

RHODE ISLAND
CHAMBER
MUSIC
CONCERTS



BRENTANO String Quartet

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2012 – 7:30PM
SAPINSLEY HALL
NAZARIAN CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

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Program notes

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN (1732-1809)

String Quartet in Eb, Op. 33 No. 2 (Hob.III.38) "Joke" (1781)

Allegro moderato

Scherzo (Allegro)

Largo e sostenuto

Finale (Presto)

The Opus 33 quartets of Haydn were dedicated to Grand Duke Duke Paul of Russia and performed on Christmas Day 1781 in Vienna, at the apartment of the Grand Duke's wife, the Grand Duchess Maria Feodorovna.

Haydn had a decade's pause in quartet composing when he introduced the Opus 33 quartets to his aristocratic audience. Entitled to a rest he was, since he had virtually invented the serious quartet with his Opus 20 set. Haydn raised the quartet from "dinner music" status to serious works that challenged players and kept audiences quiet and alert to every new twist and surprise.

The first movement, *Allegro moderato*, begins and ends gently, with a rocking, gracious melody, like entering and leaving a card game that never ends. We are used to thinking of Haydn as a fuddy-duddy, but starting with these works he consciously plays against expectations. Modulations are not the expected ones. Rests occur where it seems they ought not to be. Voices enter on odd beats. The first violin occasionally forgets himself and acts as though it is a concerto, and then comes to his senses. Well-mannered as it all is, it is music for alert, smart people.

The novelties in this quartet include a *Scherzo* (itself a work meaning "joke") instead of the stately Minuet that was customary. The *Allegro* tempo marking also makes certain that the listener knows this is not music to which one dances, even if the Austrian court ladies are tapping their feet and expecting to be asked. The opening theme has unexpected dips into piano, almost like a distant horn call or an echo. The middle section, instead of a Trio, introduces a new theme with alarming slides (*glissandi*). The Bb slow movement, coming after the Scherzo, is a miracle of invention. It begins as a tone painting with viola and cello, and a melody that sounds like something from *The Seasons*, Nature incarnate. Its gentleness is quickly answered by stern chords, and this delicious movement builds from that contrast. This is music from the world's springtime.

Haydn always has warmth and wit and *surprise*, and although this quartet ends in a novel way that will make you smile, it is not the musical equivalent of a whoopee cushion. The finale movement is a Rondo in ABACA form, the first time that Haydn introduced this form into his quartets. The main theme always returns in its original key, so familiar that the listener is inclined to say, "Yes, I've heard that before." In the final A section, Haydn brings us back where we started with the opening phrases, and there it seems to end. But no, a loud chord. The theme again, softer. A long rest. (Your country cousins will start to applaud here, and you will shush them). The opening passage again. An even longer rest. Oh, again, ever so softly. Are they done? The joke is on you.

BÉLA BARTÓK (1881-1945)

STRING QUARTET No. 4 (1928)

Allegro

Prestissimo, con sordino

Non troppo lento

Allegretto pizzicato

Allegro molto

Perhaps, in starting out on this quartet, Bartok felt the need to prove himself once again as a musical intellectual, a radical thinker in the organization of notes and tonalities. Without going the shrieking 12-tone route, Bartok nonetheless wanted to create something new, a music that would reject the bourgeois world of the triad and arpeggio and tonic-dominant, just as the strident Bauhaus architecture and graphic design of the era rejected all that came before while still retaining the external structure of a building, a book, a string quartet. Bartok's brain, vast browed like Shakespeare's, sought to extract from his studies of folk music new scales, new key relationships, new rhythms.

The first movement of the Fourth Quartet is the workshop of this experimenting: I for one find it more like a session in the dentist's chair than a musical epiphany, but players and listeners who love Bartok will hasten to disagree. There is much anxiety in this music, a Hamlet-like brooding, with its terraced rhythms and harmonic complexities. If, like me, you find the first movement too much to bear, take comfort: it passes quickly, and the rest of the quartet is Bartok as tone-painter and subtle Bard of the bow. It's worth the wait.

The second movement, *Prestissimo con sordino* (as fast as possible, with mutes on), is a Fuseli nightmare painting, or El Greco's Witches' Sabbath, in sound. This is ghostly, haunted music with twittering bats and wailing spirits, and it may have taken a cue from the opening of the Witches' Sabbath movement in Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. Alarming chords and creepy glissandi (slides) make this a prototype of horror movie music. Bernard Herrmann's music for *Psycho* was decades away! This could be background music for the appearance of the ghost in Hamlet.

The passionate third movement is punctuated with intense cello solos against a desolate background. The Hamlet who baffled us with his private thoughts in the first movement is now the singing cello in "To be or not to be" soliloquys, the violins like figures hiding behind a tapestry playing bleak extended notes *sin vibrato*.

The fourth movement, *Allegretto pizzicato*, employs the plucked strings throughout, and is a tour de force of timbre and dynamics. Bartok invents new twists on pizzicato, including a strumming effect resembling a guitar, and here and there we even get hints of the Gypsy cimbalom. Some have compared this to a Mendelssohn scherzo, especially the fairy music in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Instead, I hear the buzz and play of insects, such as one might hear in a deep forest, or along a stream

bed in high summer. Returning to Hamlet again, are these the sounds Ophelia heard as she floated in the brook before sinking? (Bartok was keen on animal sounds, and even composed a tiny piano piece evoking the most humble of pests, “From the Diary of a Fly.”) Some of the sounds created here had never been tried before in a quartet, so this is new territory in music making.

