Chamber Music Society - April 22, 2018

Momenta Quartet

Emilie-Anne Gendron, *violin*
Alex Shiozaki, *violin*
Stephanie Griffin, *viola*
Michael Haas, *cello*

2 bosquejos para cuarteto en 4os de tono: meditación, en secreto — Julián Carrillo (1875-1965)
(Two Sketches for quartet in quarter tones: meditation, a secret)

The entry in *Grove*'s Dictionary of Music that begins "Carrillo, Julián, composer, theorist, conductor, violinist, inventor, teacher," traces only the outlines of a remarkable life story. Carrillo, the last of 19 children, was born in Ahualulco, a village in the state of St. Luis Potosí in central Mexico. His bit of training as a child in San Luis Potosí City continued at the National Conservatory in Mexico City where he studied violin, composition and acoustics. From 1899-1905 he studied in Europe, first in Leipzig where he became first violinist in the Gewandhaus Orchestra under Arthur Nikisch, the noted conductor, and conducted the orchestra in the premiere of his First Symphony. From there he continued at the Ghent Conservatory where he was awarded First Award Cum Laud and Distinction in the Ghent Conservatory International Violin Competition. On his return to Mexico in 1905, Carrillo began intense work as violinist, orchestra conductor, composer and teacher. In 1906, he was appointed professor of history and in 1908 professor of composition, counterpoint, fugue and orchestration by the National Conservatory, for which he was Director for a time. In 1914, he moved to New York where, among other activities, he organized the American Symphony Orchestra and eventually became closely associated with Leopold Stokowski.

With all that, his primary preoccupation, however, was dividing strings into "multiple parts" to achieve a "new sound." Eventually he discovered a new pitch between g and a on the lowest violin string, and calling it the "thirteenth tone" ("el sonido trece") and from it he derived scales, melodies, harmonies, meters, rhythms, textures, and composed music for instruments that he invented. In 1924, he retired from public life to work on his theory. He was convinced "a revolutionary renewal" would bring renown to Mexico with a "new order, less complex though providing for complexity, less constrained though providing for restraint." He was dedicated to his idea of microtonal composition, but he was also aware of the extra training and dedication required to perform the scores and consequently composed music both with and without microtones. Sometimes he simply attached arrows that pointed up or down to regular pitches to indicate quartertones as in these two works. *Grove* lists his work for orchestra, voice, chamber ensemble, and soloists under two headings, one with and another without microtones. In a subsection under Microtonal Quartets, one finds "#4 and 5, *2 balbuceos para cuarteto en 4os de tono: meditación, en secreto."*

Meditación and *En Secreto* (1927) are two short pieces composed with pitches derived by dividing the twelve half-steps in the octave into 24 quarter steps, or "tones." While the chords are built using these quarter tones, movement between them can use quartertones or half-steps, and in both pieces, the closing cadential material features sequences of harmonic series in the solo cello.

Meditación is a variation set in which the full ensemble plays sequences of chords moving in parallel motion (usually referred to as "planing") move up and down a scale. Starting with a Major chord, Carrillo creates a variation movement in which the repeated chord sequences are "fractured" resulting in a more complex sonority. In this manner, the initial triad comes back as augmented triads, later as diminished sevenths, and last as cluster chords built from consecutive 2nds). Short transitional solo passages are answered variously, by delicate treble chordal responses, or trills, for example. These elements contrast with the more fixed character of the planing and provide contrast. There is some variation in the combinations, a segment featuring the harmonic series played by the cello, short unison statements and various versions of clusters, including some very high/treble ones answering the cello to bring the piece to a close.

