summer Evenings of Music Festival

Program I - Wednesday, June 17, 2009

Haydn, String Quartet in G Major, Op. 77 No. 1

Haydn composed his 68 string quartets over a period of about 45 years, beginning around 1755-60 and ending in 1803. While he did not originate the genre, he did write some of the first examples, and is surely the earliest composer whose string quartets we hear frequently today. The craftsmanship and musical value of Haydn's quartets is remarkable, and we are mistaken if we suggest that their large number means that they were written carelessly. As with his symphonies, Haydn's creativity and originality yielded a stream of fine works over the many years of his long compositional career.

In 1799, when Haydn was in his late sixties, he received a commission from Prince Lobkowitz for a set of quartets, and he composed two of them that same year. These we know as Op. 77. Then he began work on a third quartet for the commission in 1802-03, writing the slow movement and the minuet only; he called it the "third and last quartet." This fragmentary quartet is known today as Op. 103. And with it, Haydn's days of quartet writing, and largely of composing in general, were over. He was now in his early seventies, and no longer had the strength to continue.

The first quartet of Op. 77 is among his finest achievements. Set in a traditional four movement scheme, this work, like so many by Haydn, presents us with a variety of distinctive procedures, compositional techniques that play with the conventions of his day. In the sonata-form first movement, Haydn presents an initial theme replete with dotted rhythms, and he reuses this same idea at the beginning of the movement's secondary key area, rather than offering a new theme, as is more common at this point in the form. The slow movement is also in sonata form, and Haydn beautifully reharmonizes the theme at the recapitulation. The movement is in E-flat major, and this is noteworthy, since earlier in the classical period, it was commonplace to set the movement that is not in the main key—usually the slow movement—in a closely related key. But, beginning around 1790, Haydn became interested in selecting keys that were more distantly related, pairs like G and E-flat, thereby widening the tonal spectrum of the work in a way that would seem to anticipate the attitudes of the Romantic era.

The third movement is a scherzo, marked Presto, and is thus an example of the trend in the years around 1800 of replacing the traditional minuet with the faster scherzo. Both the minuet and the scherzo are structured with repeated sections that derive from the binary dances of the Baroque era. Haydn, characteristically, steps outside this convention,

writing out varied repeats, and eliding the end of the scherzo into the beginning of the trio. The trio section is in E-flat major, the same remote key in which Haydn set the slow movement. A sonata-form finale in a rousing Hungarian style closes this gem of the string quartet repertoire.

Berg, Piano Sonata Op. 1

Among the pupils of composer Arnold Schoenberg were two highly talented young men, Alban Berg and Anton Webern, and they, along with their teacher, have come to be known as the “Second Viennese School.” (The first such “school” centers around such composers as Mozart and Schubert, also working in Vienna over a century earlier.) Schoenberg wrote important atonal music in the 1900s and 1910s before originating the influential twelve-tone method of composition in the early 1920s, and both pupils also wrote atonal as well as twelve-tone compositions. The compositional talents and personalities of each of the three composers were strikingly dissimilar, and thus the style of their works is decidedly personal and individual.

Berg began his studies with Schoenberg in October 1904 at the age of 19, and worked formally with him for six years. The first large work that Berg deemed worthy of publication dates from this period: it was his Piano Sonata, written in 1907-08 and first performed on April 24, 1911. He originally planned a three-movement sonata, though the final work is cast in just one; Schoenberg told Berg that if he has no more to say, then the piece is finished. The harmonic language of the sonata is on the verge of atonality, but it makes reference to the key of B minor at both the beginning and end. Berg’s sonata stretches tonality to its limits: in writing it, Berg accepted the challenge of writing a coherent, large-scale work that eschews structural organization on the basis of keys, as had been the norm in European composition for the past two centuries.

In order to achieve this new form of coherence, Berg bases the work on motivic relationships, writing themes that are related by virtue of small musical ideas that they have in common. Each theme is assigned its own tempo, and this creates for Berg the contrasts he needs in order to articulate the structure. The movement is in sonata form, albeit highly modified, avoiding the traditional tonal elements of the structure that fell into obsolescence in the early twentieth century.

Mendelssohn, Piano Trio No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 66

Tonight’s trio was composed in April of 1845, during a period of frequent travels for Mendelssohn. He had made his eighth visit to England the previous summer, and while there, he was no doubt gratified to hear performances of music of Johann Sebastian Bach at the Philharmonic concerts, since Mendelssohn had been instrumental some fifteen

years earlier in sparking the revival of interest in the late Baroque master by conducting the great *St. Matthew Passion*. Returning to Germany later in the summer of 1844, while working in Soden, he composed his justly celebrated Violin Concerto Op. 64, and it received its premiere in March of 1845. Later that year he was in Berlin, where he conducted a concert of the music of Weber and Beethoven, whereupon he spent some time with his siblings in Frankfurt am Main.

This second of Mendelssohn's two piano trios, dedicated to composer Ludwig Spohr, was written six years after the first. Of the first movement, John Horton has written "Mendelssohn never wrote a stronger sonata form movement." It is largely based upon its initial idea, one that is presented in a variety of speeds and dynamic levels over the course of the movement. In the slow movement, a distinctive four-note idea is presented and developed extensively. This lyrical movement has been likened to the composer's Songs without Words for solo piano. The third-movement scherzo carries a toccata-like texture, coupling Gypsy style with some fugal writing. It is a characteristic Mendelssohn scherzo, with a light and nimble sound that Charles Rosen has suggested may derive from the scherzo in Beethoven's Sonata Op. 31 No. 3. And in the rondo finale, the theme that opens the movement is contrasted with a secondary idea in the style of a harmonized chorale, and Mendelssohn concludes the trio by combining these two melodies.

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.