

SOU Chamber Music Concerts
Friday, February 6, 2004
Juilliard String Quartet
Program Notes

Mozart:
Quartet in D Major, K. 575 (1789)

Frustrated by the absence of a major professional appointment in Vienna, Mozart traveled to Germany in the Spring of 1789. He sought employment opportunities or at least lucrative commissions, and may have received the latter from King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia for a series of string quartets. Both the question of the actual commission and any Mozart financial benefit remain subjects of historical conjecture. But music lovers certainly benefited in the two centuries since then, because the German trip generated Mozart's final three string quartets (the "Prussian" quartets K 575, 589, and 590 in D, B-flat, and F Major, respectively). These quartets also yield an additional benefit, as they reflect Mozart's late stylistic growth beyond the six quartets he dedicated to Haydn in the mid-1780s.

Mozart began work on the first of these quartets immediately, which was tonight's D Major, K. 575. He wrote all of it, and the first two movements of the next one as well, on North German music paper collected during his trip. Unlike his usual 12-stave Viennese manuscripts, this 10-stave German paper proved less efficient for quartet writing. He had to leave two blank staves on each page. But the six movements written on it reflect Mozart's early hopes for this commission, as they highlight the role of the cello---King Friedrich's instrument. In K. 575, the cello presents the first theme of the new key area in the sonata form opening movement, and receives a long solo in the trio section of the Minuet. Mozart also writes extensive passages of dialogue for cello and first violin (the "B" section of the *A B A* adagio movement), and for cello and viola (opening of the sonata-rondo finale). When he finally completed the set of three quartets in 1790, though without the hoped-for commission, the later movements perhaps understandably avoid such cello prominence.

However, every movement of K. 575 reveals Mozart's increasing assimilation of Haydn's style in combination with his own artistic mastery. Mozart tempers his penchant for a continuous flow of lyrical new melodies with some of Haydn's thematic concision. He generates the second major theme of the Allegretto first movement, as well as both main themes of the finale, from the opening theme of the quartet. He also links the trio motivically to the 16th-note figure of the minuet theme. Canonic passages in the development sections of the first and final movements, as well as dense passages of counterpoint and simultaneous inversion also enrich his style to a greater extent than in the past, reflecting his late studies of Bach and Haydn. However, Mozart's gift for sensuous harmony remains all his own, especially in the chromatic shadings of the adagio's "B" section, and the half-step counterpoint of the finale's opening theme. Matched with such sophisticated chromaticism and the unsurpassed dramatic pacing from his operas and concertos, late works such as K. 575 create a richly textured sense of emotional and musical complexity unequalled in the 18th century.

Webern:
Five Movements for String Quartet, Op. 5 (1909)
Six Bagatelles for String Quartet, Op. 9 (1913)
String Quartet, Op. 28 (1938)

Arnold Schoenberg's second string quartet, written in 1908, opened the doors to a new musical universe. He composed the first piece of Western art music without a tonal center, an *avant garde* style of music that became known as "atonality." It posed challenges especially for chamber music composers, and his student Anton Webern was one of the first to face these new issues. He wrote tonight's Five Movements for String Quartet, Op. 5 the following year, in 1909. Two challenges surfaced immediately. The absence of tonal centers (accompanied by the high level of dissonance) precluded the long, tonally-oriented structures such as sonata and rondo forms, which had provided the foundation of most quartet composition. And the string quartet instrumentation itself omitted the variation of contrasting timbres found in orchestral composition.

Webern's initial solution turned in the direction of much shorter pieces.

The five movements of Opus 5 last a total of ten minutes. Webern searched for an alternative title for "string quartet," in part because these movements lack the symphonic breadth and cyclic connections of earlier quartets. The adagio second movement totals only thirteen bars, and the scherzo-like third movement lasts about 40 seconds. Yet within these short time spans, Webern creates music of extraordinary complexity. Instead of lyrical melodies or themes, Webern offers thematic work of incredible concision. He focuses on "little phrases, single notes, individual chords and brief patterns of ostinato" according to quartet scholar Paul Griffiths. All three members of the "second Viennese School" (Schoenberg, Berg and Webern) also provide far more special string effects (pizzicato, sul ponticello, muting, col legno, harmonics, etc) than earlier quartet composers, especially Webern.

