

Chamber Music Society - October 14, 2018

Takács Quartet
Edward Dusinberre, violin
Harumi Rhodes, violin
Geraldine Walther, viola
András Fejér, cello

String Quartet, Op. 76, No. 2

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Allegro

Andante o più tosto allegretto

Menuetto. Allegro ma non troppo. Trio

Finale. Vivace assai

Joseph Haydn began to work on the six String Quartets, Op. 76 in 1796, and completed them in the autumn 1797. Published in 1799, they were dedicated to the Hungarian count Joseph Georg von Erdödy (1754–1824) who commissioned them. Op. 76 was the last complete set of string quartets from the master, as Haydn was able to complete only two for Op. 77. At this time, he had returned to Austria from two extraordinarily successful trips to London, for which he composed a remarkable amount of music (including 12 symphonies, 6 string quartets, an opera, among other works) and he was again an employee of the Esterházy family, this time for the rather difficult Prince Nicolaus II. Showing no slow-down expected for a person in his sixties, he had turned to composing principally vocal music. The works of this period that include *The Creation* and *The Seasons* and the six late masses together with the six quartets of op. 76, are among Haydn's most ambitious works. Quartet No. 2 in D Minor, deviates from standard forms by expanding formal principles, reinventing them to accommodate his growing emphasis on contrapuntal exchange between instruments. Praising these innovations, the English music historian Charles Burney wrote to Haydn:

They are full of invention, fire, good taste, and new effects, and they seem the production, not of a sublime genius who has written so much and so well already, but of one of highly-cultivated talents, who had expended none of his fire before.

The second quartet is popularly known as the “Fifths” or *Quinten* because the falling and rising open fifths heard prominently at the beginning of the first movement. They dominate the exposition and are featured in the development section as they thread their way through the on-going discourse, answer from one part to the next and knock against each other in staggered imitation. Sometimes they are accompaniment and once time, they move in all four voices. They are also heard occasionally, at “signal points,” in the other movements as well. Another feature of the work is its homotonicity, meaning that all movements are principally in one or the other mode—in major or in minor—of the key of D. The Haydn scholar, David Wynn Jones, attributes its “tough, uncompromising nature” to the opposition of D major and D minor from movement to movement and within movements.

The first movement in D minor, “a radical essay in sonata form” (Jones) opens with a beautifully structured four-measure phrase with the falling fifths in motion, a rising four-note motive in 8th notes and a falling one in 16ths. Shifting up an octave, the consequent initially follows the same outline, but takes the rising motive and expands the phrase until it reaches the high D from which it falls back to arrive at the opening pitches, 12 measures later. The ensuing transition continues at length, and arrives at the second key area in a most unusual manner; without a cadential pause, Haydn simply continues to work new material that contains some falling fifths in the melody and others prominent in the accompaniment. Then instead of turning to the relative major (F major), Haydn chooses to continue the exposition of the second theme in F minor. All of this, the sustained contrapuntal texture, the lack of a pause for a cadence and the minor key of the second theme—works to downplay the usual contrast expected for the second key area. The first time around one is likely to miss the change. Nor do the proceedings “lighten” as the closing material continues the fast forward motion and brings rising fifths in the cello to open the development.

String Quartet No. 4, Op. 83 (1949)

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Allegretto

Andantino

Allegretto, *attacca*

Allegretto

The period following the end of WWII was extraordinarily difficult for the artistic community in Russia because of the government’s program of “Socialist Realism.” Shostakovich’s music was deemed “formalistic,” performances of his works were banned and he was dismissed as a professor in the Moscow and Leningrad Conservatories. Having lost all other means of revenue he composed film music and created some works that demonstrated “Socialist Realism,” one of which was an oratorio in seven movements (1949). The Song of the Forests, which celebrated the “The Great Stalinist Plan for Remaking Nature,” a 15-year project for planting trees to protect Southern Asia from drought. The work pleased the authorities and it was awarded the Stalin Prize, First Grade.

Shostakovich also realized that folk music was another way to satisfy the requirements of Socialist Realism. Folk music had the virtues of being accessible, traditional and melodious and Shostakovich had developed a particular interest in Jewish folk music. In 1944, he had incorporated distinctive Jewish elements into the fourth movement of his Second Piano Trio, opus 6, which won the Stalin Prize in 1946 and in February 1948 had survived examination by the censorship board. Even as late as 1948, official acceptance of Jewish music was positive, for at that time many active members of the communist parties were Soviet Jews, as finding communism more acceptable than life under European nationalist regimes, they had participated in taking control of Eastern European countries after the occupation of the Red Army. Stalin supported Jewish organizations in Russia and abroad, the USSR representative at the United Nations supported Zionism and the creation of a Jewish State in the Middle East.

