

SOU Chamber Music Concerts ~ Program Notes

www.sou.edu/cmc

Saturday, January 22, 2005, 8 pm:

Philharmonia Quartett Berlin

Haydn: String Quartet in Bb Major, Op. 76 No. 4 "Sunrise" (1797)

Britten: String Quartet No. 2 in C Major, Op. 36 (1945)

Beethoven: String Quartet in C Major, Op. 59 No. 3 (1806)

Haydn

String Quartet in Bb Major, Op. 76 No. 4 "Sunrise" (1797)

After his second trip to London, Haydn returned to Vienna in 1795 as an international celebrity. Haydn didn't rest on his laurels, though; he changed directions. He abandoned most of the instrumental genres which contributed so much to his fame in favor of vocal music (his final masses and oratorios). However, the six quartets of Op. 76 and two later ones provide his masterful, and surprising, final thoughts in the one instrumental genre Haydn continued to extensively cultivate. Because his most recent quartet sets (Op. 71 and 74) each consisted of three works, that is how the Viennese publisher Artaria originally published his six new quartets: the first three as Op. 75 and the final three as Op. 76. A London publisher simultaneously printed them as one opus in two parts, however, and thus all six quartets came to be known as Opus 76.

A Viennese nobleman (Count Joseph Erdody) commissioned the Op. 76 quartets, and Haydn dedicated them to him. In the practice of the time, Erdody then owned exclusive rights to them for the next few years. (Though they were finished in 1797, for this reason Haydn couldn't publish them until 1799.) At first glance, this quartet appears to provide another of his delightful late 18th-century cycle of movements: a fast, Sonata-Form first movement, a lovely Adagio second movement of great warmth (in abbreviated Sonata Form), a Minuet and Trio third movement, and closing with a lively Rondo finale. It contains all his trademarks---continually fresh and unpredictable phrasing patterns, thematic economy (deriving secondary material from the opening theme), and a third-movement Trio which evokes Hungarian folk style. Despite this traditional packaging, however, the "Sunrise" quartet teems with new departures, many of which anticipate 19th-century procedures. The esteemed Haydn scholar H.C. Robbins-Landon considers this quartet "...as perhaps the greatest of Op. 76."

The three fast movements all open with a "pick-up" rhythmic figure, as Haydn moves closer to 19th-century cyclic connections between movements. In that spirit, Haydn not only links the minuet with the trio, but does so with a sustained-note variant of the first movement's opening theme (the "Sunrise" gesture). He sets all the Op. 76 minuets at a fast tempo, heralding the scherzos of a later era. Haydn also anticipates the 19th-century procedure of giving the finale greater weight through stretto - providing not just one, but two tempo accelerations in the coda, the last one a demanding presto. Three other Op. 76 quartets emphasized the final movement in different fashion - by opening it in minor mode before closing in major. That minor/major coloration provides the single most striking feature of this quartet as well. In the slow movement, Haydn surprisingly begins

the recap in the minor mode, a rich and dramatic gesture that looks ahead to similar coloration in the great Schubert G Major quartet. This Haydn penchant to radically alter exposition material in the recap (unlike Mozart) is also found in the first movement, and later became an even more prominent feature of his pupil Beethoven.

While Haydn supplied a few of the nicknames for his works himself, he had nothing to do with the vast majority of them--including tonight's "Sunrise" quartet. Publishers, critics, and music lovers invented most of them long after his death in 1809. However, the "Sunrise" designation falls into yet another category: nicknames that originated during Haydn's lifetime and reflected 18th-century responses to his music. These 18th-century nicknames carry an authenticity--coming much closer to the essence of their respective works--that is lacking in those which originated in the 19th century or later. The soft opening and sustained whole-note accompaniment at the opening of tonight's quartet reminded 18th-century listeners of similar passages in both "The Creation" and "The Seasons," in which Haydn explicitly created representations of "Sunrise."

Britten

String Quartet No. 2 in C Major, Op. 36 (1945)

Benjamin Britten's greatness as a composer provided a wonderful exception to the unfolding legacy of 20th-century classical music. He maintained a remarkable popularity and modest critical acceptance despite his conservative approach to modernism. The influence of avant-garde serialism and electro-acoustic styles relegated most composers of more traditional 20th-century styles to the backroads of critical disfavor. After the 50-year prominence of serialism finally crested in the 1970s, many composers suddenly found favor with a wider, more eclectic range of styles. It also allowed a fresh perspective to emerge regarding more conservative composers "previously dismissed as secondary or irrelevant." The 2001 New Grove article on modernism continues "...Copland, Barber, Britten, and Shostakovich increasingly appear central to any musical characterization of the century." Britten's reputation, always high, needed far less "resurrection" than most other composers.

This new perspective allows a reconsideration of such works as Britten's second string quartet. Written for the 250th anniversary of Henry Purcell's death, it provides one of the strongest examples of Britten's neo-classicism: an opening movement in Sonata Form, followed by a Scherzo and Trio, and closing with a Theme and Variations movement. All three movements are tonal, reinforcing the central key of C Major. Purcell became one of the 17th-century masters of the Chaconne, a triple-meter tune serving as the basis for a set of variations. Britten's remarkable embrace of Purcell in this quartet not only includes this form, but Purcell's spelling as well - Chacony. This finale dominates the quartet, lasting twice as long as the previous movements combined. Britten sets the 9-bar theme in a very slow triple meter. He provides 21 statements of this ostinato passage, broken up by cadenzas for the cello (after the 7th statement), viola (after the 13th), and first violin (after the 19th). Britten favored such variations at the time: similar chaconnes or passacaglias also appear in "Peter Grimes" (1942), "Young People's Guide to the

Orchestra” (1946), and “The Rape of Lucretia” (also 1946).

