

PROGRAM NOTES

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791): String Quartet in E-Flat Major, K.428 (“Haydn” Quartet No. 3)

The period between the summers of 1781 and 1783 was a momentous one for Mozart, marked by personal and artistic emancipation, success and challenges. Emancipation came with the 25-year old composer’s decision not to return to Salzburg in 1781, or to the domination of his employer, Archbishop Colloredo, and his teacher, Leopold Mozart. Successes early on favored Mozart’s conviction that he could “freelance” in Vienna, culminating a year later in the Burgtheater production of what became his most popular opera, Die Entführung. As an encore, he married its soprano, Constanze Weber, in August of 1782, and was a new father by the next July, 1783. Challenges, precipitating a turning point in Mozart’s style, were offered by Joseph Haydn in 1781 with his dazzling new Opus 33 “Russian” quartets and by Sebastian Bach in 1782 with the dazzling fugues of the Well-Tempered Clavier.

The confluence of these disparate stimuli, together with Mozart’s need to absorb and transform everything within his experience, resulted in a tremendous release of creative energy. One outcome was a set of quartets, which were the “laborious” issue of the next two and a half years. The first three quartets were completed around the birth of his first child, the second three early in 1785. Mozart arranged for Haydn to hear his efforts and, having acknowledged that Haydn taught him how to write quartets, subsequently dedicated all six “children” to his “celebrated and dearest friend” in the Artaria publication (designated Op. X). Truly impressed with Mozart’s achievement, Haydn declared to Leopold “your son is the greatest composer known to me,” and insisted well into old age that he “never heard a work by Mozart without having learned something from it.”

From 1782 on, what Haydn learned from Mozart was directly related to what Mozart learned from Bach. The catalyst was the Baron van Swieten, Vienna’s Imperial Librarian who, as Ambassador to the Prussian Court in the 1770s, heard about “old” Bach from the aging Frederick the Great, and returned to Berlin with manuscripts of the Art of the Fugue, the forty-eight preludes and fugues of the Well-Tempered Clavier, and the great works for organ. Drawn into van Swieten’s aristocratic circle, Mozart attended the private Sunday afternoon sessions where only Bach and Handel were heard, and arranged the 3- and 4-voice fugues from Volume II of the WTC for the Baron’s string trio (K. 404a) and quartet (K. 405). For three years, Mozart struggled with the impact of Bach’s North German genius on his South German sensibilities, with the consequence that nearly a third of his work during that interval was wholly or predominantly contrapuntal. Even in 1786, one of his students remarks that Mozart always had a copy of the “48” lying open on his clavier.

Mozart’s hard-won mastery of polyphony enabled him to re-think the texture of the quartet in terms of truly independent voices, which was somewhat different from Haydn’s concept of the “quatuor en dialogue” in Op. 33. But, like Haydn, Mozart sought always to wear his learning lightly, and held in contempt those who did not. The high value he placed on “charm” and “naturalness” is amply evident in the Quartet in E-flat, despite its contrapuntal underpinnings.

The Allegro opens with a strong, unison gesture, announcing intentions of chromaticism, which are kept up throughout the next three movements; the second motif, by contrast, is a quiet little gruppetto figure. A concise development, in the minor, is introduced by a canonic restatement of the first motif, and the movement returns by sequences to a polyphonically-structured recapitulation. The Andante offers an iridescent shimmer of Galant grace alongside an aching Romanticism, all contained in a few moments of surpassing beauty. With the simplest of melodic means, chromatic appoggiaturas, and slowly dissolving suspension dissonances, Mozart achieved an effect not unlike Wagner’s Tristan prelude, with which it is frequently compared.

The Minuet is least typical of the “Haydn” set as a whole, and features an uncharacteristic accent on the second beat, irregular phrase lengths, and shifting drone-like accompaniments.

While it may have been influenced by the Minuet of Haydn's own E-flat quartet in Op. 33, it also suggests the French pastoral Musette and the shepherds' bagpipes from which the name derives. The quartet closes with an Allegro vivace rondo of folk-like simplicity and humor in which fioritura passage work is tossed between the instruments in the intervening section, and finally comes to rest in a conclusively stated, chordal finish.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897): Sonata No. 2 in A Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 100 (1886)

Romantic music, as a whole, adheres to the formal patterns of the classic period. There are no other comparable instances between adjacent style periods in music history, e.g. Late Renaissance to Baroque or Romanticism to Impressionism. Of course there are some changes, or there would not be a new style period. In the Romantic period, melody becomes more flowing, dissonance is more prevalent, rhythm is greatly enriched, and oscillating moods become common. With all this, Romantic music remains rooted in the major-minor system and melody remains supreme over all other elements. Brahms' Sonata, Op. 100 is a prime example.

This work is a popular favorite. It has the nickname of the Thun Sonata after the lovely summer retreat where Brahms wrote it. There are references to some of Brahms' songs. But more striking are the opening measures, which use the same notes as the beginning of Walter's Prize Song in Wagner's The Mastersingers. This is not significant. When one considers that there were only twelve different notes available, duplication was inevitable. It is the treatment of the material that is important.

The first movement is a sonata form. The themes are song-like without much contrast, as would be likely in Beethoven. The second movement combines the features of a typical slow movement and a scherzo-like third movement. The last movement is a rondo whose principal theme is one of those warm, noble melodies that Brahms does so well.

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924): Piano Quartet No. 2 in G Minor, Op. 45 (c. 1886)

Speaking of Fauré, Aaron Copland said this: "Perhaps no other composer has ever been so generally ignored outside his own country, while, at the same time, enjoying an unquestionably eminent reputation at home." Perhaps popular acclaim hinges more on large-scale offerings of a Mahler or Wagner, or even a Debussy or Ravel, than on the more intimate offerings of a Fauré. It is undeniable that he was one of the most inspired musicians of the last 150 years.

His music well fits the frequently quoted statement: "the eminently French qualities of taste, clarity and sense of proportion." A student of Saint-Saëns, his music is a further development of his teacher's manner. He is the last great traditionalist of French music.

The first movement of the second piano quartet begins with the melody in octaves in the strings over a restless broken chord accompaniment in the piano—a procedure that he uses many times throughout the quartet. A more meditative second theme follows. The scherzo is very fast. It starts with a rapid piano figure and pizzicato string chords. The music hurries forth with sinister energy. There is no trio section. The adagio is indicated as being in 9/8 meter. That is only part of the story. The first two bars in the piano alone are in a cross rhythm between the hands in 4/4 and which overlaps the bar line. This is said to represent the bells of the village of Cadirac, not far from his boyhood home. Then follows the true 9/8. These two ideas then alternate during the rest of the first part and return, after a middle part, in a new setting. Here Fauré's impassioned lyricism reaches a high point. The final allegro is full of driving energy. It uses several themes of varied character. The movement is brought to a close by a tumultuous coda.

Fauré, like Beethoven, became totally deaf. However, the present work is not affected as it was finished well before the affliction struck him.

Program notes by Hoyle Carpenter

Save the dates:

Summer Gala Concerts: July 13, 20, 27