

Chamber Music Society - October 8, 2017

Emerson String Quartet

Eugene Drucker & Philip Setzer, violins

Lawrence Dutton, viola

Paul Watkins, cello

Quartet in A Major, Op. 41, No. 3

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Andante espressivo – Allegro molto moderato

Assai agitato – Un poco Adagio – Tempo risoluto

Adagio molto

Allegro molto vivace

In 1842, two years after his marriage to his beloved, the pianist Clara Wieck, Robert Schumann composed the three string quartets, Op. 41, Nos. 1-3. Ambitious for her husband, Clara had encouraged him to broaden his sights, compose symphonies and chamber music and was enthusiastic about his new ambition: “I am endlessly happy that Robert has finally entered the field where, with his great imagination he belongs; I think that he will also work himself to the point where he will no longer compose anything besides instrumental music.” As he tended to focus on one genre at a time—earlier years had been devoted to song and piano music—composing in short, concentrated bursts, 1842 became his “year of chamber music” a period during which he produced the three string quartets—notably works without piano—and two other excellent chamber pieces, an excellent piano quintet and equally fine piano quartet. He approached his task with fore thought and in order to “compensate for his miserable life without Clara” during a short period when she was away concertizing in Scandinavia, he revived his interest in counterpoint and began a study of Mozart’s quartets. After her return, he continued his study of quartet literature with Beethoven’s late quartets and then finished with Haydn. According to his journal, the three string quartets were composed in a space of five weeks with the third requiring only three days. While at this time he continued to compose at the piano, his careful preparation paid off as these works readily reveal his understanding of quartet texture. Schumann dedicated Op. 41 to his friend and contemporary, Felix Mendelssohn.

The impression of Schumann’s study of Beethoven’s Quartet in Eb Major can be felt now and then in his Third String Quartet. For instance, like Beethoven, at the outset Schumann prefaces the opening movement with a slow introduction in which a two-measure cadential phrase featuring a falling fifth is iterated three times, twice in the violin and once in the cello, each time lower than the previous one until, finally, the first violin returns to the opening pitches with what feels like a sigh. But here the music speaks with a distinctly Schumannesque voice: unlike his model, Schumann seeks no resolution as there is no real forward motion in the reiterated statements. The longing remains unresolved even when the Allegro begins with the opening pitches in the movement’s main theme; the falling fifth has become a “thing in itself.” Typical for a sonata form in the Romantic era, the material in the first key is presented in a concise three-part segment, with upward moving arpeggios as the central contrast. As for the rest of the movement, given the oddly anxious theme in the second key area with its rhythmical offbeat character, a development fixated on the falling interval, and a rhythmically interesting coda the movement that breathes its last with the falling interval in the cello—the longing remains unresolved.

In the second movement, Schumann continues with his singular proclivity for rhythmic agitation, although he takes a cue from Beethoven and turns this quickly moving scherzo in the key of F# Minor cast in the usual dance form (A|BA) into a series of variations that change the character and shape with each new version of the theme. The inevitable play with rhythm and meter affects the character from one variation to the next. From the beginning of the movement, his rhythmic sleight of hand is operative: what the listener hears in the initial figure as a downbeat is actually an upbeat tied over the bar—and this continues throughout the whole first exposition of the scherzo. The rhythmic complexity is only clarified as the first variation changes the meter from 3/8 to 2/4 and now the first note of the theme lands on a very decisive downbeat. The movement ends with a bravura variation, *Tempo risoluto* in 3/4—a perfect foil for the hymn-like Adagio molto that follows as the third movement. Exemplary of Schumann’s characteristic gift for both lyrical and threatening expression, the warm and tuneful opening is soon confronted by a second broken and anxious idea that changes the song into a chaotic and plodding march in the central section of the movement. Eventually peace is restored before the end.

Typically, the finale sweeps everything away—kinetic energy here comes to a grand conclusion. Again, like Beethoven, Schumann takes a classic basic shape and expands it into a full-blown rondo with numerous contrasting sections—but without losing any forward motion along the way. That is, even when—surprisingly—several of the episodes, marked “Quasi Trio,” are abruptly introduced, inserting a kind of courtly dance in the midst of the rustic and vigorous movement, all of which greatly expands the already expansive form, the whole justifying an exuberant and harmonically complex and challenging coda.

Six Bagatelles for String Quartet, Op. 9 (1911-13)

Anton Webern (1883-1945)

Mässig (Moderately)

Leicht bewegt (Gentle motion)

Ziemlich fließend (Somewhat flowing)

Sehr langsam (Very slow)

Äusserst langsam (Extremely slow)

Fließend (Flowing)

Webern’s whole compositional work list comes to little more than three hours of music and these brief essays constitute only about three and one-half minutes of that total, but they are compelling and beautiful. One needs to listen openly, receptively, quietly.

