

Program notes for April 15, 2009 (Tákacs String Quartet with Marc-André Hamelin)

Haydn. String Quartet No. 66 in G, Op. 77 No. 1 (1799)

Haydn, in failing health, published his uncharacteristically short set of two quartets, Op. 77, in 1799. The young Beethoven, who had briefly (and unsatisfactorily) been Haydn's student on his arrival in Vienna, had just published his six quartets, Op. 18. With that publication, the string quartet had exploded from the politeness of classical Europe into the age of revolutions. Haydn had literally invented the quartet genre and had perfected the sonata form at its heart. In Op. 77, Haydn backs out the door with a bow and flourish.

Dedicated to Prince Lobkowitz (also a patron of Beethoven's), Haydn's G Major quartet is anything but predictable and retiring. The first movement, *Allegro moderato*, is as rich as a late Haydn symphony first movement. The march-inflected main theme plays against intense arpeggiated triplets – a dance inside a march, three inside four -- that provides rhythmic interest and tension throughout.

The second movement, an *Adagio*, opens with two bars of unison playing that suggests the tragic tonality of c minor, but the relative major of Eb quickly establishes itself. This is a glorious fantasia, continually evolving, varying, modulating – yet everything is based on the opening phrases. A soulfulness and operatic theatricality characterize this magnificent expanse of music. Beethoven would admire and imitate this manner of writing in his slow movements, all the way up to the serene third movement of his Ninth Symphony.

If you're expecting the third movement, marked *Menuetto*, to be one of those leisurely dances "typical" of Haydn, you'll be surprised. This *Menuetto* is marked *Presto*, not for dowagers but for gazelles -- no, make that Hungarian or Balkan gazelles. The contrasting Trio section, in Eb Major like the slow movement, echoes the first movement, a glimmer of the "cyclic" idea that both Beethoven and Schumann would develop. Haydn's health may have been failing, but his imagination could still run to the wild side, his ability to create a sense of unity within a work still developing.

The last movement is motive-based. A tiny cell, just the first few notes of the melody, becomes the seed crystal from which a propulsive finale unwinds. It is perpetual motion, perpetual variation, even the second subject taking its impetus from the first notes of this *Presto*. The quartet becomes an orchestra, aiming for maximum brilliance and effect. For sheer liveliness, this is a match for any quartet movement in the entire Haydn catalog.

Bela Bartók. String Quartet No 1 in a minor, Op. 7 (1909)

Fellow Hungarian composer Zoltan Kodaly says of Bartók's 1909 first quartet, "The unity of the movements, preserved during the 19th century by devices which became more and more external, is established here in the manner of the old masters; by the homogeneity of the thematic material, with something more which I would call psychological unity – an intimate drama, a kind of 'Return to Life' of

one who has reached the brink of the abyss. It is programme music, but it does not need a program, so clearly does it explain itself.”

Bartók’s “programme” was a secret: his unrequited love for a violinist named Stefi Geyer. Using a theme from his long-suppressed Violin Concerto, Bartók opens his premiere quartet with what he himself calls a “funeral dirge,” in this case a slow fugue. Let’s consider it a four-part dirge with the quartet as pall-bearers.

Don’t expect a Bach fugue here. We’re not in Bach’s choir loft, not in Kansas, either: we’re in that anti-bourgeois world of Austro-Hungarian angst, the “modern.” In spite of its being a fugue, there is a “difference” in the construction of theme/motif, the intervals within them and the modulations to new material. Going beyond post-Wagnerian chromaticism, Bartók is a rule-breaker even while aiming at contrapuntal perfection, a man setting out to invent his own musical language with its own syntax. You don’t know what’s coming next, to the delight of players and the occasional perplexity of listeners.

The *Lento* movement begins with violin and viola in dialogue. Even though a fugue is ongoing, the lines, tugged by urgent voice leading and crescendo and decrescendo, are mournful and expressive. Once all four players are fully engaged, they converge in chordal climaxes starting in bar 23, culminating in a broad *ff* chord with the violin’s high A ringing out on top. This is followed by a sudden drop to quietness, a clear modulation to another key, another world, which triggers a sudden burst of double-stop chords from the cello, and the entry of the viola with a kind of syncopated, almost gypsy quality: there is no funeral without dancing. The keening violin soars above this, however, and then the cello gets its chance to speak out. Then there ensues a hush, the solo violin playing over its brethren’s sixteenth notes and pizzicato chords on the cello. Finally, the two violins resume the contrapuntal dialogue which began the movement, joined by viola and cello – a crescendo passage leads to a series of emphatic, cadential chords. These are beautiful, a blossoming out of the murkiness of the mourning that has preceded, and they sound to me like a direct echo of a moment in Tchaikovsky’s string sextet – an allusion perhaps shared between Bartók and the object of his secret affection? The movement dies away, almost as though Bartók were suddenly embarrassed by where his fugue has just brought him out.