Britten tapped a different source of melodic unity in the first two movements - sharing the development of the same motive. In the first movement, the opening two pitches of the 1st violin span the broad leap of an ascending tenth (an octave plus a third). This dramatic motive dominates the sonata-form movement. It reappears in two more themes of the opening section, underlies the jagged 8th-notes of the transition leading to another recurrence in the secondary theme, as glissando harmonics in the development section, and finally as an augmentation in the coda. The coda highlights Britten’s sense of structural drama, as the final violin entrance provides the longest and highest appearance of the motive. This motive also plays a prominent role in the second movement Scherzo and Trio, occurring as both the initial and final statements of the 1st violin.

The culture of 20th-century classical music now celebrates a wider diversity of styles. Though conservative, Britten’s quartet establishes an unmistakably 20th-century style of dissonance and remains his best-known chamber work. Its concept of “new wine in old bottles” served as an effective invitation for many listeners to grapple with the complexities of mid-century modernism.

Beethoven

String Quartet in C Major, Op. 59 No. 3 (1806)

Compared with his Op. 18 quartets of 1800, Beethoven composed Op. 59 in a different world. The three quartets reflect aspects of his new middle-period style which first coalesced around his third symphony, the “Eroica” - an enormous expansion in length, complexity and dramatic power. The heightened sense of drama in many works from this time may in part be autobiographical; Beethoven recognized the first unmistakable signs of deafness in 1802. The opening quartet of Op. 59 - in F Major - was the longest string quartet anyone had written to that time. The 150-bar development section of its first movement came in at a greater length than many entire first movements of Haydn and Mozart quartets. The Eroica symphony, and the later 5th symphony, also included his new concept of a long-range transformation of the opening theme - its final version emerges only at the end of the movement.

Not every new work of Beethoven reflects this striking expansion of range and power, however. The scholarly literature on Beethoven often focuses on works of “retrenchment” and consolidation, temporarily reaching back to an earlier conservative style after enormous strides forward - the more conservative Op. 54 piano sonata in F Major (immediately after the “Waldstein” sonata), or the 4th and 8th symphonies (following such dramatic works as the 3rd and 7th symphonies). Many critics place tonight’s quartet in such a group, and Op. 59 No. 3 certainly shuns some of the more obvious manifestations of Beethoven’s newfound achievements. With the dimensions of Haydn & Mozart quartets, it avoids the tremendous length of Op. 59 no. 1. This C Major quartet also omits the typically dramatic emphasis on the development and coda sections. And unlike the newfound, breakneck scherzos characteristic of Beethoven’s new style,

he reaches back for an easy, *grazioso*, 18th-century Menuet and Trio instead.

However, dynamite can come in small packages. Though not packaged the same way as Op. 59 no. 1, this quartet nonetheless offers of a compendium of Beethoven's new style. He places us in new territory immediately, with the very first chord: a diminished seventh. Remarkably, Beethoven delays the establishment of the tonic C Major not only beyond the slow introduction but also avoids it in the opening phrases of the sonata-form first movement. By postponing the tonic until 14 bars into the *allegro vivace* section, he offers a far more wide-ranging and unstable chromaticism than Mozart's comparable opening in his C Major "Dissonant" quartet, K. 465.

These first 14 bars of the *allegro vivace* provide a comparable thematic instability to match the harmonic style. This solo arabesque for the first violin - supposedly the opening theme - never recurs in this fashion. Beethoven's musical language grows increasingly concise throughout his career, and in this quartet we realize (after the fact) that we don't have an opening theme. Typical of Beethoven's later works, like the 5th symphony, we have an opening motive instead. As we move from the introduction to *allegro vivace*, the two-note figure - quarter note and dotted half - becomes the central thematic element of the piece. Throughout the movement it always rises upward, and Beethoven further heightens the intensity by offering it in ever-shorter note values throughout the piece, often in imitative counterpoint. In similarly compact fashion, Beethoven abandons the broad lyricism of his earlier works - the largest repetition in the movement is a 2-bar phrase. Beethoven's postpones the ultimate resolution of this motive - a relaxing melodic descent, reinforced by a tonic cadence - until the coda. This quite belated revelation of its final triumphal, if gentle, essence remains a quintessential structural trait of his new style.

The softer, velvet-glove revolution continues in each of the following movements as well. Andrey Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador in Vienna, commissioned the three Op. 59 quartets. In his honor, the first two quartets both contained a Russian folk song, and the Andante movement in this third quartet is written in a warm, yet almost haunting Russian folk style. Its ambiguous structure moves beyond 18th-century designs - the proportions are wrong for sonata form, rondo and ABA. And the cello part, among others, contains the first prolonged use of pizzicato for dramatic effect in a slow movement. This introspective mood continues in the graceful Minuet and Trio. Yet listen for the rhythmic dislocations and syncopations in the trio, as well as the coda that links this movement to the finale (another unifying trait characteristic of this new decade). Fugues and fugal style assumed an extraordinary prominence in Beethoven's late style, and he closes this quartet with an entire movement devoted to these principles. Though set in Sonata Form, Beethoven keeps the focus on the contrapuntal elements and the remarkable intensity of the *perpetuum mobile* motivic work. In the case of Op. 59 No 3, these smaller, often more introspective movements (in comparison with other middle-period works) nonetheless reveal a revolutionary new style as well. Far from being a conservative retrenchment, this quartet anticipates many of Beethoven's late-period glories.

Program notes by Ed Wight