At the time of composition, Webern was seeking to find a basis for composing without recourse to repetition, that is, to develop a means to achieve an unrestricted flow of music, and to find the artistic essence in the shaping of its sounds and rhythms. To create something that is more than the sum of its parts and yet not separate from them. In these pieces, the essential musical elements have been “excavated”—they are presented unadorned, without introduction or reiteration. Taking a big risk, Webern chose to limit his expression to bare essentials, meaning that for some listeners, the “musical information” that comes without introduction and repetition, lacks emotional charge and sensual gratification. But for Webern and his contemporaries, the bare surfaces and shaped musical spaces in these pieces were essential ideas in musical form. One might compare the elementary spaces and exposed surfaces of his music to the contemporary modern design with its sense of spaciousness in contrast to elaborately decorated and cluttered 19th century decorations. As he noted on a copy of the score he sent to his friend Alban Berg, “Non multa sed multum,” that is: Not much in quantity, but much in content.

Six Bagatelles, that is six “trifles,” or, six small nuggets of musical expression. The movements are through-composed, not sectional; each phrase moves the work forward, requiring no repetition or resolution. The level of musical tension is rather high, as each statement highlights and juxtaposes individual musical gestures. Drama is found in the density and the rhythms of the activity. In listening be prepared for generally very short phrases (usually only three notes, often divided between the instruments), mostly delineated by ritardandos, and expect altered sounds throughout as Webern showered the score with directions: to use the mute, *pizzicato*, *am steg* (on the bridge), *spiccato* (at the tip of the bow), tremolos, harmonics, extreme dynamics (from *ppp* to *fff*), accents (*sf*, *sfp*, *sff*) all of which reinforce the musical expression.

In 1924 Schoenberg wrote a preface for the publication of these “bagatelles,” these “little nothings,” as a kind of advocacy for them and his words convey a complete understanding of them as products of an unfathomable dedication. In it Schoenberg says

While the brevity of these pieces is a persuasive advocate for them, that very brevity itself requires an advocate. Consider what moderation is required to express oneself so briefly. A glance can be stretched into a poem, a sigh into a novel. But to convey a novel by a single gesture, or joy by a single catch of the breath—such concentration exists only to the extent that emotional self-indulgence is correspondingly absent.

These pieces will only be understood by those who share the belief that sound can only express things which can only be expressed by sound.

String Quartet No. 3

Béla Bartók (1881- 1945)

Dedicated to the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia

Prima parte, Moderato

Seconda parte, Allegro

Ricapitolazione della prima parte, Moderato

Coda, Allegro molto

In his *Guide to Bartók*, György Kroó describes the decade, ca. 1918-1928, that encompassed Bartók’s composition of his ballet, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, and the completion of the Fourth String Quartet, as a period of exponential growth and consolidation in the composer’s development. During this time, he forged his own unique musical idiom; first discarding his early tendency for Romantic expression, and then, drawing from his travels and encounters with folk cultures (Hungarian, Turkish, Arabic), and music by Debussy, Henry Cowell and others, he met the challenges of contemporary music coming from Western Europe, especially elements of Expressionism (Schoenberg school) and Neo-Classicism (Stravinsky). The result was the development of his own independent creative thinking, forged from intense analysis of musical expression as he found it both in himself and in others. Composed in a period of less than three short months (July-September, 1927) the Third Quartet is a work of complete concentration and one that marked the point where he diverged the most in his development. Here he is on his way to the formulation of his own fabulously complex compositional technique and to the liberation of his unique artistic imagination; here the tonality is as impenetrable as it is ever to get and the form is completely new. The dedication reflects Bartók’s gratitude for the award of first prize to the work in a competition held by the group in 1927. On that occasion, Bartók shared the prize of \$6000 with Alfredo Casella.

The formal design of the Third Quartet is unique in Bartók's work list. Essentially a work in one-movement, it has two main sections, each of which features a slow segment followed directly by a fast one—all of which is played without pause. The materials in the second section are related to those in the first one, implying a kind of parallelism (ABA'B'); however, when the second A returns, it only comprises an essential reference to the original A, and does not entail anything like a conventional variation or recapitulation. In the pages of A' two or three measures recapture ten or twelve measures of the original segment. As Halsey Stevens remarks, the return is "psychological...not physical...attenuated...restrained." On the other hand when segment B' returns, it is a broadly extended version of the materials of the first B. Furthermore, both A segments are pensive, lyrical and emotive, and both B segments are active rousing dances. There is no outside reference for this form; it is an entirely original effort, and one that is very difficult to pull off.