The structure of *En Secreto* is both more varied and more integrated. It features a familiar form (the rondo) in which an opening section heard at the beginning is repeated, followed by a contrasting mid-section with a return to the original material. In *En Secreto* the initial section is in two contrasting parts: in the first section (**a**) swaying cluster chords move upwards intentionally in parallel motion through three levels (with brief pauses along the way); in the second part (**b**) when they reach the top they turn and descend to the starting point where they leave the chord formation and enter into a third segment © that features various short interjections, including some plucked sounds and gestures two-by-two. In this piece, the **a** is the same each time it is played, and the other sections are varied to some degree. This would be indicated as follows: **abcab'c'** (with ' indicating a variation). The contrasting middle section features changing figures played solo and in pairs. When the figure of two augmented fourths (cello+viola, violin 1&2) simultaneously moving in opposite directions is complete, the swaying chords and their descending counterpart return. The piece is finished with a coda that introduces new material, notably some decorative elements (trills), but in particular features the harmonic series (played by the cellist) rising up to meet a "ceiling" of clustered upper voices. The entire form known as a rondo can be expressed as follows: **abcab'c'dab''coda**.

String Quartet No. 3, Op. 94 (1975) Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)
I Duets. With moderate movement
II Ostinato. Very fast
III Solo. Very calm
IV Burlesque - Quasi 'Trio.' Fast– *con fuoco*
V Recitative And Passacaglia (*La Serenissima*). Slow

Benjamin Britten's last string quartet is often praised for its simple eloquence and clear-eyed treatment of form and substance. The score reveals thoughtful consideration of questions of balance and character–effecting even those few places where the composer has "let go" with a bit of whimsy.

For some time the members of the Amadeus Quartet, Britten's long-time friends and colleagues, had asked him to write a string quartet, and in 1975 they asked again. He had been seriously ill, he knew that his time was limited and that a large work was beyond his capabilities, a realization that influenced his decision to honor their request. At first, he labeled his sketches "divertimento" apparently intending to compose a rather light piece, but as the work progressed he set that notion aside, and when he arrived at composing the last movement, he went to Venice, a city he had always loved, presumably hoping for inspiration. And it came--from the city's tolling bells, from the barcaroles associated with the music of the canal boats and from his last opera, *Death in Venice*, hence the reference on the last movement to the old name for the city, *La Serenissima* (English: the most serene), which derives from the historic status of the former Republic of Venice as a sovereign republic.

Taken as a whole, the five highly contrasting movements of Britten's Third String Quartet trace an arch form. Movements one and five are slow, movements two and four are fast and quite loud, even boisterous, and the central movement is *very* slow–one might even say that in deliberate contrast to the rest it's almost in suspended motion. Each of the first four movements is composed in ternary form, and in each cases, the second A section continues to vary and process the ideas from the first A section (A-B-A'). Up to the end of the fourth movement, the work does have some characteristics of a divertimento, but changes as Britten adopted a form from the Baroque *opera seria,* for the last movement–the so-called accompanied recitative and aria on a ground bass, or Passacaglia. For the recitative he took musical segments from his opera, and inspired by the tolling Venetian bells, he created a 12-bar tune that became the ground bass line for the aria, which is a series of variations as is traditional. This movement is considerably longer than any of the previous four and while the first four are elegant and interesting compositions, the fifth movement is challenging and provocative musical essay.

Britten was as his most deliberate in composing his first movement, "Duets," as he chose a pre-compositional scheme of writing for the six possible pairs in a quartet of instruments (v1+v2, v1+vla, v1+cello, v2+vla, v2+cello, vla+cello), and consequently opens both of the main sections with extended duos. The A segment features swaying seconds between the second violin and viola in a leisurely 9/8 meter that continue when joined by the first violin and cello playing starkly contrasting material–isolated and irregularly timed pizzicatos and harmonics--a configuration that gives the section its identity. When the mid-section comes, it is in stark contrast to the opening. It's aggressive music, with brusque exchanges and tremolo flourishes, that start low in the viola and cello and expand to the point of exhaustion eventually giving way to the return of the ruminating rhythm of the opening 9/8. In the coda Britten returns to his material–the seconds, the chords, even the tremolos–before he finds his way to an airy, delicate cadence.

