HA YDN: STRING QUARTET IN F MAJOR, OP. 77, NO. 2

Programming a Haydn quartet is always a celebratory event. String quartet players, musicians and chamber music lovers owe a great debt to this remarkable man who singlehandedly invented and established the string quartet as one of the most prominent mediums of Western Music, a status it retains to this day. From composers that were directly inspired by his quartets and wrote their own (starting with Mozart and Beethoven, continuing with practically every important composer since) to chamber music societies, the popularization of chamber music concerts (and even the establishment of String Quartet residencies such as our own here at CCM) all are ultimately fruits of Haydn’s work.

Haydn lived an unusually long life (dying at 77, very old by any standard of the day), and string quartets occupied him until the very end. So even though he didn’t start seriously exploring this genre until well into his 30s and 40s (the average European life expectancy at the time), he lived long enough to produce the most impressive output of quartets by any composer: over 70 of them! Haydn took an almost arbitrary instrumental formation that was in the fringes of musical art, used for private and amateur settings (mostly reducing orchestrated material to one player per part or to lightly accompany a soloist or two), and with it established an entirely new, harmonious language and subsequently put it center stage alongside the symphony and the opera. One cannot overstate how dramatic this transformation was: a whole new medium was born, in effect establishing an altogether new culture of chamber music for centuries to come.

Tonight’s program features a particularly important work: his last completed quartet. This piece was the second out of a commissioned set of six by Prince Lobkowicz, an avid music lover and patron of the arts. Sadly, Haydn was already quite frail at the time and was having
difficulties fulfilling his obligations due to his worsening health. He made several attempts to complete the set but eventually managed to write just two more movements of another quartet (published separately as Op. 103), prefacing the score with the words: “Gone is all my strength, old and weak am I.”

Old and weak perhaps, but oh so young and boisterous in spirit! Haydn’s usual charm, wit and mischievous style is, if anything, exaggerated in the wonderfully joyous and feel-good Op. 77.

This second quartet in the set is perhaps one of the most striking examples of Haydn’s obsession with monothematicism (a compositional practice where the entire musical material is developed from a single theme or tune). The piece begins with a brilliant and vibrant melody in the first violin, and Haydn doesn’t need any special props to produce one: the whole tune is just a simple scale going down from high F to a lower one. The arrangement of the scale highlights a pattern of a three-note descending motif (a short thematic fragment) that becomes the compositional DNA of the rest of the movement as well as of each of the other three. In this respect, one could argue here that Haydn took the monothematic idea a step further towards the motivic compositional practice we attribute to Beethoven, where a fully organized theme is no longer required to provide a work with its essential building blocks. (It’s an interesting thought, considering Beethoven, already in his 30s then, was composing his first set of quartets Op. 18, which are entirely motivic in nature, at the exact same time Haydn was working on Op. 77; incidentally, both were commissioned by the same Prince Lobkowicz).

Alongside the exploding positivity and good spirit this piece radiates, it also features one of the most profound and solemn slow movements in the quartet literature. Certain parallels can be drawn to the slow movement of the “Emperor” Quartet, Op. 76, No. 3, a theme and variation movement utilizing the very successful “Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser” (“God Save Emperor Franz”) hymn Haydn wrote in honor of Emperor Franz II (which eventually become the Austrian national anthem and the current national anthem of Germany). Both movements present a non-typical set of variations in which the theme (itself
normally transformed through the different variations) retains its original presentation throughout while the surrounding material is developed instead, partially contributing to its hymn-like quality. Haydn was very fond of “Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser” and it is possible he had the “Emperor” variations in mind when working on this slow movement. Both share a kind of serenity and simplicity. The latter, with its freer and inventive form, as well as its powerful dramatic impact, is in no way inferior to the former, and, in my opinion, is one of the rarest and most inspired wonders of the literature.

It is a great privilege to perform what concludes a lifework of the founder of the String Quartet. What an exquisite conclusion to the journey taken by this masterful craftsman and innovator!

- Notes by Gershon Gerchikov

BARTÓK: STRING QUARTET NO. 1, OP. 7

Bartók’s inspiration for the first of his six quartets was the unrequited love for violinist Stefi Geyer. The work was completed in 1909, only one year after dedicating his long-suppressed violin concerto to Stefi Geyer, who rejected the piece. (The concerto was only published after both had died.)

