DEBUSSY: STRING QUARTET IN G MINOR, OP. 10

Debussy’s music is radical and innovative in every aspect. He was among the first composers to break with the continuous evolution of the AustroGermanic musical tradition that started with Haydn and Mozart and culminated with Brahms and Wagner. Debussy rejected the logical structure and strict rules of Germanic music and looked for ways to free it from established conventions. He expressed his attitude and desire to change by saying, “I love music passionately. And because I love it I try to free it from barren traditions that stifle it. It is a free art gushing forth, an open-air art boundless as the elements, the wind, the sky, the sea. It must never be shut in and become an academic art.”

It could seem curious then that Debussy chose to tackle the string quartet, one of the most iconic classical music forms. Moreover, this quartet is his only work that bears an opus number, and the only one written in a perfectly conventional form. It faithfully follows the traditional four-movement model: a first movement in sonata form, a rhythmic scherzo, a slow movement and a vigorous finale. However, the musical content and sound of the quartet could not be more different from that of his predecessors. Debussy pushed the boundaries of what was thought to be the sound of a string quartet, creating a sound that was entirely new and exotic.

In his quartet, Debussy, somewhat similarly to the impressionist painters of the time, elevates texture from acting merely as a supporting element to being in the forefront. The texture becomes an expressive tool that is capable of invoking imagery and sensations in the listener’s mind. Equally striking is the harmonic language; the piece is abundant with fast-paced modulations (some early critics described this as “orgies of modulation”), frequent parallel harmonies (progressions of chords moving in the same direction, sometimes referred to as melodic harmony) and
unconventional chords. The harmony acquires an independent aesthetic value as it begins to exist beyond its function as a system of tonal relationships. The use of exotic scales (such as modal, whole tone and pentatonic) weakens the tonal orientation of the harmony and, in turn, creates a very unusual and diverse world of sound.

One of the staples of this quartet is its cyclic design. This is not a new concept; we find a similar idea in Berlioz’ *Symphonie fantastique*, which uses a recurring theme as an *idée fixe* that comes back like an obsession in every movement and serves as a connecting thread through the entire composition. Debussy takes this idea a step further: unlike *Symphonie fantastique*, where the theme remains practically unchanged, the thematic material of each movement of the quartet is built on a variation of the core motive.

The motive is presented by all four voices in the opening bars of the first movement and characterized by a distinct tritone interval (derived from the phrygian mode) and a brisk triplet figuration. Together with multiple variations of the theme itself, both elements become essential building blocks in the later movements.

The scherzo is unique in its mixed texture of pizzicato and arco. In the opening measures, while the rest of the voices are playing pizzicato, the viola is ‘stuck’ with an obsessive repetition of a rhythmic pattern—essentially an accelerated version of the first bar of the piece. This motive, repeated in all instruments, will haunt the entire movement.

The third movement is one of the most remarkable movements in all of the quartet literature. It is written in a traditional ABA form; the opening and closing sections are in the distant key of D flat major (the same key as the slow and timeless movement of Beethoven’s Op. 135); and the movement is to be played with mutes. This gives the whole movement a mysterious, unearthly quality.

The last movement starts from a point of uncertainty, but gradually gains momentum to a fiery finale. The opening theme returns in an augmented version, its original form and the second movement’s variation,
which, together, summarize the whole piece by bringing the previous movements to a close. Finally, in keeping with tradition, the whole piece ends in triumphant G major.

- Notes by Sasha Kazovsky

WEBERN: SIX BAGATELLES, OP. 9

This four-minute piece is a wonderful demonstration of the musical philosophy that was being shaped in the first quarter of the 20th century, led by Arnold Schoenberg and his pupils Anton Webern and Alban Berg—the three pillars of what scholars later called the Second Viennese School.

Scholars look for patterns and try to contextualize individual phenomena to larger-scale processes and trends. By doing so, they inevitably categorize, assign labels, and impose certain definitions, with the goal of differentiating one from the other and establishing coherency. Through this analytical process the Second Viennese School became known as the movement that declared war against tonality, so much that the term atonal was coined as early as 1907 as the main adjective describing this new music. However, defining music by what it’s not doesn’t reveal the full picture, and this term remains controversial to this day. Schoenberg himself, the father of this so-called atonality, was opposed to the term strongly, saying “the word atonal could only signify something entirely inconsistent with the nature of tone....”

