

SOU Chamber Music Concerts ~ Program Notes

Friday, April 8, 8pm: Calder String Quartet

Mozart - String Quartet in E-Flat Major, K. 428 (1783)

Debussy - String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 10 (1893)

Schubert - String Quartet in d minor, D.810 "Death & the Maiden" (1824)

Mozart

String Quartet in E-Flat Major, K. 428 (1783)

Mozart and Haydn established a relationship unique among great composers. Though their paths did not often cross after Mozart moved to Vienna in 1781, they grew close through genuine mutual admiration. Mozart and Haydn shared many mutual friends in the musical community, may have played in the same string quartet at musical parties (with Vanhal and Dittersdorf), and joined Viennese Masonic lodges within two weeks of each other. Mozart rarely spoke well of contemporary composers, but in the remarkable dedication of his six quartets to Haydn, he called him a "most celebrated and very dear friend." Haydn made two visits to Mozart's apartment to hear these six quartets. During the second visit in February 1785, he said to Mozart's father the famous accolade "before God and man, your son is the greatest composer known to me." Haydn's student Beethoven waited in vain for a similar sentiment. Haydn was genuinely moved by Mozart's early death, and offered to give free music lessons to his sons. And in the 1780s, these two good friends did more than anyone else to fashion our modern notions of chamber music and the string quartet.

This is particularly obvious in Mozart's six "Haydn" quartets. In the dedication to Haydn, Mozart wrote the famous phrase that they were "the fruit of long labor." Begun in 1782, he worked on them for over two years, and in the process abandoned his earlier style of quartet writing. In his early quartets, Mozart wrote the melody and bass lines first, then went back and filled in the rest of the texture. Inspired in part by Haydn's magnificent Op. 33 quartets, Mozart now writes all four voices simultaneously. It was a struggle, as shown by the extensively revised and corrected manuscripts, and the unprecedented number of abandoned quartet fragments and studies. But both Haydn and Mozart developed a more flexible and supple texture among equal voices, a constantly varied fabric that departs from both the strict imitation of the Baroque era, and the simple 'melody plus accompaniment' texture of the fashionable "quartet concertante" of the Classic style. The opening bars of tonight's quartet, K. 428, from 1783 reflect this new style. Mozart writes the first phrase in simple octaves, while the concluding phrase offers melody (1st violin), dialogue and counterpoint (2nd violin), and lower string accompaniment. For the repetition, Mozart fully harmonizes the theme's first phrase, and concludes with 1st violin melody and three different levels of accompaniment.

The rich variety of textures continues in the following sections of the sonata-form first movement. The transition features a motive passed among all four parts, and the secondary theme offers rich harmonies for the 1st violin melody. This quartet offers many similar chromatic passages, and is one of Mozart's most harmonically advanced works. Listen especially for the remarkable harmonies (and dense texture) of the opening theme of the sonata-form second movement. Mozart extends this chordal vocabulary even further in the development section of the tender andante movement. Early in the Minuet, Mozart offers yet another new texture, a delightful, pizzicato-like passage in eighth notes. The ample dimensions of this Minuet reflect the fact that in all six of these quartets, Mozart reaches beyond Haydn's Op. 33 set for movements of greater length, diversity and harmonic richness. Mozart changes key for the Trio sections of all six minuets, only an occasionally gesture for Haydn. And Mozart throws further chromatic dust in our eyes for tonight's Trio, as both sections of it open in "wrong" keys. The sprightly sonata-form finale also draws upon one of Haydn's greatest features - humor. Mozart anticipates the return of the opening theme with a Haydn-like maze its 8th-note motives, and extends this even further in the coda, delightfully closing one of the greatest of all Mozart's chamber works.

Debussy

String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 10 (1893)

After Beethoven, the string quartet became hallowed ground. Though other 19th-century genres proved more popular to both composers and the public, the genre of quartet writing maintained enormous prestige. The quartet scholar Paul Griffiths thinks that the cyclic thematic treatment in Cesar Franck's 1889 quartet assumed such importance and influence not merely because of the technique - many 19th-century composers used it - but because Franck chose to employ it in a string quartet. It is therefore not surprising that this string quartet marks the only time Debussy used an opus number in any composition, the only time he referred to a key in the title of a piece, and one of the few instances of sonata form in his entire output--for the first movement, naturally! In hindsight, this quartet also reflects another

aspect of his respect for the genre. This early work, from 1893, marks the first appearance for many of his revolutionary stylistic traits on such a broad, multi-movement canvas.

We assign such a significant role to Debussy and his music, it surprises us to consider that the extraordinarily influential features of this quartet and his 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." Earlier works that hold such importance to us, such as "Suite bergamasque" (1890), "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" (1894) and the tone poem "Nocturnes" (1899) received scant attention in France on their first appearances. However, other composers noticed. Several influential traits that first appear on a wide scale in this quartet include Debussy's penchant for modal harmonies and constant thematic variation. When Debussy traveled to Hungary in 1910, it pleased him immensely to bask in the positive reception of his music. He wrote that "'La mer' is better known here than in Paris!" Bartok and Kodaly were quite taken by his emancipation from German influence, the use of pentatonic mode, and the incessant alteration of previous thematic material. Bartok considered Debussy the "greatest living composer" and dedicated a movement of his "Impressions" to him.

