

SOU Chamber Music Concerts  
Friday, February 27, 2004  
Pacifica String Quartet

Program notes, Pacifica

Beethoven - String Quartet in E-Flat Major, Op. 74, "Harp" (1809)

Beethoven moved to Vienna to study composition with Joseph Haydn, and he wrote tonight's Op. 74 in 1809, the year of Haydn's death. By coincidence, Haydn composed his own set of quartets published as Op. 74 in 1793, while serving as Beethoven's teacher. Some of the differences between these two "Opus 74s" eloquently document how Beethoven transformed the quartet genre.

18th-century composers published instrumental works in sets of three or six, and Haydn wrote three quartets for Op. 74. Beethoven followed suit early on, with such works as the six quartets of Op. 18, but by 1809 he published all his subsequent quartets as single works - a practice characteristic of most 19th-century composers. The sonata form first movement closes with a long coda on the pizzicato cello motive. Such codas, serving as second development sections, rarely appeared in Haydn works. Beethoven usually replaced the Minuet and Trio movement of Haydn and Mozart's era with the faster, more robust Scherzo and Trio, as in tonight's quartet. But this Scherzo contains several new wrinkles reflecting Beethoven's evolution beyond his earlier works, as he sets it in C Minor - a different key and mode than rest of the quartet (all Haydn and Mozart Minuets appear in the tonic). Beethoven also expands the genre to five parts with extra repetitions of both the Scherzo and Trio sections. He then caps the movement with a long coda (based on motives from the Scherzo) which also serves as a link to the Theme and Variations finale. Haydn never bonds his quartet movements together, and the form of this finale also highlights another difference between the two composers. Despite his penchant for monothematic and motivic economy, Haydn rarely closed a multi-movement cycle with a Theme and Variations movement (writing only one such finale in his 68 quartets). Beethoven turned increasingly to such finales in all genres in his middle and late-period works.

However, this work also departs somewhat from the style of Beethoven's revolutionary Op. 59 "Razumovsky" quartets as well, heralding some aspects of his later works. The Op. 59 quartets featured the huge scope and symphonic breadth typical of Beethoven's so-called "heroic decade," with many movements over 400 bars in length. Beethoven chooses a more intimate and concentrated style for Op. 74, one of the first appearances of this new approach that dominated his late-period works. The dimensions of the movements resemble those of Haydn and Mozart, and the forms are less "symphonic" as well. He focuses instead on the more sectional and lyric forms: Scherzo & Trio, an impassioned second movement Rondo, and the closing Variations. And listen for another quintessential late-period trait - extreme motivic concentration - in the middle of the opening movement. Just before the return of the main theme in the home key (the

“recap”), Beethoven offers an extended violin and cello exchange on a two-pitch motive from the opening theme.

One final difference involves Haydn’s delightful sense of humor. This led him to many colorful surprises, such as opening Symphony 103 with a timpani roll. Though such gestures appeared less frequently in Beethoven’s more earnest style, he also opened Violin Concerto with the timpani. But he also broadened the significance of this gesture by integrating that motive into the piece itself. He works the same magic with the unusual cello pizzicato giving the “Harp” quartet its nickname. It is not only an interesting Haydn-like surprise, but Beethoven strategically employs it in the exposition, development, recap and coda sections as well.

#### Hindemith - String Quartet, Op. 22 (1921)

The horrors of World War I generated several strong responses from the artistic community. One such response appeared under the title of “Neo-classicism.” Many prominent artists (Picasso, Matisse, Leger) and composers (Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Hindemith) turned briefly to a simpler, more objective style drawing on elements of the past - after writing more complex, explosive, and powerful works before the war. Neo-classicism flourished in German arts of the 1920s as well, under the title of Neue Sachlichkeit (“New Objectivity”). After earlier Expressionist works by such artists as George Grosz and Otto Dix, their style also became more naturalistic after the war. They used the cooler, more representational neo-classical style to relentlessly satirize and caricature the aspects of German society that led to war. On the musical side, few composers capture the musical transition from expressionism to “new objectivity” better than Paul Hindemith.

As a student, Hindemith rose to prominence first as a violinist, then as a violist of such stature that he performed the premiere of Walton’s Viola Concerto in 1929. After service in World War I, however, Hindemith returned to civilian life determined to focus on composition. His seven string quartets thus benefited from a rare dual perspective - the mastery of both violin and viola. After bursting onto the scene with several avant-garde works (several one-act operas, song cycles, and the first version of his Cello Sonata), Hindemith turned to neo-classicism for a burst of chamber compositions in the mid-1920s. Such works as the Kammermusik series, as well as tonight’s quartet, reflect the typical return to Baroque techniques of linear, contrapuntal emphasis, concerto grosso textures, and the strict polyphonic techniques fugue and fugato. But while establishing an unmistakable modernist style, he adopts other conservative approaches as well. His works retain tonal centers, avoiding the cutting edge dissonance of Schoenberg and Webern’s expressionist and serialist styles. And unlike Bartók’s supple and incessant motivic development, Hindemith writes broader and recognizable themes and motives. This more accessible style also reflects the spirit of the neo-classical impulse.