Yet indeed, looking at these six little gems, one can certainly recognize the negation of tonality. They are by no means tonal—the harmonic language evades practically any opportunity of establishing, or even implying, a tonal center. “Harmony is expression and nothing else,” and for Schoenberg, freeing music “from the shackles of tonality” was no doubt immensely important, ultimately culminating in the establishment of the twelve-tone system. Harmony in the Sechs Bagatellen (Six Bagatelles), instead of being chordal in the sense of being functional in a tonally-structured context, is intervallic: the intervals themselves
become the center of expression, of internal pattern and context, especially the minor second and the major second. Webern begins the piece with a series of horizontally (motivically) displayed minor seconds and major seconds, tritones and a major third at the tail end. The entire piece is centered around this set of intervals, exploring their different possibilities and relationships. The last bagatelle, after introducing the trill (ornamentation produced by rapidly alternating between two adjacent notes—a device that by definition plays with either the minor or major second), concludes with a final statement of the original intervallic set, abstracted from their motivic attributes by a more vertical alignment and sparse instrumentation, leaving the original intervals as pure harmony. The piece’s last dissipating gesture is a major second trill in the viola (G–A) clustered with a G-sharp in the first violin, beautifully summarizing the harmonic essence of the piece: the major second of the viola’s trill and the two minor seconds created by the first violin’s pitch against the two alternating notes of the trill (G-sharp–G and G-sharp–A). Cyclicity, as well as symmetry, apparently, still retained their status.

Interestingly, the compartmentalization and differentiation that is necessary in order to analyze certain phenomena also has the tendency of disguising an important facet, which is the fluidity and inevitability of them as being born out of what had preceded them, rather than just abruptly breaking apart from it. Using harmony as a function of color and mood rather than that of tonality and structure wasn’t new. Debussy’s Quartet (also on tonight’s program) is just one recent example. We can find examples even in Beethoven, who was, by all accounts, an indisputable pillar of the First Viennese School, the same one Schoenberg and his pupils were rebelling against. In reality, the escape from tonality began almost as early as tonality itself was established, climaxing with the late Romantics who stretched the limits of harmony to a point where a tonal center was nowhere in sight. Atonality is a term which is problematic not only semantically, but because the movement out of tonality was intrinsic to the development of tonality itself; the entire evolution of the harmonic language from the 17th century on can
be viewed as a movement away from the stability, and ultimately the very existence, of a tonal center.

The succinctness of the *Bagatelles*, in the gestures, the phrases, which is ultimately also expressed in the length of the piece, is not only an example of Webern’s personal minimalist aesthetics, but is really a powerful statement about the role of music altogether, a vision for the new world of musical art that is at the core of the Second Viennese School’s philosophy: music is to express how we truly experience the world: emotionally, complicatedly, and not necessarily logically. “My music must be brief. Concise! In two notes: not built, but ‘expressed!!’” Schoenberg claimed. “And the results I wish for: no stylized and sterile protracted emotion. People are not like that: it is impossible for a person to have only one sensation at a time. One has thousands simultaneously... This illogicality which our senses demonstrate... this I should like to have in my music.”

Here too, in the core of their thinking, Schoenberg, Webern and Berg reveal themselves not just as rebels against the past, but as a natural evolution of the same process that governed art for centuries. Art was always there to imitate nature, to investigate and attain it, as well as our own human nature within it. It is our understanding of nature that has evolved and shifted over the centuries, leading to new aesthetics and art philosophies, but not the underlying instinct of the human condition to make sense of its existence. The twelve-tone system, ironically, would become just as strict and logical as the tonal system it was trying to negate. There is ultimately no escape from our notion of nature as being structured and logical, even if our subjective experience of it is not always such.

I invite you to spend the next four minutes freeing yourselves from the shackles of atonality, and experience this music not as an antithesis to the tonal language we are so accustomed to and comfortable with, but as a natural extension of it, being just as logical, expressive and profound in its intentional intimacy.

- Notes by Gershon Gerchikov
Eight centuries ago Isaac The Blind, the great kabbalist rabbi of Provence, dictated a manuscript in which he asserted that all things and events in the universe are products of combinations of the Hebrew alphabet’s letters: “Their root is in a name, for the letters are like branches, which appear in the manner of flickering flames, mobile and nevertheless linked to the coal.” His conviction still resonates today: don’t we have scientists who believe that the clue to our life and fate is hidden in other codes?

Isaac’s lifelong devotion to his art is as striking as that of string quartets and klezmer musicians. In their search for something that arises from tangible elements but transcends them, they are all reaching a state of communion. Gershom Scholem, the preeminent scholar of Jewish mysticism, says that “Isaac and his disciples do not speak of ecstasy, of a unique act of stepping outside oneself in which human consciousness abolishes itself. Debhequth (communion) is a constant state, nurtured and renewed through meditation.” If communion is not the reason, how else would one explain the strange life that Isaac led, or the decades during which groups of four souls dissolve their individuality into single, higher organisms called string quartets? How would one explain the chain of klezmer generations that, while blessing births, weddings and burials, were trying to discover the melody that could be set free from itself and become only air, spirit, ruakh?