While masterfully using traditional techniques, forms and textures, Bartók pushed musical boundaries in his string quartet by expanding far beyond romanticism, developing his own conception of modernism. His personal collage of influences (the rational use of traditional values combined with folkloristic and rustic qualities) provided Bartók with the building blocks of the unique musical language that not only left its important mark on 20th-century composers, but is also strikingly relevant today.

The work is written in three connected movements, which produces the strong feel of a developing narrative. Embarking on the darkest, most intimate point of pure despair with the first movement – an unusual way to make an opening statement – the composition brightens up gradually towards the second and third movements, while exploring the
Austro-Hungarian and more rhythmically quirky dance-like flavors so typical of Bartók.

The first movement is a slow fugue, which starts with the violins exchanging the motif of a descending sixth – a motif taken from the violin concerto representing Stefi Geyer. The descending interval like a sinking heart, and the slow contrapuntal pace set up one of the gravest most anguished movements of the string quartet literature. The use of bursting dynamics, crescendos and diminuendos (combined with the inevitable pace of the fugue) creates a very unsettling sensation: Bartók himself describes this movement in a letter as a “funeral dirge.”

The middle section of the first movement is opening a window to a completely different world, starting with earthy syncopated double stops in the cello while the viola is playing an almost improvised sounding and gypsy-like solo, eventually joined by the second violin.

Before the fugal motif in the violins returns to end the movement with the same dark sentiment of its opening, Bartók allows the music to brighten up and bloom into a magical melody in the cello that almost sounds like a day dream in the surroundings of this lament.

Although clearly looking back to the Baroque period by using one of the strictest compositional forms (the fugue), Bartók feels free to break some rules along the way by changing the intervals of the motif while finding his own unmistakable approach. It’s hard not to detect the influence of Beethoven’s Quartet, Op. 131, a monumental piece that features a similarly slow fugue as its first movement.

The second movement is a dance-like emotional roller coaster written in 3/4 time. Eerie passages often presented in unison underlie the movement and are constantly interrupted by bursts of energetic and charged gestures, which give the movement its mysterious and explosive feel. Nothing in this movement is stable or familiar; the frantic changes of character are supported by temperamental tempo variations throughout the movement. Bartók’s fable for exploring unusual scales and pentatonic gestures is omnipresent.

The third movement is preceded by a short, dramatic introduction that
displays an exchange of rapid, high-pitched and humoristic passages in the upper voices. Each passage is answered by an intensely contrasting and rather severe cadenza from the cello.

The last movement is where the typical rural folksong influence of Bartók’s mature work truly comes to life. Dense textures as well as plenty of clashing intervals rub against one another in close vicinity, certainly increasing the challenge that we interpreters have to deal with. Working on such a movement requires taking a lot of time to play the music in a slow tempo in order to be able to observe the material with “magnifying glasses;” this way, we become very familiar with the sounds our instruments create together, enabling us to make the most of these special non-classic blends of sounds and to choose the most successful strokes and articulations.

It is also this final movement that brings us the first true flavors of folk music that would become so important for all of Bartók’s future compositions: we hear the impact of regular visits to the Hungarian countryside in the unmistakably peasant-like and folkloristic nature of the music.

The first quartet marks a fascinating and exhilarating time for Bartók, a time of impactful change: the 27-year-old rejects his Roman-Catholic upbringing, falls in love with Stefi Geyer, discovers the Hungarian folk tradition and develops strong emotional patriotic ties to his country. This mix of highly personal and extremely dynamic flavors seeps through Bartók’s personality straight into his music and arguably makes it his first masterpiece.

- Notes by Amit Even-Tov

**BRAHMS: STRING QUARTET IN A MINOR, OP. 51, NO. 2**

When introducing Brahms’ String Quartets, Op. 51 (published in 1873), scholars typically highlight the fact that these works are the result of almost twenty years of painstaking work by an impossibly self-
critical composer, slaving away in the shadow of Beethoven’s “Sword of Damocles.” Beethoven’s immense influence on Brahms is well documented and hardly surprising.

There is certainly truth to this observation: in his famous article “Neue Bahnen” (“New Paths”), published back in 1854, Robert Schumann announces Brahms as a force to be reckoned with and already then mentions the existence of unpublished string quartets, amongst other works.