The compositional technique for working out the musical ideas in this quartet is as unusual and as original as the formal shape, for there is very little thematic material, and there is certainly no referential or predictable harmonic structure. Here rigorous construction dispenses with classical forms and the usual process of theme and variation or extension. Instead Bartók's composition technique is based on two main ideas: one is the use of linear motives in a free variation technique derived from his folk music studies together with chords usually built from pitches in close chromatic relationship (half-steps), and the other is focused on linear structures treated with strict contrapuntal procedures—in particular the use of canons—to secure structural integrity in the work. The use of freely varied linear motives can be seen as the main focus in Parts A while Parts B are rife with canonic and contrapuntal constructs.

The principal melodic material in the work comes from the opening pages of Parts A and B, specifically the tunes of the opening measures. The first motive present in the opening pitches of the first melody, comprises a chromatic cell of whole- and half-steps that rise up and fall back in tight 1/2-steps, it has the character of a lament. The other melodic motive, the most prominent one in the quartet, features three notes, a rising fourth and falling third. This particular motive is ubiquitous, occasionally decorated with an added note. The other prominent melodic motives are principal themes in the B section, both of which run stepwise up and down the scale. They are clearly derived from folk dance music, one motive starts on an offbeat and the other starts on the beat and both can be found in many arrangements and figurations throughout.

This quartet is the most tightly constructed of the six by Bartók. In addition to the intricate play between the closely-related motives and their extended variations, the work excels by virtue of its extraordinary rhythmic vitality—the whirling motion in the climax—and from the excitement created from the liberal use of extended performance techniques for string instruments: *col legno*—striking the strings with the wood of the bow; *sul ponticello*—bowing close to the bridge; *pizzicatos*; trills; complex glissandi; mixed meters. The production of these sounds is never just gratuitous, they are always integral to the direction the music is headed. They complement the more contemplative and soulful aspect of expression with fanciful, wild inventiveness.

String Quartet in Eb Major, Op. 127

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Maestoso. Allegro.

Adagio, ma non troppo e molto cantabile. Andante con moto. Adagio molto espressivo.

Scherzando vivace. Presto.

Finale.

Early in 1822, for the first time in something like a dozen years, Beethoven mentioned in a letter that he was working on a string quartet. A bit later the same year, he accepted a request from Prince Galitzin in St. Petersburg for “one, two or three new quartets,” as well as an offer of fifty ducats, and began to enthusiastically mention his new quartets to friends and acquaintances--in spite of the fact that he was very busy at that time with both the *Missa Solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony. He finally was able to begin the new composition in May 1824, and after a rather long period of work, he sent the work to his patron in February 1825.

The Quartet in Eb Major is the first of a group of works that are the monumental achievement of the end of his life: five extraordinary quartets and the Great Fugue composed in a span of two and a half years. No other works were completed during this time. In November 1826, he completed the last movement of the Quartet in Bb, fell ill in December and died in March 1827. Joseph Kerman writes that the group of three late quartets, of which Opus 127 is the first, are Beethoven’s “greatest works because each creates a more profound and individual impression of coherence than he or anyone else had yet achieved. Contrast within or between movements may be more extraordinary than ever but the really extraordinary thing is how inevitably the expanding range of sentiment is subsumed into a total integrity.” Specifically, in the case of Op. 127, it is the coherence of the entire work in spite of the unusual elaborations and treatments of form in the individual movements. While he was able to fit his thoughts into four movements in this quartet, in subsequent quartets he overrode this classic formulation: Op. 132 has five movements, Op. 130 has six movements, and Op. 131 has seven movements. Only Op. 135, the last quartet, has, again, the four-movement configuration. Perhaps this provides some context for the discussion of Op. 127 as indeed every movement notably challenges expected formal boundaries.

In the first movement, Beethoven challenged conventional expectations for a first-movement sonata form. The *Maestoso*, in duple meter, opens with three sets of bold chords, the last trailing off with a trill directly into a captivatingly lovely Allegro in which a graceful pattern of accented down-beats and off-beats support a lyrical first theme in 3/4. Not a folk or dance tune, this triple-meter melody is undergirded with contrapuntal voicing: the cello moves on the beat and the inner voices actively divide up the beats in a measure. In spite of its lyricism, it is built up in the manner of Bach, on a contrapuntal accompaniment, and it is more thoughtful because of the intricate relationship between the voices.

