

PROGRAM NOTES

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827): String Quartet, Op. 18, No. 3 (c.1798)

In the symphonies and other massive works, Beethoven was concerned with heroic, poetic or religious ideas. In solo works, he stressed virtuosity. The string quartet had none of these limiting factors. It is a medium stripped of all extra musical relationships. It is austere and exacting. Yet, this combination of four instruments affords great variety of tonal color and invention. It is a musical conversation on a high level.

Since it was the custom to publish related works in groups of three, the first set of quartets by Beethoven were brought out in two sets: 1,2,3 and 4,5,6.

Before trying his hand at this medium, he attended the quartet sessions of Prince Lichnowsky. There the Schuppanzigh Quartet played every Friday. They were at Beethoven's disposal to try out his musical ideas. This was invaluable to him. George Gershwin, with his large earning power, did the same thing with an orchestra that he hired.

The opus eighteen quartets followed the tradition of Haydn and Mozart, but nevertheless, a new original voice was being heard. This was revealed in his probing of new harmonic procedures.

The first movement is a bright, cheerful sonata form. Listen for the first theme—two rising whole-notes followed by rapid eighths. The second movement is a tender, lyric *andante con moto*. It is in sonata form without development, but the recapitulation is followed by a development-like coda. Is the third movement a minuet or a scherzo? Beethoven does not say. It has none of the sinister character of the later scherzi, but its driving, quick tempo leads me to think of it as a scherzo and not a minuet. The last movement returns to sonata form. A frequent occurrence (but not at the beginning) is a motif of three short notes followed by a longer one. This came to be a favorite device of Beethoven. The best-known example is the so-called fate motif at the beginning of the Fifth Symphony. This movement goes at a fast pace. It is Beethoven in his most cheerful mood.

-Hoyle Carpenter

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963): Sonata for Violin and Piano, FP 119 (1942-43, revised 1949)

Just as classical folklore would have us believe that Mozart disliked the flute, so it is with French composer Francis Poulenc, who by his own admission disliked the violin, at least as a solo instrument. Poulenc's violin sonata, composed during 1942 and 1943 while his country was at war, was at least his fourth attempt at the genre, and the only one published. The fact that it exists at all is largely due to the influence of the violinist Ginette Neveu, whom Poulenc greatly admired. He later confessed that "the few delicious violinistic details of the score" were due to Neveu. On the completion of the first draft he wrote, "The monster is finished. I will begin the realization...The violin prima donna over piano arpeggio makes me vomit."

Those are strong words, indeed. Nevertheless, it is a lovely piece, if a deeply tragic one. Dedicated to the memory of the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca, who was killed in the Spanish Civil War, it reveals its hard edge in the very first movement with a dark, jagged opening theme on the violin and percussive support on the piano. Poulenc headed his second movement, an *Intermezzo*, with a quotation from García Lorca, "The guitar makes dreams weep," an allusion to the poet's own guitar arrangements of Spanish folk and popular songs. The third movement carries the uncommon indication *Presto tragico*, calling for a very quick beat but in a funereal mood. The sonata progresses lyrically, yet speedily, to its close.

One must realize that in composing a work under such wartime circumstances, even the most delightful of composers can acquire a harder edge, and Poulenc was no exception. His violin sonata showcases the unique qualities that Poulenc's music is famous for: poignant lyricism, vivid contrasts, and a sense of deep nostalgia.

-Steve Siegel

Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel (1805-1847): Piano Trio in D Minor, Op. 11 (1846-47)

Like so many other women of talent and musical ability of the nineteenth century (and, sadly, even more recently), Fanny Mendelssohn was a victim of a male-dominated world. Ironically, even her younger brother Felix considered her as obviously talented as himself, and an even better pianist. Yet it still shames one to realize that her family took her Piano Trio in D Minor to the publisher only after her death, for they had all but forbidden her to publish works while she was alive.

In spite of his personal feelings about his sister's talent, Felix's own attitude was characteristic of the time. "From my knowledge of Fanny," he wrote in 1837, "I would say that she has neither inclination nor vocation for authorship. She is too much all that a woman ought to be for this." Nonetheless, Felix allowed several of Fanny's songs to be published under his name (an open secret). Fortunately, Fanny's husband, the painter Wilhelm Hensel, was even more supportive, and allowed several of her works to be performed publicly at the Mendelssohn home in Berlin.

That was the scene for the premiere of her last major work, the Piano Trio in D Minor, completed shortly before her death. It is in four movements, the first beginning gently but with great energy and passion, with a primary theme driven by whirling piano figures. The lyrical second theme evokes Fanny's talent for song. The romantic second movement opens with a delicate piano solo, much like one of her brother's "songs without words." The third movement is labeled "Lied," and features a prominent reference to an aria in Felix's recent oratorio "Elijah." The dramatic finale leads with an almost improvisatory piano solo and later recalls the lyrical second theme of the first movement.

-Steve Siegel