He took this concision and color to even greater extremes in the Six Bagatelles, Op. 9. Once again he chose the title carefully, as a Bagatelle traditionally indicates a short, light piece. Each of the movements generates a quartet score lasting only a single page. The shortest movement of Op. 5 (the 40-second Scherzo) would be one of the *longest* of the Bagatelles, with only the fifth movement running longer than a minute. Webern further develops his penchant for brevity in scoring as well, as themes stated in a single instrument vanish. Not only are the motives even more concise than Op. 5, he changes scoring and tone color far more often. He also focuses again on string technique---almost every pitch of the second movement features a special coloration. This emphasis on concision in all elements, as well as the prominence of dissonant semi-tones (half-steps, major sevenths, minor ninths) became hallmarks of his mature style.

Webern's style changes again in his String Quartet, Op.28 of 1938. He adopts and modifies Schoenberg's next major stylistic revolution - the development of serialism in the early 1920s. Webern applied some aspects of this technique more rigorously than Schoenberg, designing his themes to explicitly avoid any sense of tonality. This sophisticated manipulation of a series of pitches (serialism) - tone rows, the 12-tone style - also provided a framework for longer atonal works. Webern's adoption of serial technique did not alter his style, but gave it greater breadth, allowing him to employ broader, traditional forms. Webern set the first movement as a set of Variations (in an A B A format), the second movement as a Scherzo and Trio, and the finale as a Fugue.

The results pleased him greatly, so much that he felt fully justified in calling this work a string quartet (unlike the titles he gave the more concise Op.5 and Op. 9). He wrote Alexander Kolisch (of the Kolisch String Quartet which premiered this work as well as Bartok's 5th and 6th quartets and Berg's "Lyric Suite") that he viewed this quartet as "altogether my first work." Strict, canonic procedure dominates not only the finale, but the first two movements as well. While Webern's mature works nonetheless remain brief in comparison with other serial composers, he fashions movements of remarkable density and structural precision.

Dvorák:

Quartet No. 11 in C Major, Op. 61 (1881)

Dvorák achieved a feat matched by very few 19th-century composers. He wrote lasting masterpieces in almost every major genre of his time, both vocal and instrumental: symphonies, symphonic poems, overtures, concertos, chamber music, sacred compositions, choruses and songs. He also participated in the rising nationalist sentiments of the era, and remains perhaps best known for the folk elements which characterize some of his major compositions. By the time he wrote his 11th string quartet (Op. 61 in C Major) in 1881, his works already generated an international reputation. He'd written six of his nine symphonies, the violin and piano concertos, the Stabat Mater, and his folk-oriented Slavonic Dances of 1878 were already performed throughout Europe. His reputation and popularity were secure. He also established a close friendship with Brahms, to whom he dedicated his 9th quartet (in D minor, Op. 34). Brahms urged him to move to Vienna (which Dvorák declined), saw that Dvorák's music was published by a leading German firm (Simrock), and may have arranged the commission by Vienna's leading string quartet - the Hellmesberger Quartet - for tonight's piece.

The prestige of this ensemble, along with the extraordinary role Vienna played in the development of the string quartet, may have influenced Dvorák to focus on other aspects of his style. It is both ironic and unfortunate that the popularity of his folk-oriented works often obscured Dvorák's mastery of the broader, European symphonic genres of symphony, concerto, and quartet. This aspect of Dvorák's output is belatedly receiving the recognition it has long deserved, and the Helmesberger commission provided the welcome opportunity to demonstrate his quartet prowess to the most demanding audience in Europe. Dvorák at first minimizes the folk elements, and produces a conservative cycle similar in many respects to the Haydn and Mozart quartets a century earlier. He makes a clear Haydn-like distinction between the prestigious 4/4 sonata form first movement and the livelier 2/4 Vivace sonata-rondo finale. The lush, song-like second movement adagio in the subdominant key (and *A B A* form) reminds one of Mozart or Beethoven, as does the da capo, unwritten repeat of the Scherzo after the Trio.

However, the key of the Scherzo (A Minor) does not match late-18th century expectations for a C Major quartet, and this highlights some of Dvorák's other colorful departures from earlier tradition. The harmony of the opening theme quickly turns to the minor mode, as in Schubert. The form also recalls Schubert, as Dvorák opens the recap in a foreign key and saves the tonic return of the opening theme for the coda. He demonstrates a mastery of 19th-century cyclic procedure by employing variants of the first movement opening theme in both the scherzo and rondo movements. Yet these lively movements also feature prominent Czech (Bohemian) harmony and dance-like spirits as well, especially in the trio of the Scherzo and the rondo's opening theme. He then broadens the traditional quartet palette yet again with an introspective violin cadenza late in the finale, which further highlights the bright spirits of the principal theme upon its subsequent return. Dvorák thus fashions a characteristic and triumphant blend of nationalist color and symphonic breadth in this delightful quartet.

Program notes by Ed Wight