In late summer, early fall of 1948, confident that Jewish references would be acceptable, Shostakovich composed a song cycle, “From Jewish Folk Poetry.” But about that time, Stalin realized that the State of Israel was not going to be a Soviet ally in the Cold War and began to attack

Zionism with articles in Pravda, picking on individuals and groups as “unpatriotic,” and “rootless.” He closed Yiddish schools, libraries and theaters, and banned Yiddish newspapers. Soon Shostakovich realized that his song-cycle would not be acceptable and dropped any idea of having it performed.

Then in February 1949, his situation changed. Stalin, decided that Shostakovich should be the official Soviet spokesperson at the Cultural and Scientific Congress for World Peace in New York City in March, and cancelled the ban on the works of formalist composers. Shostakovich went to the Congress in March, began working on his Fourth Quartet when he arrived home in April and finished it in December. He intended it for public performance in spite of some stringent elements in the work and perhaps he hoped his performance at the Congress had brought him back in favor. However, when the Beethoven Quartet performed the work for the first time in private, the audience, fearing the inevitable reaction it would provoke, convinced him to put it safely away, “in the drawer.” The premiere took place in 1953, some months after the death of Stalin.

There are two important reasons for Shostakovich’s partiality for Jewish music and Jewish themes. “It’s multifaceted and can appear to be happy while it is tragic. It’s almost always laughter through tears. This quality of Jewish music is close to my ideas of what music should be. There also should be two layers in music.” (*Testimony*) But the Fourth String Quartet is not really a work that uses Jewish themes; it is rather a work by Shostakovich who has made up his own kind of folk music, indeed it was similar to Bartók’s Sixth String Quartet he heard performed in New York. I believe this is why he was unable to see that his Fourth Quartet would not be acceptable to the authorities. Despite areas of impassioned repetition, the character of the work is basically restrained. The movements are all in moderate tempos (*allegrettos* and one *andantino*) and the melodic material is repetitious but does not often repeat anything exactly. There is nothing like the “conversation” found in classical forms, and no conflict and resolution, except when it is expressed as heartfelt resignation, of which there is plenty on these pages. It is as though the composer improvises on basic forms like those that make up the repertory of folk music. Excited, emotionally heightened passages build up to high pitch through repetition but give way to reserve and restraint, sometimes droll and sometimes quietly humorous. Harmonically, simple diatonic melodies are contrasted with passages composed from repetitious and grinding dissonance. Still, in the end there seems to be only resignation.

The first movement stands out by virtue of long drones on the viola and cello over which a two part melodic line that (more or less) moves along in three-measure groups (for instance, $2/2 + 2/2 + 3/2$). After the first exposition, tension builds as the drones move up an octave and the viola and cello also begin to double the lines played by the violins creating a 6-part texture, albeit 2 lines are immobile and the other four are really only two, each doubled at the octave. So it becomes very loud. This continues for a very long time, and finally gives way to a melody, remarkable mainly for its pleasant character. The drones return briefly, stay in the lower range and eventually give way to a brief return of the contrasting material.

The second movement, a gentle waltz in triple meter, is carried along on a simple ostinato in an iambic pattern (short-long) heard in violin II and viola under the first violin solo. Eventually the melody moves to the cello and then again to the violin. As the movement approaches the end, passages of complex slow chords alternate with fluid solo violin passages that take gentle flight

usually tracing an arching line that rises and then falls, but finally settles on three iterations of up-ward rises.

The third movement is a scherzo--or rather, the shadow of one, as it is played from beginning to end on muted instruments. In the first section, a steady 8th-note ostinato supports a droll melody first in the cello, then in the first violin. Contrasting material played in unison on the upper three instruments follows but gives way as the ostinato returns. The tempo increases in the central section--possibly the trio--as 16th-notes gradually take over from the steady pulse of the scherzo 8th notes. Like the second movement, this one proceeds largely with three instruments at a time. The movement ends with a gentle melody in the viola that continues beyond the pizzicato sign-offs.

