

SOU Chamber Music Concerts
Friday, January 9, 2004
I Musici de Montreal

Gougeon Coups d'archets

Denis Gougeon established himself as one of Canada's most prolific and multi-faceted composers long before he wrote "Coups d'archets." He writes in most contemporary genres, with operas, ballets, oratorios, vocal, orchestral and chamber music to his credit. His career reflects this remarkably diverse and accomplished background, serving as composer-in-residence for both the Canadian Opera Company (1988) and the first composer-in-residence for the Montreal Symphony Orchestra (1989-92). He recently wrote tonight's piece for the fifteenth anniversary of the I Musici de Montréal Chamber Orchestra.

"Coup d'archets" reveals a playful sense of humor as well. Historically, the *coup d'archet* refers to the decisive unison bow stroke used by French orchestras at the start of a symphony. It firmly established the key and demonstrated the excellence of the ensemble playing. So how does Gougeon begin his piece? With a cello solo, and the performer alone on stage. Other performers gradually join the cellist, each picking up the motivic thread in turn. The work *concludes* with a grand unison tutti in a single rhythm - precisely the reverse of the centuries-old French tradition. But extramusical elements also account for this unusual gesture, as Gougeon intended the work as a metaphor for the birth of I Musici de Montréal. Gougeon wrote the opening cello solo for Yuli Turovsky, the group's founder, who performs the work tonight as well.

Bruckner String Quintet in F Major (1879)

After serving as organist at the Linz Cathedral, Bruckner accepted a teaching post at the Vienna Conservatory and moved to the Austrian capital in 1868. This followed Brahms' emigration to Vienna six years earlier, and Bruckner may have wished for some of Brahms' early successes as well. The 1870s proved a quite trying decade for the cautious and religiously devout Bruckner. The Vienna Philharmonic rejected his early symphonies, and other symphonic performances met with either disastrous or mixed results. In part, he became a victim of local politics, as his music proved more popular elsewhere in Germany. His embrace of Wagner's music placed him in that wing of the Brahms vs. Wagner polemics in a decade in which the conservative ("Brahms") wing dominated the local Viennese musical press. Tastes changed however, and long overdue Viennese and international success began to come his way in the 1880s. Bruckner's 1879 String Quintet---his only mature chamber composition, and always a popular piece---was one of several works which helped turn the tide.

By the time he wrote the quintet, he had also written five of his nine symphonies. Bruckner's rich harmonies, massive slow-moving sonata structures and powerful brass-oriented scoring all reflect Wagner's influence in part. Such late 19th century traits nonetheless obscured another equally important aspect of this great composer: his reverence for the Viennese classical style of Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, and especially Beethoven. The quintet highlights Bruckner's penchant for the sonata form and cyclical procedures of the late 18th and early 19th century. All of his symphonies and the quintet include a Scherzo and Trio, something Brahms and most later 19th century composers abandoned. He set the quintet's Trio in E-flat Major, a half step above the key of the Scherzo (a dramatic harmonic relationship recalling Haydn's final piano sonata). Bruckner also invigorated his sonata form movements with greater 18th century continuity (unlike the more sectional approach of his contemporaries). Listen for the lush harmonic influence of Schubert in the opening of the sonata form first movement. It begins in the very first bar, as Bruckner already offers a colorful F Minor passing tone in this F Major movement.

Like Beethoven (and such later Mozart works as the G Minor String Quintet), Bruckner places the dance-derived movement (Scherzo and Trio) as the second part of the cycle. It precedes one of his richest Adagio movements, which he often sets in Rondo form. Like his classic predecessors, he saves the sonata form structures for the outer movements. Beethoven occasionally opens the sonata form finale in the "wrong key," another gesture Bruckner employs in the quintet with its opening D-flat pedal point. But Bruckner

also includes a twist his Viennese predecessors never attempted. He reverses the order of thematic material in the recapitulation, so he can close the quintet with a glorious, long-delayed affirmation of the F Major tonic key.

