

PROGRAM NOTES

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791): Quartet for Oboe, Violin, Viola, Cello K.370/368b (1781)

This quartet was written for a famous oboist, Friedrich Ramm of Munich. While this is genuine chamber music, there are definite concertante elements, that is, it is something of a small-scale concerto for the oboe. There is even an opportunity for the oboist to improvise a cadenza. The quartet also revives a characteristic of the old trio sonata. The two upper parts play a sort of duet over the two lower instruments.

The first movement is in sonata form as would be expected, but it has some unusual features for Mozart, such as the same melody at the beginning of the second tonal area as at the opening of the piece. This is a common practice with Haydn but rare with Mozart. The development section is made up almost entirely of new material—another unusual feature. The second movement is a very concise bipartite sonata form. It is a masterpiece of compactness. There is not a superfluous note in it. It is, indeed, a little jewel. The third movement, a rondo, begins with the oboe playing a rollicking 6/8 tune. About halfway, there is a passage that must have astonished its first players. While the strings jog along comfortably in their 6/8 rhythm, the oboe is in 4/4. The effect is a kind of pulsating polyrhythm. Presently, the oboe breaks into a series of rapid sixteenth notes. After a few measures, everything comes together as smoothly and gracefully as one could wish. Shortly after this, there is a choice example of Mozartian humor. Instead of sixteen notes to a measure there is now only one. These are played each one louder and higher than the previous one. The oboist is in the extreme high register. As he goes up and up, the listener wonders whether or not he will make it to the highest note. By the time he plays the high E, everyone is ready to help him in a superhuman effort. Then he fools everyone with an effortless little peep on the high F and continues merrily on his way.

-Hoyle Carpenter

Frank Bridge (1879-1941): Phantasy for Piano Quartet in F Sharp minor, H.94 (1910)

Perhaps no other British composer of the first half of the century reveals such a stylistic journey in his music as Frank Bridge. Born in Sussex, England, in 1879, his early works before 1910 follow in the late-Romantic tradition of Fauré. Works from around 1915 come close to the orbit of Delius, and after the First World War his music bears the intensity of Scriabin. In his radical chamber pieces of the 1920s, Bridge rubs shoulders with the early works of Arnold Schoenberg. Apart from composition, his career embraced performance (he was the violist in several quartets), conducting, and teaching, with Benjamin Britten being his best-known pupil.

Bridge's more radical works did little to enhance his reputation. Rather, it was works like the Phantasy for Piano Quartet of 1910 and several other of his Phantasy works which contributed to his success. The three-movement piece was composed for the annual and prestigious Cobbett Competition, instituted by Walter Wilson Cobbett, an amateur musician with a particular interest in the "fantasy" form of that time. Generally, a "fantasy" is a piece of music favoring a free flight of expression over strict adherence to formal rules, suggesting an improvisational character. It comes towards the end of Bridge's early period, when he was not venturing out of a late nineteenth-century harmonic language.

-Steve Siegel

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908): String Sextet in A Major (1876)

Yes, even great composers can enter a competition and fail to win a prize. Celebrated for symphonic works with dazzling orchestrations such as *Scheherazade* and *Capriccio Espagnole*, and - in Russia, at least - his many operas, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov did try his hand at chamber music. Two years after he became Professor of Practical Composition and Instrumentation at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory, he entered a competition held by the Russian Musical Society in 1876. He surprised everybody with a Sextet in A Major that failed to win the first prize – or any prize, for that matter. It did receive an honorable mention and was favorably described as a “youthful entertaining piece that is full of gaiety.” That’s pretty slim pickings for a musical giant on the scale of Rimsky-Korsakov.

The sextet was not published until four years after the composer’s death in 1912. Yet despite its history of neglect, and despite its not having the nationalistic flavors of Rimsky-Korsakov’s operas and symphonies, it is a delightful work, full of charm and ingenuity. The five-movement work, scored for two violins, two violas, and two cellos, opens with a graceful waltz-like melody played by the cellos, then violins, then pizzicato by first cello and second violin in unison. Next comes a Rondo fugato - a surprise because fugues, especially ones with six voices in counterpoint, were not the norm in 19th-Century chamber music, or in Russian music of any genre! The third movement is a sprightly Scherzo, again with a hit of fugal treatment. A graceful Andante espressivo follows, and the sextet wraps up with a Finale that leaps from the gate with a headlong rondo theme, momentarily slows down, and ends with a presto dash to the finish.

-Steve Siegel