The second movement, Ostinato, is in sharp contrast to the first. Its opening gesture sets the tone with a brusque flourish that flings pitches in both directions–a kind of wedge in quarter notes. And then, emphatically insistent, it comes again, now twice as fast– in eighth notes.As the movement continues this wedge figure serves as punctuation, a signal in the formal design: it is the ostinato figure that strides through the outer A sections of the movement. The middle section brings a stunning contrast with 6-part chords, ***pp**, sostenuto,* cobbled to subdued ostinato figures. The return to the A section entails a classic build-up: starting at the low end of the ensemble, Britten restores the ostiinato in the cello, *martellato,* and adds a short repeated tune in the viola. When that tune is finished the viola takes on the ostinato playing off-beats to the cellos' on-beat pattern. In this manner, adding one instrument at a time, the composer builds a crescendo of ostinatos. One more statement of the grand ostinato initiates the coda which eventually gives way to a calm ending.

In Solo a very slow melody played by the first violin in its highest register prevails throughout the entire movement. While the other three instruments together accompany the violin in the central B portion, in the outer portions (A and A') the accompaniment is only one instrument at a time, one note at a time. Beginning with the cello the notes shift from one instrument to the next almost imperceptively as they move up through the quartet. With the accompanying instruments comes a strong suggestion of tonality; the cello starting with its low C (***pp*** sostenuto) moves through an A♭Major chord, the viola through F Major and the second violin through A Major arriving at the movement's mid-point and an abrupt change in tempo and character. All four voices become very animated in a brief intermezzo of four short cadenzas, each in a different key, taking the same ones as in the first section, and adding C major to close the mid-section and reinstate the original slow tempo. As the first violin regains its stratospheric perch and resumes its contemplative solo, the other three instruments–now moving in ensemble– begin their rising accompaniment. But now when they attain the soloist's register, it begins a slow descent to its lowest register and the movement's final cadence.

Marked "Fast - *con fuoco*," Burlesque is, by contrast, crude, boisterous...and simple. The opening A segment has one principle musical idea and it comes at us with verve. The mid-section is extremely charming with its special effects–*col legno* in second violin, tripping harmonics in the viola and *spiccato* in the violin. The return to the "Maggiore" of the A section is as fun as it was the first time around.

As mentioned above, the last movement takes the composition beyond the realm of a divertimento. While there are elements in the earlier movements that can relate to those in this last movement, it could almost stand alone, and not only because it is much longer than any of the others. Part of the fascination comes from the composer's choice and adaptation of a formal structure that resonates with multiple associations from a long historical development, and one that was always associated high drama. In a sense, while choosing to compose a recitative and aria with its traditional expectations, Britten was also addressing deeply personal issues rising from his own illness and impending death. Citing specific phrases for the opening recitative and recalling Aschenbach Britten "locates" himself squarely in the opera and its drama, and following that with music that evokes the tolling bells and the regular wave-like movement of water lapping the sides of the gondolas, he “relocates” himself, composing in Venice. The treatment of the repeating bass line is along traditional lines. It starts simply and becomes more complicated with each reiteration of the 12-measure phrase.

As the movement progresses one becomes more conscious of the pause on the low D natural at the end of the bass line, a note that contradicts the E Major key of the passacaglia and compels the music to repeat the tune. At first it feels awkward, but as the repetitions of the melody continue, the succession of heavy pauses begin to feel somehow inevitable. Normally the final statement of the ostinato is altered so that the music can come to a resolution, but contrary to standard practice Britten does not provide those conciliatory extra few measures to resolve the vagrant pitch and bring the passacaglia to a close on a resonant E. Instead, a sudden intensive swell, like a “huge sigh,” ends the movement right there on that unresolved pitch. Of all the speculations I have encountered, I prefer the one that says that Britten, in the terminal stage of life, wished to imply continuity, that for him it was “an alternative to accepting finality.” Without going into detail, Peter Evens terms this last movement a “sublime valedictory,” bringing as it does an “element of closure for Aschenbach, the tormented hero of *Death in Venice*,” and perhaps for the composer, also.