Bloch From Jewish Life (1924) - "Prayer" and "Jewish Song"
Meditation Hebraique (1924) - "Nigun"

Born in Switzerland in 1880, Bloch first immigrated to the United States in 1916. Among other distinguished activities, he served as the founding director of the Cleveland Institute of Music (1920-25). While serving in this capacity, he became a naturalized American citizen in 1924 (the year he wrote the pieces on tonight's program). He also accepted the directorship of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music (1925-30) before returning to Europe. However, the rising tide of war and anti-Semitism led him to return permanently to America in 1940. He retired in 1952 and lived his final years in Agate Beach, Oregon. His departure from Europe seemed inevitable, as Bloch had earlier explored and developed biblical passages related to his Jewish heritage extensively in such works as "Prelude & Two Psalms" (for soprano and orchestra, 1912-14), "Three Jewish Poems" (the "Israel Symphony," 1912-16), and "Schelomo" (a Hebraic rhapsody for cello and orchestra, 1916).

Tonight's pieces return to that prominent Judaic expression. Bloch composed "From Jewish Life" for cello and piano in 1924, and "Prayer" is an excerpt from that larger work. By 1924, aspects of Serialism as well as atonal, quarter-tone harmonies appeared in his works. But Bloch returns to the tonal styles (and modal harmonies) of many of his earlier Judaic pieces in "From Jewish Life." The half-step modal harmonies of "Nigun" stem in part from its origins as an Eastern European Ashkenazi chant, and the modal harmonic style of that region remains a prominent feature of this piece. Bloch dedicated it to the memory of his mother, and it is no coincidence that "Nigun" is the most powerful and impassioned of his three pieces on tonight's concert. The lovely tone colors of "Jewish Song" provide the most sustained single mood of the three pieces. Bloch's solo cello deliciously exploits the Phrygian half-steps above the tonic and dominant throughout this short but expressive piece.

TCHAIKOVSKY SERENADE FOR STRINGS, OP. 48 (1880)

The years immediately preceding the "Serenade for Strings" in 1880 proved especially significant for Tchaikovsky's life and musical style. The breadth, drama and full beauty of his mature style first emerged at this time. From 1874-80 he revised his earlier symphonies, providing the final versions of No. 1 (1874) and No. 2 (1880), as well as finishing his third (1875) and fourth symphonies (1878). He also composed his first orchestral suite (1879), the first two piano concertos (1875 and 1880 respectively), the violin concerto (1878), the "1812 Overture" (1880) and his first great dramatic works---the ballet "Swan Lake" (1877) and the opera "Eugene Onegin" (1879). Two women also played prominent roles in his life at this time. He married Antonina Milyukova in 1877, but the marriage proved unworkable and was quickly ended. However, his wealthy patron Nadezhda von Meck entered his life in 1875. At her request they never met, but she loved his music and gave him generous financial support for the next fourteen years, freeing him to compose. With monetary matters no longer an issue, it's probably no coincidence that so many significant works emerged at this time.

Tchaikovsky returned to the genres listed above - overtures, concertos, suites, operas and ballets - many times throughout his career. But he only wrote two serenades, and only one for string orchestra. This is surprising, given its continuing popularity. The piece was always one of Tchaikovsky's favorites, and the public loved it as well. In the custom of the time, they applauded after every movement of an early performance---so much so that the Waltz movement was repeated on the spot. Tchaikovsky titled the opening movement "Piece in the form of a Sonatina." He wrote it in sonata form without a development section---what the 18th century called a sonatina. The rising scale passage for cellos and basses near the opening (in bar 8) also provides the motive - highly varied - for the opening themes of the second and third movements. Reflecting his newfound mature style, The 2001 New Grove Dictionary refers to the Serenade as the most "closely knit a motivic framework...Tchaikovsky ever wrote."

After the delightful Waltz movement and the lush, harmonically rich elegy in A B A form for the third movement, Tchaikovsky's finale once again reflects 18th century procedure. As he had in the second piano concerto, Tchaikovsky again turns to an earlier example of Beethoven. The introduction of a Russian folksong recalls Beethoven's similar gesture in the finale of his F Major quartet, Opus 59 No.1. Like Beethoven, he links the end of the third and beginning of the fourth movements thematically, and both fourth movements open in the "wrong" key as well. The short, repetitive nature of both folksongs establishes a further connection. But the sprightly, lyrical nature of the movement Tchaikovsky fashions remains his own, a delightful conclusion to one of his deservedly most popular works.

Program notes by Ed Wight