Carried by the seamless contrapuntal flow of the material in the first key, the second key area arrives in the totally unexpected mediant key of G Minor; it is also bit dramatic, with changes in texture, repeated notes, and octave leaps. The extended range and changes in phrase lengths--now three bars, now two--carry the music forward now a bit more forcefully, until the final pitches of the second theme comes to constitute the closing theme with a cadential series of repeated notes. For the first time in the movement the forward lyrical motion halts playfully, repeated notes passed from instrument to instrument lead directly into the development and a return of the *Maestoso*, again in 2/4, but now in G Major-- with the notes of the chords in a wider spread the statement is more brilliant since its first appearance. In the course of the ensuing

development, the contrapuntal interplay builds to a momentary *ff* climax, and then to a third *Maestoso*, this time in C Major, the boldest of all with still-richer chords and wide expanded range, but with a difference: this time, lacking the trill in the fifth bar, the statement is shortened. At once, the momentum is resumed, bringing eventually the figures of the development that arrive—hardly noticed—at the tonic E \flat Major and the first theme, now *piano* and an octave higher. Having dispensed with a return of the *Maestoso*, Beethoven moves on to the recapitulation, softening the minor character of the second thematic area (remember it was G Minor, unexpectedly so) by skillful recasting of the material to maintain equilibrium in the character of the movement as a whole.

The second movement is the glorious cornerstone of the entire quartet. Hymns of praise have been written about its extraordinary beauty as being comparable only to the *Adagio* of the Ninth Symphony. Joseph Kerman writes, “What one cherishes is its calm directness, its sense of freedom, its simplicity and its economy.” Yes, that and the rich clarity of the moving complementary lines and the fulfilling simplicity of the harmony, altogether so satisfying that one hardly expects the theme to become the basis for a chain of variations. The form is simple: two parts each repeated, but in this instance the repeats are rewritten and amplified. Variation 1 follows the plan of the original only more elaborate with inventive ornamentation. Variation 2, *Andante con moto*, is altogether livelier; the meter changes to duple time and the figuration beginning with light syncopations and trills that grow very quickly into masses of 16ths, 32nd and 64th notes (sometimes referred to as “black music”). Quite at the end, it swerves into a new key, moving from the original A \flat Major of the theme (the key of the quartet’s subdominant) to E Major (a distance of 6 keys!) and, retaining the duple meter as an *alla breve* time (“cut-time”), Variation 3 begins, *Adagio molto espressivo*. Now the essential tune has the aspect of a hymn. Stripped of ornamentation, its intense transparency encourages us to think of the inner personal world to which Beethoven had retreated by this time in his life. The sense or “tone” of the original theme is then largely restored. With a return to the A β Major and the original 12/8 meter, *pp*, Variation 4 rather slowly returns to its original motion and introduces new arpeggiations, rich dynamics, and trills. But before it goes far enough to precipitate a close, comes a diversion. Some think of it as Variation 5, others as an interlude or an intermission. In any case, this short half-meditation on the theme, *sotto voce*, in canon takes us to the key of C# (the minor counterpart to the earlier E Major passage). Everything seems suspended with the momentary preoccupation with the C#, until rising trills in the first violin brings us to the final Variation 6, the last and shortest iteration flows in streams of unaccented 16th notes, quiet, tranquil, serene and when it ceases briefly there is no feeling of interruption; rather a remarkable sense of the large structure just revealed.

After such a sublime experience, the Scherzo comes with as much contrast as Beethoven can muster. One is rather reminded of his rather crude humor. In this case we have a piece that stridently makes a point of being what any of the other three movements in the quartet are not—except, that is, for its contrapuntal character. It is neither majestic, nor lyrical, nor, one hastens to say, at all spiritual, but Beethoven does adopt the usual scherzo-trio but with some interesting differences. The opening—three full chords, *pizzicato*, ostensibly *pp*—is the first oddity, and the second is the odd interruption in the forward motion, a change of meter, texture and tempo before the return of the first section. One could also mention further aspects of a work that may be best said to take “being humorous seriously”: misplaced dynamic emphases hamper the imitative build-up, there are too many disorganized contrasting elements, ill-considered dynamics, and misplaced accents. Kerman suggests that Beethoven needed the *Scherzando*

vivace to balance the first part of the work. Indeed considering these observations this scherzo is one of Beethoven's "most explosive pieces, bursting with energy and malice, crackling with dry intelligence." At the end of the work, the character of the last movement is one of "relaxed simplicity," a full-blown rondo, a well-wrought and effective Finale for a work that has explored complexities. Simplicity is not unusual for a finale, as a finish, but simplicity can also serve the demands made by complexity. The achieve it is, perhaps the most reliable means to avoid superfluous decoration and—instead—to discover essentials.

- *Program notes by Dr. Jean Christensen*

All are welcome to come to the pre-concert presentation beginning at 2 PM in Room 130.