

SOU Chamber Music Concerts  
Friday, October 10, 2003  
Amati Quartet

Beethoven: String Quartet in A Major, Op. 18 No. 5

Most music scholarship asserts that Beethoven modeled this A Major quartet after Mozart's 1785 string quartet K. 464 in the same key. One must always be cautious on questions of potential influence; just because it is chronologically possible that a composer studied someone else's music doesn't mean it necessarily happened. However, the evidence in this case overwhelmingly confirms the general verdict. A copy of the final two movements of the Mozart quartet exists in Beethoven's handwriting. They set their first, third and final movements in A Major. Both quartets include an opening sonata-form movement; a Minuet and Trio as the second movement; a third movement Theme and Variations in D major, 2/4 meter and Andante tempo; and they both close with another sonata-form movement in 2/2 meter.

More subtle connections also link these two works. While Beethoven usually writes longer quartet movements than either Haydn or Mozart, the ones in tonight's quartet are among the shortest in his Opus 18 set---much closer to those of Mozart. He had already written Scherzos (a genre Mozart never used) for other Opus 18 quartets, but he reverts to Minuet and Trio for this work. Both composers also draw upon a similar theme structure for their variation movement: a pause on a half cadence in the dominant after eight bars, and a repetition of those eight bars in each variation. And while Beethoven usually writes rousing, assertive finales, this one closes quietly, just like Mozart's.

This is not an isolated case either, as Beethoven modeled other early works after Mozart as well. His six-movement String Trio in Eb, Op. 3, adopts the same forms, keys and movement cycle as Mozart's six-movement trio K. 563. Similarly, Beethoven's Piano and Wind Quintet Op. 16 closely matches Mozart's Piano Quintet K.452 in key and cycle. Beethoven also wrote first and third movement cadenzas for Mozart's D Minor Piano Concerto K 466. The irony in all this lies in the fact that Beethoven's motivic-oriented style more closely matches his teacher Haydn than the supple melodic lyricism of Mozart. But these youthful works particularly demonstrate the remarkable prophecy of Count Waldstein. He wrote the famous statement "You shall receive the spirit of Mozart from Haydn's hands" while Beethoven still lived in Bonn.

Despite the close study of Mozart, however, one also finds ample demonstration of Beethoven's personal genius which heralds later achievements. Both quartets conclude the third and fourth movements with lengthy codas. The codas recall the primary theme; Mozart repeats a fragment of the theme exactly, while Beethoven's references remain more veiled and clothed in new counterpoint. Beethoven's penchant for imitation also surfaces frequently. He writes fugato passages for the first variation of the third movement and the opening theme of the finale (while Mozart avoids such prominent placement for his counterpoint). Finally, Beethoven's more urgent, elemental power surfaces with strong offbeat accents in every movement. His sense of drama extends even to the aristocratic Menuet movement. Beethoven "prepares" for the return of the opening theme in the minuet section with a pause on a distant key, then the immediate and unexpected return of the main theme in the tonic, but soon fragmented and colored by the minor mode. In all these and other gestures, he leaves any 18th-century model in the dust.

Bartók: String Quartet No. 5

Bartók's fusion of folk and art music remains the most comprehensive and masterful 20<sup>th</sup> century attempt to bridge these diverse genres. Yet his achievement generated criticism on all sides during and after his life. The Communist rulers of Hungary actively tried to suppress his music along the lines of the Kremlin's 1948 ruling against modernism in music. A few years later they changed course, realizing that his focus on music of "the folk" might champion Eastern Europe culture against the evils of the capitalist West. The champions of avant-garde serialism criticized his emphasis on folk music and the more accessible style of his works after 1930 (Bartók committed the heresy of showing that the use of all 12 pitches could still be tonal). Finally, the conservative Budapest Philharmonic and Opera companies criticized his modernism and the emphasis on peasant music. They wanted the more familiar and accessible Hungarian gypsy tunes

instead, and rarely performed his music. Bartók became so disgusted with Hungarian officials that he saw to it that Hungary did not premiere any piece of his after 1930.

His focus on this more authentic folk music played a particularly prominent role in Bartók's life in the early 1930s. Bartók published the findings of his 30-year project "Hungarian Folk Music" in 1931. He then turned to a wider range of simple folk tunes (Serbian, Romanian, Ukrainian, Arabic, etc) for major pedagogic projects: the "44 Duos for Violin" (1931) and the six-volume progressive set for piano "Mikrokosmos." Bartók's appointment as an ethnomusicologist at the Academy of Sciences in 1934 freed him to study and catalog folk music full time. He broadened his focus towards more distant folk cultures in South-Eastern Europe and the Arabic lands.