In the final movement, following the viola introduction, three large chords initiate a dance with stomping octaves in 4/4 time. The melodic ideas are treated rather freely to begin with and the tension builds through repetition and variations on them. Off-beat chords with multiple double stops push the movement forward; they punctuate or answer, they comment or interrupt. Eventually the large spread out texture dissolves but the dialogue continues until hardly anything is left to say in the end.

The Fourth Quartet is dedicated to the memory of Shostakovich's close friend Pyotr Vladimirovich Vil'yams (1902-1947) who was an uncontroversial Russian stage designer and a painter noted for his portraits, one of which was of Shostakovich.

Quartet, Op. 52, No. 2

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Allegro non troppo

Andante moderato

Quasi Minuetto, moderato

Finale. Allegro non assai

Many of Brahms's peculiarities are well-known and one was his propensity for working on compositions and discarding them as inadequate, or for polishing works for a long time before finally releasing them for publication. The String Quartets, Op. 52 were the products of both those personality traits. Brahms said that he had composed 20 string quartets before his first one, Op. 51, no. 1 in C minor, and it is known that he polished that work for at least 7 years before it was published in 1873.

An inveterate student of all aspects of music and an accomplished pianist and organist, Brahms studied works and collected scores of master composers and works by theorists, as well as those of his contemporaries. One of his objectives was to study how the masters solved the problems they encountered including such things as avoiding forbidden intervals and ineffective movement of pitches. According to Karl Geiringer Brahms's biographer, he mastered counterpoint to the point that complex forms were "a natural means of expressing his emotions." Brahms was also a master of rhythm and meter and was particularly fascinated by the metrical effect of crossing two rhythms, for instance, taking two measures of three beats (that is, two groups of three notes) and treating them as three groups of two, a handy rhythmic device particularly well-disposed for composing cadences.

The second string quartet in A minor was one of only three published by the composer. Other chamber works included 2 string quintets, two sextets, and numerous combinations that included

piano for it seemed that his musical expression needed a larger ensemble to provide more variation in timbre.

Like Haydn's String Quartet, Brahms's String Quartet in A minor is a homotonal work; all the movements are in either A minor or A major. In the first movement sonata form, the first key area is in A minor and following the exposition of the first theme, the transition moves to C major for the contrasting key but toward the end of the statement, C minor is briefly introduced before the closing theme of the exposition. Brahms always sought to make connections so that every note had a foundation within the work. For instance the triplet rhythm in the opening theme is found again in the accompaniment to the second theme, though these themes could hardly be more different in character. The first figure in the development, a quarter note followed by a rest and two quick 16ths and a half note, have their origin in the third measure of the first theme. Brahms was alert to the character and strength of contrapuntal relationships, so throughout one finds short imitations and canonic passages

The second movement is a kind of rondo form with two motives in the first segment, and a very interesting canonic passage that contrasts brilliantly with the opening passages. Following this inner section, Brahms treats the main thematic material by extending and shortening them, first bringing a recapitulation in the "wrong" key (F Major) –which actually sounds quite beautiful--and then he begins a recapitulation again, this time in A major followed by a coda.

The third movement, a Minuetto, moves rhythmically in graceful patterns of three measures. The first 15-measures of the A section are grouped as follows: 3+3+6+3. The second section is grouped as follows: 3 + 6 + 3 + 3 + 6. Then the mode changes from minor to major, the meter from 3/4 to 2//4 and the middle section begins with an Allegretto vivace that contrasts brilliantly with its long phrases in 16th notes of 8 or 9 measures each. In an unusual turn of events, the Minuetto returns for a brief passage of 6 measures, in which the four voices are arranged in two canons, one based on the theme of the opening Minuetto (violin II and cello) and the other on the Allegretto vivace (violin I and Viola).

The final movement, a complex sonata rondo, opens with a robust rhythmic pattern said to owe its origins to Hungarian dance. In any case, the principal theme is a full-fledged example with its useful hemiola pattern (grouping 2x3 as 3x2) described above. Unlike many composers Brahms will not alter a minor cadence to a major one if the movement is in the minor key. Despite passages in A major in this movement, Brahms returns in the coda, Più vivace, to finish the movement in the original key, A minor.

- Program notes by Dr. Jean Christensen

Jean Christensen, retired Professor of Music History at the University of Louisville, will lead a pre-concert talk on the program beginning at 2 p.m. in Room 130 of the School of Music.