Années de Pèlerinage: Italie (Years of Pilgrimage: Italy)[2016-17] Claude Baker (b. 1948)
Dedicated to the Momenta Quartet

I Roma (*Janiculum*) Intenso!
II Venezia e Napoli
III Firenze. molto leggiero sempre
IV Abruzzo. Flessibile!

Années de Pèlerinage: Italie was commissioned by the Barlow Endowment for Music Composition at Brigham Young University expressly for the Momenta Quartet. On October 3, 2017, it was premiered by Momenta at Columbia University’s “Casa Italiana” in New York City.

Claude Baker is Class of the 1956 Chancellor’s Professor of Composition in the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University, Bloomington, where he is also the recipient of the university-wide Tracy M. Sonneborn Award for accomplishments in the areas of teaching and research. Prior to his appointment at Indiana, he served on the faculties of the University of Georgia and the University of Louisville, and was a Visiting Professor at the Eastman School of Music. In the eight-year period from 1991-99, he held the position of Composer-in-Residence of the St. Louis Symphony, one of the longest such residencies with any major orchestra in the country. During this time, he initiated numerous community-based projects, the most notable of which was the establishment of composition programs at multiple grade levels in the St. Louis Public Schools. In recognition of his contributions to the cultural life of the city, he was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Missouri-St. Louis in 1999. Dr. Baker has sent the following program notes and also graciously agreed to join with Prof. Chris Brody in a pre-concert discussion of his work.

> *Années de Pèlerinage: Italie* derives its title from the set of three suites for piano by Franz Liszt in which he musically portrays the “strongest sensations and most lively impressions” created by his travels to Italy and Switzerland during the period 1835-39. In my composition, each of the four movements “explores” a particular Italian city or region through, in part, the eyes of other composers who (like Liszt) were inspired to write works based on their own sojourns in the country. Thus, there are references both literal and oblique, to music by Berlioz, Tchaikovsky, and, of course, Liszt (with a sly wink from Paganini). Serious and playful elements combine in the piece, with the two inner movements (“Venezia e Napoli” and “Firenze”) providing light-hearted foils to the more somber outer movements (“Roma” and “Abruzzo”).

String Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 20, No. 1 Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Allegro moderato
Menuetto - Allegretto
Affettuoso e sostenuto
Finale. Presto

Haydn's six quartets of opus 20, have long been referred to as the "Sun Quartets" because of a lovely figure of a rising sun on the title page of an early edition. It also seemed a fitting designation for a set of works that marks the beginning of the string quartet as a genre. According to Sir Donald Tovey, this opus is "one of the most important documents of music history," for here there is nothing of the decorative figuration found in an earlier baroque or rococo style–every note belongs to the essential workings of the melodic line, the classical ideal. And more importantly Haydn formulates, really for the first time, the basic compositional objective of the classical string quartet in which independent instrumental lines combine to work out a harmonic entity, one that could embody the dynamic curve of classical forms. Far from a uniform set of works, the six quartets of op. 20 are treasured for their variety and flexibility. Especially it seems that in no. 1, there is an element of unpredictability that reflects the composer's progress in bridging styles and ideas while in the process of creating an approach to four-part writing for strings that was new quite if not entirely new. Though located first in the set of six, the quartet in E♭Major is said to have been composed last. Perhaps this is the reason that it often seems so "willful" and almost improvised. The sheer flexibility of the voicing in the quartet, especially in the cello, and the independence of the instruments is fascinating. Following the work on opus 20 Haydn ceased composing quartets for ten years during which time he was essentially applying what he had learned in quartet writing to his symphonic output. And when he began again, it was to produce opus 33, which he claimed was in a completely new style.