Another major composer also paid attention. Debussy's second movement of the quartet draws heavily on pizzicato. Is it mere coincidence that Ravel's quartet a decade later not only features that technique in his second movement, but that he employs the identical tempo designation as well?

While Debussy titled this work "String Quartet in G Minor," the richness of his harmonic language belies that designation. The opening bar already features pitches outside that key, an F-natural and an A-flat that imply the Phrygian mode. Debussy's penchant for such central and eastern European modes revolutionized late 19th-century harmonic style (and drew such a favorable response from Bartok and Kodaly). There is also no parallel in previous quartet repertory for the myriad tempo changes in this opening sonata-form movement. Debussy continues to adapt this prestigious genre to his own ends with that extensive use of the pizzicato string color in the second-movement Scherzo. Debussy sets the lovely, hymn-like third movement in A B A form. And listen closely to the introduction of the finale. Many 20th-century pop and jazz composers studied these opening harmonies. It provides yet another detail of this remarkably influential quartet to which few people initially paid attention when premiered by the Ysaye Quartet in 1893.

Schubert

String Quartet in d minor, D.810 "Death & the Maiden" (1824)

Schubert entered a profound state of melancholy in the early months of 1824. His health was declining, doctors temporarily confined him to his room, and he wore a wig to disguise the shaved head necessitated by his medical treatment. Professionally he also lamented the failures of his most recent operas – "Alfonso & Estrella" (1822) and "Feierabas" (1823) - as well the play "Rosamunde," for which he wrote incidental music. In the famous letter to his friend Leopold Kupelwieser, he laments the absence of a healthier, happier past. This spirit of remembrance also pervades the three chamber works he composed in early 1824 - the Octet, and the string quartets in A Minor and D Minor. Each of them draws upon Schubert's earlier music. Worried over his health, it's no surprise Schubert returned to the issue of mortality in his song "Death and the Maiden" for the second movement of tonight's quartet. However, these were also his first complete quartets in eight years. Though strikingly different from each other in tone, their every page reflects the mastery of his mature instrumental style. Schubert transforms this melancholy into two of the most beautiful and powerful of all his instrumental works.

The opening theme of the **sonata-form** first movement in tonight's D Minor quartet heralds both the power and beauty ahead. Schubert begins with a dramatic, fortissimo opening phrase, and contrasts it with a surprisingly tender response. This theme and the one immediately following also generate a sophisticated dramatic structure as well. He omits them from their expected return (at the opening the recap), saving variants of them for the wonderful coda at the end of the movement. This quartet also offers one of the earliest examples of Schubert's departure from the style of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven - a three-key exposition. Instead of the normal secondary key in the opening section, Schubert offers two, with delightful lyrical themes in both F Major and A Major. His penchant for a further source of harmonic color - modal contrast - closes the exposition in A Minor. The development section is also remarkable for dense passages of contrapuntal mastery: four independent voices, strict imitation two beats apart, dramatized by powerful accents and dynamics in a complex fabric that Beethoven also explored in his later quartets.

Yet Schubert leavens this formidable technical apparatus with passages of extraordinary warmth. In the second movement **theme-and variations**, after the powerful opening of the third variation, Schubert surprises with a

remarkably tender conclusion. With his penchant for modal contrast, the heartbreaking coda surprises us as well. In similar fashion, Schubert opens the third-movement **Scherzo** in dramatic, minor-mode instability, making the sudden warmth of the soft D Major Trio all the more appealing. Schubert saves the dance-like spirits usually found in the minuet for the sprightly themes of the **sonata-rondo** finale, at times tinged with a folk-like gypsy flavor.

The musical scholar Carl Dalhaus offered some thoughts on Schubert's capacity for musical remembrance. He contrasted this with Beethoven's style, whose "...goal-consciousness progresses [forward] from one event to the next." With Schubert, however, "...the most lasting impression is made by remembrance, which turns from later events back to earlier ones." Instead of the expected return to the final statement of the refrain theme in the rondo finale of the A minor "Rosamunde" quartet, Schubert magically fashions a new statement which only draws upon elements from both phrases of the theme. The "Death and the Maiden" variations also offer a particularly striking example, similarly challenging our memory. At the end of the movement, Schubert once again avoids the expected restatement of the minor-mode theme in favor of a tender concluding passage in G Major based upon it.

The A Minor "Rosamunde" quartet became the only one of Schubert's 15 quartets published during his lifetime. He dedicated it to his friend Ignaz Schuppanzigh, whose quartet performed it in March 1824 (and who also premiered the late Beethoven quartets in 1825-26). Beethoven's quartet commission had been languishing for over a year, and he finally began work on them in earnest in May 1824. The timing may not be mere coincidence, after Beethoven heard Schuppanzigh's response to Schubert's quartet. These first mature quartets - the A Minor and D Minor - demonstrate what his Viennese contemporaries lost, in waiting two generations after his death for the appearance of all his instrumental masterworks.

Program notes by Ed Wight