In the fifth movement, we see that Bartok, despite his ramblings in the country-side to glean authentic folk material, has also been in the concert hall listening to Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, a decadent imagining of Neolithic folk rituals. Indeed, we hear “Dance of Death” chords on viola and cello. To take my Hamlet analogy to its furthest point, is this not music of strife, war, madness, poison, and swordfights? There is a clear sense of madness about two and half minutes in (bar 149) when there are three bars of rests (oh, Haydn!) followed by some alarming “tuning up” notes from the second violin and cello. These *apoggiatura*’d half-notes, like the milk that has been soured by a witch spell, intrude into the next section, adding a certain nocturnal cat sound. The mutes come off the string, making some *pizzicato* effects more piquant, and music accumulates power until some more giant Stravinskian chords lash out (the swordfight in *Hamlet*?) The same alarming manner, drifting into even more disorienting sounds, leads this tumultuous quartet to its final chords.

I ask your indulgence for thinking of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* during this fevered quartet. I would not want to go home to an unhappy house and a loaded weapon after hearing this music: Shakespeare is safer.

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

String Quartet in A minor, Op. 51 No. 2 (1873)

Allegro non troppo

Andante moderato

Quasi Minuetto, moderato

Finale (Allegro non assai)

Brahms was past 40 when the two quartets of Op. 51 were published in 1873, and the shy composer seemed as reluctant to thrust immature quartets on the world. He had destroyed 20 previous efforts at writing a quartet! Always the shadow of Beethoven loomed, and Brahms was terrified of the comparison. Like Bartok in the 20th century, Brahms sought a new way in a genre that some thought to be extinct.

Was the string quartet dead after Beethoven? Few quartets after Beethoven had taken root in the repertoire. The prolific and popular Louis Spohr, who died in 1859, had composed 36 quartets, and they vanished into oblivion before the varnish was dry on his coffin. Schumann had faltered, and Schubert and Mendelssohn produced some gems. Dvorak was just coming into his own that year, but, like Brahms, was discarding older quartets as failures. Tchaikovsky had published the first of his three quartets in Moscow in 1872, a tentative beginning for that master.

This was the daunting background against which Brahms, ever the perfectionist, worked. The Opus 51 quartets are mature, polished, hammered to perfection. They

are also “absolute music.” Like most of Brahms’ chamber works, they are fully-worked out, almost symphonic structures, that just happen to be played by four string players. Forget intimacy: expect complexity, passion, love and lamenting. The sense that this is absolute music is also underscored by the fact that Brahms issued a transcription of this work for piano four-hands the same year the quartet was published.

My friend Pieter says that Brahms’ chamber music should only be played by “unloved old men,” and although this is hyperbole, it makes the point: both Opus 51 quartets are in minor keys and they are serious. In the opening *Allegro non troppo*, Brahms embeds, after a misleading first tonic note, the three notes F-A-E, the only “extra musical” element one needs to know about in the sonata form movement. FAE was a motto Brahms shared with his friend Joachim, meaning frei *aber einsam*, “free but lonely.” This crusty bachelor motif is a building block, although one that does not overtly declare itself.

Listening to this well-wrought, dramatic movement, one hears in the meandering opening theme the little melismatic turns that we know from the symphonies, and the rhythmic interplay of competing twos and threes, Brahms’ own way of coming at climaxes.

You will recognize the entry of the second theme when Brahms has the accompaniment in pizzicato (plucked strings) in triplets, with the upper instruments declaring a theme that alternates short with long notes. This is the “two-against three”, and the theme also hints at the Baroque “dotted rhythm” slow movement of Bach and the French masters. Later in the development, Brahms leans into that manner full force, with great effect.

In the recapitulation, one notable detail is the reintroduction of the second theme in bright A Major, but the dramatic coda brings us firmly back to the elegiac land of A Minor. This music is not easy to follow at first listening, but it deepens with repeated hearings.

The A Major slow movement, *Andante moderato*, has a theme characterized by very small intervals (seconds, mostly), as though a ghost were singing. Brahms sets himself the challenge of making much of something in a small compass. This subdued manner makes the dramatic interruptions in the middle section, when they come, seem quite fierce. The “free but lonely” spirit at the heart of this somber music folds in his cloak around himself and passes through storms and losses, and the wounds seem self-inflicted since the interruptions appear to be variations on the main theme. When the theme recurs again after a slide out of the minor into F Major and then finally home to A, it is as if to say, “See, I am still here.”

The *Quasi Minuetto* third movement is the most accessible movement of the quartet and its main theme has a teasing, almost Mendelssohnian quality about it. Accented descending notes are almost, but not quite, laughter (this is, after all, Brahms). A sudden *Allegretto* in A Major brightens things and picks up the pace in duple time. A more formal Minuet theme attempts to assert itself, but it is swept away again like a rejected suitor after only six bars, as the *Allegretto* returns for an elaborate, contrapuntal spin. We almost hear “symphonic” Brahms here. The music gradually resolves back to A Minor, and, magically, the opening theme returns, finished off with a handsome, brief coda.

Poor Hungary! We don't tend to think of it much except for goulash and the Gabor sisters. Brahms thought of Hungary and its gypsy subculture a lot, and he probably had his Hungarian violinist best friend Joachim in mind when he wrote this *czardas*-inflected finale. The last movement is a rondo-style structure with its folk-tune main theme repeating and varying. The tension between the melody and its accompaniment is a main feature here. Near the end, a chorale-like passage, played *pianissimo* modulates subtly from cheerful A Major back to the home key of A Minor for the final *Piu Vivace* coda.

Everything in Hungary always ends in a minor key.

— ***Program Notes by*** BRETT RUTHERFORD