The movements of this work sound to me as if written in three of the different languages spoken by the Jewish people throughout our history. This somehow reflects the composition’s epic nature. I hear the prelude and the first movement, the most ancient, in Arameic; the second movement is in Yiddish, the rich and fragile language of a long exile; the third movement and postlude are in sacred Hebrew.

The prelude and the first movement simultaneously explore two prayers in different ways: The quartet plays the first part of the central prayer
of the High Holidays, “We will observe the mighty holiness of this day,” while the clarinet dreams the motifs from Our Father, Our King. The second movement is based on The Old Klezmer Band, a traditional dance tune, which is surrounded here by contrasting manifestations of its own halo. The third movement was written before all the others. It is an instrumental version of K’Vakarat, a work that I wrote a few years ago for Kronos and Cantor Misha Alexandrovich. The meaning of the word klezmer, instrument of song, becomes clear when one hears David Krakauer’s interpretation of the cantor’s line. This movement, together with the postlude, bring to conclusion the prayer left open in the first movement: “Thou pass and record, count and visit, every living soul, appointing the measure of every creature’s life and decreeing its destiny.”

But blindness is as important in this work as dreaming and praying. I had always the intuition that, in order to achieve the highest possible intensity in a performance, musicians should play, metaphorically speaking, “blind.” That is why, I think, all legendary bards in cultures around the world, starting with Homer, are said to be blind. “Blindness” is probably the secret of great string quartets, those who don’t need their eyes to communicate among them, with the music, or the audience. My homage to all of them and Isaac of Provence is this work for blind musicians, so they can play it by heart. Blindness, then, reminded me of how to compose music as it was in the beginning: An art that springs from and relies on our ability to sing and hear, with the power to build castles of sound in our memories.

- Notes from the composer
Only a select few artists have the ability to convey their message to the back row, to galvanize an audience with a visceral power that connects on a universal level. David Krakauer is such an artist. Widely considered one of the greatest clarinetists on the planet, he has been praised internationally as a key innovator in modern klezmer as well as a major voice in classical music.

Known simply as “Krakauer” to his fervent following, he is nothing less than an American original who has embarked on a tremendous journey transforming the music of his Eastern European Jewish heritage into something uniquely contemporary. That journey has lead Krakauer to an astounding diversity of projects and collaborations ranging from solo appearances with orchestras to major festival concerts with his own improvisation based bands.

He has shared the stage with a wide array of artists such as the Klezmatics, Fred Wesley, Itzhak Perlman, Socalled, Eiko and Koma, Leonard Slatkin and Iva Bitova while being sought after by such composers as Danny Elfman, Osvaldo Golijov, David Del Tredici, John Zorn, George Tsontakis, Mohammed Fairouz and Wlad Marhulets to interpret their works. In addition, he has performed with renowned string quartets including the Kronos, Tokyo and the Emerson and as soloist with orchestras such as the Orchestre de Lyon, the Orquestra Sinfonica de Madrid, the Phoenix Symphony, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, the Dresdener Philharmonie and the Detroit Symphony, among many others.

Writer Mark Stryker hinted at the visceral nature of Krakauer’s performance in his Detroit Free Press review: “Krakauer played with astounding virtuosity and charisma. A furiously improvised cadenza leapt between low and high registers in a way that suggested John Coltrane, building to an excited peak. After the concerto he also offered an encore, improvising by himself with an air of ritual, before playing a swift klezmer dance with the orchestra.”

Having been showered with accolades for his groundbreaking work in classical, klezmer and jazz, Krakauer now finds himself at an artistic crossroads and is ready to make a daring leap into a new phase in his career. His next project, The Big Picture, may be his most adventurous to date. With an all-star crew of fellow musical renegades, Krakauer is re-imagining familiar themes by such renowned film music composers as John Williams, Marvin Hamlisch, Randy Newman, Wojciech Kilar and Vangelis, as well as interpreting melodic gems by the likes of Sidney Bechet, Sergei Prokofiev, Mel Brooks, Ralph Burns, John Kander & Fred Ebb and Jerry Bock that have appeared in popular films. Having already contributed to films by directors Ang Lee and Sally Potter, Krakauer now takes on the challenge of bringing a modernist vision to tunes that resonate on a deeply emotional level with generations of moviegoers.

“For me, it’s like putting on a new suit of clothes,” says Krakauer of The Big Picture. “And this project is also a way for me to connect the dots of all the music I’ve been playing throughout my career. So I’m very excited about this new step we’re taking.”

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