This further emphasis on folk study coalesced with his mature techniques of counterpoint, motivic development and his "new polymodal chromaticism" (simultaneous use of different folk-music scales). It propelled Bartók into his next round of compositions (1934-40) ---the pinnacle of his career. He produced masterpieces in each of his major genres: chamber music (String Quartets 5 & 6, the Sonata for 2 Pianos & Percussion, Contrasts for Clarinet & Piano), orchestra (Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste, Divertimento, Violin Concerto No. 2), piano (Mikrokosmos), and choral music (27 Two & Three-part Choruses).

Bartók launched this great series of works with his String Quartet No. 5 in 1934. Like the fourth quartet, he bases the five movements on a mirror or palindrome structure: ABCBA. The first and final movements ("A") share thematic material, and a similar motivic relationship binds the second movement Adagio and fourth movement Andante together ("B") as well. This leaves the third movement Scherzo as the keystone in the center, yet it also has its own mirror structure. It provides Bartók's first essay into the traditional Da Capo format of Scherzo-Trio-Scherzo. As in the other movements, however, the "mirror" repetitions are anything but: Bartók extensively varies all thematic returns. This third movement also directly reflects Bartók's Southeast Europe folk studies of the early 1930s, as he sets one Bulgarian 9-beat dance 4+2+3 for the Scherzo, and another 10-beat one (3+2+2+3) for the Trio.

While he provides a different form for each of the movements, the central logic of each remains the incessant motivic variation. (Bartók sets the famously slow "banal theme" near the end of the finale as an inverted variant of the opening theme.) He focuses a Beethoven-like intensity on this motivic manipulation, but without Beethoven's penchant to combine them into larger phrases or repetitive dialogue. A better historical model might be the genius of Bach's contrapuntal motivic work, combined with a rich, kaleidoscopic array of 20th century modernist harmony and string effects.

#### Debussy: String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 10

After Beethoven, the string quartet became hallowed ground. Though other 19th-century genres proved more popular to composers and the public, the genre of string quartet writing assumed enormous prestige. The quartet scholar Paul Griffiths thinks that Cesar Franck's 1889 quartet proved so influential not solely because of the cyclic thematic treatment---many 19th-century composers used it---but because he also "chose to employ it in a string quartet." It is therefore not surprising that the only time Debussy used an opus number was for his 1893 quartet. A more significant token of his regard for the genre stems from the fact that it marks the first appearance of many of his revolutionary stylistic traits on such a broad, multi-movement canvas.

We assign such a significant role to Debussy and his music, that it remains a surprise to consider that this quartet and other works of the 1890s left little initial impression on his contemporaries. Debussy's significant breakthrough into the musical limelight occurred with his 1902 opera "Pelleas et Melisande." Works that hold such importance for us---"Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" (1894) and the tone poem "Nocturnes" (1899) ---received little attention in France on their first appearances. However, other composers noticed. Several influential traits that first appear on a wide scale in the quartet include Debussy's penchants for modal harmonies and constant thematic variation. When Debussy traveled to Hungary in 1910, it pleased him to discover the positive reception of his music. "La Mer" is "better known

here than in Paris" he wrote. Bartók and Kodaly were quite taken by his emancipation from German influence, the use of pentatonic mode and the incessant alteration of previous material. Bartók considered Debussy "the greatest living composer" and dedicated a movement of his "Impressions" to him.

Again conscious of the prestigious genre, this quartet remains the only Debussy work that refers to a key in the title. But the richness of Debussy's harmonic language belies the "G Minor" designation. The opening bar includes the pitches F-natural and A-flat, characteristic of the Phrygian mode that dominates the first movement. There is also no parallel in the previous quartet repertory for the myriad tempo changes in this opening sonata-form movement. Debussy is adopting this important genre to his own very influential ends. Do you think Ravel remained unaware of Debussy's frequent use of pizzicato in the second movement Scherzo when he wrote his own quartet a decade later? Debussy sets the lovely, hymn-like third movement in ABA form. And then listen closely to the introduction of the finale. Many 20<sup>th</sup> century jazz composers studied these opening harmonies in this remarkably influential quartet that few people paid much attention to when premiered by the Ysaye String Quartet in 1893.

Program notes by Ed Wight