

PROGRAM NOTES

Franz Josef Haydn (1732-1809): String Quartet, Op. 76, No. 5 (1797)

In addition to being the year of the opus 76 quartets, 1797 saw Haydn's writing of the Austrian national anthem which he incorporated into the third of this set of six quartets. This is the only instance of a national anthem being written by a composer of first-rank. Charles Burney, the eminent English music historian, said this when he first heard the opus 76 quartets in 1799, that he "never received more pleasure from instrumental music; they are full of invention, fire, good taste, and new effects..." One of the new effects may have been the speeding up of the minuet into a quick scherzo, an innovation he may have picked up from his one-time pupil, Ludwig van Beethoven.

The quartet starts in a usual way: a moderately-paced theme and variations. The treatment of the theme in the variations is very free, and each variation is of a different length. The theme is passed freely among the instruments, and the treatment resembles sonata-form development. Variation one is in minor, and the tempo picks up in the last (var. 3). The second movement is even more unusual. It is the musical and emotional center of the quartet and is the most substantial in sheer length—taking up more than twice the time of the first movement. The unusual key of F-sharp major (six sharps) must have made the players of Haydn's day take notice. About the only use of such a key in earlier music occurs in Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, where its use occurs only as proof that it can be done. It is a warm, dignified piece—perhaps his finest slow movement. The quick-moving minuet has the speed of a Beethoven scherzo but without its sinister overtones. The main body of the piece is in D major. The trio is in D minor, with the cello taking a leading role.

The last movement is a prime example of Haydnesque musical humor. What could be more absurd than the opening of the last movement of this quartet? It starts with three emphatic authentic cadences, the most final of all closing formulas. That everything does not stop before it gets started is due to the fact that we are conditioned to expecting much more to follow. Haydn takes advantage of this psychological situation. Sonata form is used but not obviously. Distinct themes are not clear, and analysis must depend largely on harmonic and key situations. The recapitulation is noteworthy. The authentic cadences are there, but the effect is modified by a running sixteenth-note passage in the first violin. There are several instances of the use of double pedal point, reminiscent of the drones heard on some folk instruments. Haydn is having a lot of fun in this movement. It is a delightful close to a most unusual and interesting quartet.

-Hoyle Carpenter

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924): Cello Sonata No. 2 in G minor, Op. 117 (1921)

It's hard to believe, but composing music was not Gabriel Fauré's day job. Probably the most advanced French composer of his generation, Fauré, who lived from 1845-1924, was able to write music only during summer vacations, while toiling principally as a choirmaster and teacher the rest of the year. Fortunately, Fauré lived long enough to see ultimate success. At the age of 60 he became director of the Paris Conservatory, a post that made him suddenly famous, although again leaving him with little time to compose.

Fauré retained his creative gifts to the end of his life, composing elusive masterpieces of French chamber music on the cusp of Romanticism and the modern age. Deeply attached to the romanticism of an earlier period, he is considered the last of the romantics. Debussy described him as a "maître de charme," an epithet that still rings true.

Fauré's first cello sonata was a violent, tragic work in D minor, composed during World War I. The Cello Sonata No. 2, although also cast in a three-movement form and set in a closely related minor key, is quite unlike the first. Despite the prevailing minor modes, its turbulent energies are more ecstatic than angry. The opening movement interweaves two contrasting themes, with a syncopated piano part restlessly extended over long passages against an ardent cello line. The austere slow movement, with its serene resolution in a major mode, is based on a Chant funéraire Fauré wrote a year earlier for the centenary of Napoleon's death. The finale is a dramatic whirlwind of a piece, filled with athletic exuberance. The day after the Sonata's premiere in May of 1922, Vincent d'Indy wrote to his 78 year-old friend, "I want to tell you that I'm still under the spell of your beautiful Cello Sonata ... The Andante is a masterpiece of sensitivity and expression and I love the finale, so perky and delightful ... How lucky you are to stay young like that!"

-Steve Siegel

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897): Quintet for Clarinet and Strings, Op. 115 (1891)

Possibly this is the best of all Brahms' chamber works. It is modeled after that other masterpiece of this medium, the Clarinet Quintet of Mozart. Both of these composers, when nearing the ends of their careers, developed an extraordinary interest in the clarinet. In each case, this interest was inspired by the playing of an outstanding performer. With Brahms it was Richard Mühlfeld, one of the finest musicians of his time.

There is also a parallel with Giuseppe Verdi, who wrote his two finest works, Otello and Falstaff, after he had decided that he had done enough and would compose no more. Brahms had made a similar decision although he was only fifty-eight at the time. He looked back on a life full of great achievement and personal satisfaction. All of his symphonies and concertos were completed. He had even drawn up his will. He told his friends that he did not wish to compose anymore. But Mühlfeld's artistry prompted him to another period of great chamber music composition.

The quintet was composed in Ischl, his favorite retreat. The first public performance took place in Berlin with Mühlfeld and the famous Joachim Quartet.

The opening theme of the first movement is flowing and rhapsodic in character. After a substantial development section the recapitulation uses the thematic material in a freely varied form. The mood is one of bittersweet reflection but with some intense moments. The second movement is of exquisite beauty. The middle section, with its florid passages, gives it a Hungarian flavor that is found in so many of Brahms' works. The andantino is more cheerful and straightforward. Its first theme resembles that of the finale of the first symphony. The effect, however, is utterly different.

The last movement is, as in Mozart's quintet, a set of five variations on a simple theme. There are several allusions to material in the preceding movements until, at the end the opening melody is quoted intact.

-Hoyle Carpenter