The mood lightens in the quirky second movement. Here, rhythmic unpredictability rules. Bartók’s discovery that Hungarian folk music – which he transcribed in remote mountain villages -- likewise did not follow the “rules” of the conservatory professors reinforces the composer’s need to be unique and peculiar: elements of the “barbaric” are already evident in this movement. After 20 bars of preparation, a kind of recitative in which the two low instruments speak, followed by the soprano instruments (like the separate men’s and women’s groups at a wake, to extend the dirge metaphor?), the solo violin gives out a motive – not as recognizable as one of Haydn’s, but detectable to the careful listener as it is subjected to remarkable and unpredictable treatment. So much happens in this movement, and so much of it is unexpected, that all the listener can do is buckle up and enjoy the roller coaster ride. It’s all right to have a good time at a party, even if no one there speaks any language you know.

The third movement is preceded by a 33-bar section marked “Introduzione.” The *Allegro vivace* which follows may be as baffling to the first-time listener as the movement that preceded it, but Bartók here

lets loose a masterful declaration of artistic independence and maturity, with another fugue at its heart. Modulations, sudden shifts in meter or tempo, and passionate outbursts abound. Emotionally, we sense that this is a hero's quest, from the persistence of the second-movement motive, from the musical onomatopoeia of heartbeats, cries and hammer blows we seem to sense in the wordless narrative. I do not have any idea what this is "about," except that the quartet is formed in grief, forged in fire, and catapults up, despite many and baffling digressions, into some final confrontation of the "I" of the four-note motive against the "other" of perpetual conflict. The final chords, which include eleven different notes, throw down a challenge to the music of the 19th century and say, in effect, "Watch out! Who needs to arrive at the end with a great big tonic chord? Anything is possible!"

Robert Schumann. Quintet for Piano and Strings in Eb, Op. 44 (1842)

Obsessive-compulsive as Robert Schumann was, he turned to chamber music only in 1842, writing all his quartets that year, as well as his piano quartet and piano quintet. In the process, he not only composed the first known quintet for piano and string quartet, but also chalked up what musicologist Arthur Cohn calls "almost chamber music's Fifth Symphony." The Schumann quintet is indeed the warhorse of chamber works with piano, unabashedly Romantic, masterful in form, and assured in manner.

The work was sketched in five days' time, and the working out took two months. The quintet was first performed on December 6, 1842 in a private home with Felix Mendelssohn at the piano. On January 8th, 1843 the work was performed publicly at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, with Clara Schumann at the piano. After hearing it, Schumann pronounced the quintet his "best work."

The opening *Allegro brillante* has no prelude or introduction. Piano and strings are at it instantly, *in medias res* as it were, in a polished theme that seems to contain contrasting masculine and feminine periods within itself. One thinks of Schumann's Eb Major Third Symphony, which starts the very same way, propelling the listener into high drama, the onrushing waters of the Rhine. Schumann will continue to remold the same germinal material in his finale, making this, like his Piano Concerto, a "cyclic" work.

The C Minor second movement has been associated with dread and quiet horror ever since the days of silent films, when it was used in a solo arrangement by pianists seeking appropriate "mood music." This movement, indeed, was used in Edgar Ulmer's classic film *The Black Cat*, with Karloff and Lugosi, and it featured ironically in a Christmas Eve (funeral music at Christmas?) chamber concert portrayed in Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander*.

"In Modo d'una Marcia" has the slow tread of a funeral march and a dignified solemnity. The contrasting middle section of the movement is in the major, but the somber opening theme always returns. This movement is one of the glories of Western music, and its ability to create and sustain a mood of mystery, dread, and melancholy never wears out, even after a hundred hearings.

Schumann's third movement *Scherzo* is all the more welcome for emerging as it does from the shadows that precede it, and it is tirelessly inventive, rhythmically complex, and livened by two Trio interludes.

Rising and falling scales open the movement, tripping over harmonic fence posts. In the Trios, the music, after a teasing rest, jolts into an even more hurried mode, as if chased by angry bees.

The equally vital finale, *Allegro ma non troppo*, is almost as interesting as the opening movement, and shares its sound world and its thematic content. The first movement theme appears again in counterpoint to the finale's theme, adding a sense of unity to the high drama (the two themes are close in many ways, the shift in accents masking their kinship somewhat). This "cyclic" form molds all four movements together as one sound-world, one distinct and complete work. (You could swap movements in many Haydn and Mozart quartets and no one would be the wiser: Schumann's movements are integral, all part of one conception, music as psychology.) After a short Bachian double-figure, the quintet arches to its end.

When this work reaches its glorious conclusion, there are only two appropriate responses: (1) astonished applause and gratitude that such things exist in the man-made world, and (2) the question, "When can we hear this again, please?"

--Program notes by Brett Rutherford