At the same time, these admittedly staggering facts and statements are merely a by-product of what makes these pieces so incredibly unique in their own right. 1871 marks a year of drastic personal change for Brahms, as he moves from northern Germany to Vienna, the musical capital of the world. The physical relocation prompts the composer to reevaluate his role in musical life and to reconsider the genres and styles of music that he must compose and promote (Leon Botstein, *Cambridge Companion to Brahms*). Until the late 1860s, most of the compositional output that made Brahms a household name were works of private musical genres such as chamber music, song and choral works playable both by professional and educated amateur ensembles. The *German Requiem* (1868) and the final push of finishing Symphony No. 1 (1876) as well as his String Quartets Op. 51 (1873) heralded the approach of what is generally referred to as Brahms’ “Second Maturity.”

The change in musical and compositional approach is strikingly evident when taking a closer look at elements of Brahms’ earlier chamber music: the Sextet in B-flat Major, Op. 18, with its vast melodic generosity, the beautiful but pronounced characters of the Piano Quintet in F Minor, Op. 34, or his immense Piano Quartet in G Minor, Op. 25. As captivating and alive as this music is, it nevertheless represents a much more accessible style of writing while (to a certain degree) catering to the average amateur musician or aristocratic layman.

Unlike the above-mentioned works, both of the Op. 51 string quartets instantly establish strong contrast to the “old” Brahms by demanding an entirely different way of listening and playing; instead of coherent and conceivable melodies, we are now confronted with almost Beethovenian use of musical motifs, constructing contours and lines rather than
melodies, while inflicting sudden and drastic character changes paired with utmost harmonic uncertainty.

In the A minor quartet, the ravishingly beautiful and unique influence of Schubertian sounds is especially noticeable, and the evocative character of Schubert’s “Rosamunde” quartet is an important part of the musical DNA. Additionally, Brahms’ great friend Joseph Joachim’s renowned motto “Frei Aber Einsam” (“free but lonely”), a lifelong source of inspiration for the composer, is cunningly woven into the first movement: F-A-E are the second through fourth pitches of the catchy four note motif constituting the first movement’s main musical material. The second movement (the flowing “Andante moderato”) is the only movement written in a major key, although its abrupt minor outbursts instantaneously recall the slow movement of Schubert’s monumental G major quartet.

The opening sounds of the third movement (“Quasi Minuetto”) remind us of Schubert’s last Winterreise song “Der Leiermann” (“Hurdy-Gurdy Man”), and the playful interludes of that particular movement seem also faintly reminiscent of the allegro sections in the “Adagio cantabile” movement of Beethoven’s Op. 18, No. 2. The fourth movement brings Budapest and Vienna together by interchanging wild gypsy flavor with Austrian charm, culminating in a vertiginous and dizzying coda.

Despite the obvious and plentiful references to Schubert’s œuvre in this particular quartet, it is worth noting that ultimately “Brahms is not a true tragedian like Schubert, he clings to hope and strength and the luminosity that seeps around the edges of shadows.” (Mark Steinberg)

Taking these considerations into account, it becomes clear that the publication of his string quartets meant much more than merely delivering an overdue addition to the already impressive Brahmsian catalogue of popular chamber music. Officially dedicated to Theodor Billroth (famed surgeon, extremely accomplished amateur musician and host of regular chamber music soirées in Vienna), the string quartets Op. 51 aimed to challenge both the increasingly demanding professional and amateur musicians as well as the audience partaking in the rapidly growing amount of professional chamber music concerts.
Curiously enough, Brahms’ publisher Simrock appears to have been in agreement with this assessment: while some 25 years earlier Schumann still had to passionately implore his publisher to print a score together with the individual set of parts for his Op. 41 string quartets, Brahms’ Op. 51 string quartets were amongst the first chamber music ever to be published as a matter of course complete with score and parts, only accentuating the highly intricate nature of these works.

- Notes by Jan Grüning

This performance is dedicated to the loving memory of CCM emeritus faculty member Peter Kamnitzer, who served as violist for the legendary LaSalle Quartet from 1949 until the ensemble’s retirement in 1988. Kamnitzer passed away in Israel on Feb. 23, 2016, at the age of 93.

CCM’s string quartet-in-residence from 1953 until 1988, the LaSalle Quartet won international recognition for its masterful interpretations of the major works in the chamber music repertory. The Quartet’s programs offered a remarkable spectrum of music from all periods, including premieres of major works by 20th century composers. The Quartet became particularly well regarded as the leading interpreters of “Second Viennese School,” performing complete cycles of the quartets of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern throughout the world.

As a member of the LaSalle Quartet, Kamnitzer helped to cement CCM’s reputation on the international stage. Tonight’s performance is presented in his honor.