The first movement of opus 20, reflects the composer's sense of formal freedom, or in other words, his "inspired eccentricity," posing a real challenge for capturing it in descriptive language. Firstly, here we have quite a few of those special characteristics that are so much a part of Haydn's reputation for surprising and delighting his audience. One might view this movement as a "series of delayed expectations" by noting the following observations: Haydn arrives at the dominant very early in the exposition (m. 7) but does not actually commit to it until 25 measures later, that is, at the "threshold" of the closing section. Then, early in the fourth measure of the development, he *seems* to return to the tonic, but moves right past it four measures later in another long delay at settling into an expected key. At the end of the development he feints a number of recapitulations as one by one they turn out to be in the wrong keys; and finally, having delayed the move to the dominant in the exposition, he needs to recompose the recapitulation and does so by taking out some material, adding some other, altering the voicing of the chords and changing the direction of the music lines. Ordinary language cannot adequately capture the nature of such subtleties; hopefully the performers will repeat both sections of the movement so that listeners will have the opportunity to catch as many of them as possible.

Describing the second movement, Menuetto-Trio-Menuetto, is less of a challenge. The first two phrases constitute the first segment of the three-part form. Each one seeming to take its cue from the dance itself: the first one (***f***) moves with high, wide steps and is answered by the second (***p***) that drops a full two octaves before moving stepwise up to the starting pitch. The 32 measures of the second segment that follow is also orderly. The surprise comes with the Trio, in the usual complementary key of A♭ Major, is scaled down as Haydn takes out the viola. The first section, with its unusual length of 10 measures, opens with a descending chromatic line, and is repeated; but the second section for which he brings back the viola, and which ascends chromatically is not repeated because it arrives, curiously and totally unexpectedly, at a dominant cadence in the rogue key of F Minor! The totally unconventional chord of C Major seventh seems to be as much a surprise for Haydn as it is for us, as he does nothing about it: he simply abandons the trio, leaving it on its harmonic precipice--and returns forthwith to the minuet. Listen for the cross-relation when this happens: the first violin swoops down from its high B♭ and turns the E♮ in the cello, into E♭, for the first pitch.

One of Haydn's most beautiful compositions, the slow movement of this quartet, *Affetuoso e sostenuto*, has been called the "pearl" of the set of opus 20 quartets. This music strikes a perfect balance between form, musical line and forward motion. Haydn's confidence is revealed in every measure as each note seems inevitable, even, or especially, in those phrases that take an unexpected turn. At the cadences listen when the first violin moves into its lowest range quite far below both the second violin and the viola. Even then, nothing is out of place; the impeccable relationship between time and phrasing facilitate the smooth sequence of irregular phrase lengths.

The last movement is pure delight, a perfect complement for the purity of the slow movement. It might be appropriate to call it an extravaganza but it is too delicate, too neat, too "finished" with challenging delightful rhythmic tricks, mischievous challenges for the performers and listeners alike. It simply needs a better word to captivate its sense of fun. If you think that the extravaganza of syncopations are challenging for the listener, consider what they are for the performers.

Goethe wrote the following comments about Haydn's work in *Art and Antiquity* (*Kunst und Altertum):*

> I have always hoped to be able to say, as warmly and as sincerely as I feel it, that the perfect harmony expressed by his genius is nothing less that the serenity of a soul born free, clear and pure . . . It is the flexibility, variety and unpredictability of his symphonies and quartets that make them so compelling. Every bar is full of musical adventure, and inspires the palpable feeling that Haydn is creating bridges between styles and ideas and forging a composite vision of four-part string writing that draws on every historical source that he knew as well as the furthest reaches of his musical imagination.

- Program notes by Dr. Jean Christensen

As noted above, Claude Baker and Christopher Brody, Assistant Professor of Music Theory in the School of Music have agreed to engage in a pre-concert discussion of the String Quartet, Années de Pèlerinage: Italie. Everyone is most welcome to attend the session beginning at 2 PM in Room 135.