

PROGRAM NOTES

Robert Schumann (1810-1856): Märchenbilder for Viola and Piano, Op. 113 (1851)

In keeping with his status as a central figure in musical Romanticism, Schumann often gave his instrumental pieces more or less specific titles that suggest a literary program that the performer and the listener would create from a mere suggestion from the composer. We find no cuckoos, storms, windmills or alarm clocks but rather hints that hopefully trigger the imagination. Thus, Schumann wrote several cycles of pieces with names such as Carnaval, Fantasy Pieces, Night Pieces, etc. The Märchenbilder (Fairy Tale Pictures) are of this kind.

The first of the Märchenbilder has contrasting phrases between the viola and the piano that are combined toward the end of the piece. The second is more rhythmic and has two episodes in a florid style. The third movement is in a definitely bravura manner. The last is slow and melancholic and is a contrast to the restless movements that precede it.

-Hoyle Carpenter

Claude Debussy (1862-1918): String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 10 (1893)

This quartet is a product of the time of his earlier masterpieces—e.g. Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune and the Nocturnes. It is not in the main stream of his extensive series of works based on the cyclical plan of César Franck, that is, the use of the unifying device of a theme that occurs in all movements. Debussy turned from his usual impressionistic methods. This is his only work that has such a Beethoven-like title, Premier Quatuor en sol mineur, Op. 10. It is his only work with an opus number. Yet he did not completely abandon impressionism. There are numerous small touches of this style. Here, for once, Debussy inhabits two worlds—the academic one of César Franck and that of his own dream world of l'Après-midi d'un Faune.

The opening theme, with its lowered second degree of G minor, is equivalent to the Phrygian mode, one of those used in Gregorian chant. It is the recurring of this theme in all movements that makes it a “cyclical” work. The first movement is a sonata form. In the recapitulation, the second theme is omitted. The second movement is a scherzo with much use of pizzicato and meter changes. The third movement is slowly paced. It builds up to the high point of the whole work. The finale contains much contrapuntal writing and devices such as augmentation—thus proving that Debussy could do it. Why is it surprising that composers such as Debussy and Schubert can do what an A student in music theory can do?

This quartet, with its successful blend of classic quartet writing and impressionistic feeling, has come to be regarded as one of the high points in chamber music literature.

-Hoyle Carpenter

Ludwig Van Beethoven (1770-1827): Septet for Winds and Strings in E-Flat, Op. 20 (1799-1800)

This lively, sparkling work was finished before April 1800 about the same time as his first symphony “Op. 21”. In both of these works, while expressing a truly individual musical personality, Beethoven leaned heavily on the examples of Haydn and Mozart. He once remarked, “The septet was written by Mozart”. It turned out to be, during his lifetime, one of Beethoven’s most popular works. This, no doubt, induced him to arrange the work for quartet, for piano and as a trio for clarinet or violin with cello and piano. Eventually Beethoven tired of it and came to dislike it as much as Rachmaninoff despised his famous (or infamous) Prelude in C-sharp minor.

The septet is a fine example of the divertimento, a genre cultivated by Mozart and others. It is built around two outer fast movements (each with a slow introduction here). In between are two minuet movements (the second speeded up to a scherzo). These are preceded and followed by slow movements. The following pattern results:

- I slow-fast
- II slow
- III fast (minuet)
- IV slow
- V fast (minuet-scherzo)
- VI slow-fast

Two movements deserve special comment. You will probably recognize the third movement as an old friend. Beethoven used it in the well-known Sonata Op. 49 No. 2 as well as in the Trio Op. 11. The fourth movement is an andante based on a popular Rhenish theme having the character of an old pilgrim song. After the theme is passed about among the instruments, there is a series of five ingenious variations. Notable is the third, which treats the theme in canon, first by the clarinet and bassoon and then by the strings. It is not known whether Beethoven borrowed the theme or that it became popular after the septet was written. It is easy to sense why this work was so popular in Beethoven's lifetime. It is a fitting farewell to the eighteenth-century serenade.

-Hoyle Carpenter