The five movements of Op. 22 nonetheless borrow another crucial element of Bartók’s style: an overall arch form. The slow third movement provides the keystone of the arch,

as well as the dramatic center of the quartet. Hindemith sets it as the longest movement, and provides the most distinctive string color (played with mutes). He provides a flowing constant pulse throughout, except for a soft and lovely fugato passage in the middle. He flanks this movement with two faster, contrasting, shorter ones. The second movement (in A B A form) opens and closes with forceful, repeated notes for all parts, while the lyrical B section softens that repeated-note texture into more delicate solo interludes. The fourth movement is the shortest of all, with a series of cadenza-like passages first in the cello, and then played by all.

Hindemith finishes the symmetrical arch cycle with complementary opening and final movements of a primarily quiet and introspective nature. The first movement opens with an extended fugue, to which Hindemith adds an almost jazz-like “walking bass” cello pizzicato accompaniment upon its return near the end. In contrast, he sets the finale as a Rondo. The opening theme once again reveals his penchant for Baroque counterpoint, with the rhythmic cello accompaniment challenging the lyrical violin melody. This quartet became one of Hindemith’s most popular works, highlighting his fame during the interwar years. And with 127 performances by Hindemith’s Amar String Quartet alone, it became one of the most performed of all works from the 1920s.

#### Mendelssohn - String Quartet in D Major, Op. 44 No. 1 (1838)

The phrase “You can’t tell a book by its cover” may have been coined with the works of Felix Mendelssohn in mind. A musical title more often reflects the date a composer chooses to publish a work, not necessarily when it was written. For example, the correct chronological order of Mendelssohn’s five symphonies for full orchestra would be: Symphony No. 1 in C (1824), Symphony No. 5 “Reformation” (1830), Symphony No. 4 “Italian” (1833), Symphony No. 2 “Hymn of Praise” (1840) and Symphony No. 3 “Scottish” (1842). The numbering of Mendelssohn’s string quartets (and Hindemith’s as well) yields similar confusion. Mendelssohn wrote Quartet “No. 2” in A Minor, Op. 13 (1827) before Quartet “No. 1” in E-flat Major, Op. 12 (1829). Like Beethoven and his six Op. 18 quartets (No. 1 was written after No. 3), he also could change the order within an Opus set. Mendelssohn wrote tonight’s work as the last of the three Opus 44 quartets, but because it became his favorite, he placed it first - as Op. 44 No. 1.

Tonight’s quartet reflects a revision of style as well as chronology. Mendelssohn writes the Op. 44 quartets of 1837-38 in a more neo-classical style than some of his earlier works. He composed one of these early works, the Op. 13 quartet, as an homage in the year of Beethoven’s death (1827). It employs aspects of Beethoven’s challenging late style - his symphonic breadth, organic unity, and some actual quotations from his late quartets - in an original work that Mendelssohn made uniquely his own. But such a gesture proved an exception, both for Mendelssohn and his generation. Beethoven’s late works were not yet widely disseminated or understood, and mid-19th century quartet composers turned more often to the works of Haydn, Mozart and early Beethoven for inspiration. Like the other composers of his era, Mendelssohn chose this path as well for the Opus 44 quartets. The second movement of tonight’s quartet features a Minuet

(instead of a 19th-century Scherzo) in the tonic key, the usual choice for Haydn and Mozart 60 years earlier. He uses variants of sonata form also commonly found in the 18th-century works - a sonata form without development (the third movement Andante) and a binary sonata form (which never brings back the opening theme in the tonic) for the finale.

However, this neo-classic approach provides many opportunities for Mendelssohn's particular gifts of lyric phrasing and harmonic richness to shine through. The opening sonata form movement offers strong contrasts between the dramatic opening theme (which dominates the movement) and two quieter, more lyric secondary themes later on (both featuring Mendelssohn's special harmonic warmth). He writes a lovely, introspective Menuet with all instruments playing in similar, singing style, and contrasts it with a Trio dominated initially by the high-flying first violin. The two song-like main themes dominate the intimate and lyrical Andante movement. Set in sonata form without development, Mendelssohn fashions a poignant movement out of deceptively simple themes that would not be out of place in his "Songs Without Words" piano pieces. In contrast, he closes with a rush - a lively Saltarello reminiscent of the finale for his Italian Symphony five years earlier. To capture the spirit of the Italian Saltarello folkdances, Mendelssohn creates a delightful movement full of bustle, warmth, and contrasting, often folk-like themes to bring the quartet to a sprightly conclusion.

Program notes by Ed Wight