

SOU Chamber Music Concerts ~ Program Notes

Friday, Oct. 8, 8pm: Schubert Ensemble of London
Schumann - Piano Quintet in Eb Major, Op. 44
Martin - Butler - Piano Quartet
Elgar - Piano Quintet in A Minor, Op. 84

SCHUMANN PIANO QUINTET in Eb MAJOR, OP. 44 (1842)

Schumann's Piano Quintet proved an extraordinarily influential work in this new chamber genre. Piano quintets first appeared in the 1770s, but encompassed a wide variety of scoring until the mid-19th century. J.C. Bach wrote one which included oboe and viola da gamba, and another with oboe and flute; Giardini used no viola (double bass instead); Hoffmeister included two violas. Mozart and Beethoven employed a woodwind quartet with piano for their only piano quintets; Schubert's only work included double bass, and Mendelssohn wrote piano quartets instead of quintets. Piano quintets for string quartet and piano existed side-by-side with these examples from the 1790s, but it remained for Schumann (1842) and Brahms (1864) to establish the definitive scoring and four-movement cycle that became the model for later composers. In addition, the quintet held great personal significance for Schumann. By 1840 Europe still knew him more as a gifted critic than composer. The back-to-back triumphs of his first symphony (1841) and the quintet finally established his international reputation as a composer as well.

It was no coincidence that this path-breaking quintet appeared in 1842. Schumann focused primarily on chamber music that year (after immersing himself in songwriting in 1840, and orchestral composition in 1841). 1842 also witnessed the composition of all three string quartets (Op. 41) and the piano quartet (Op. 47) as well. As in the first symphony, Schumann's concerns also included those of motivic development and establishing thematic links between various movements. Not surprisingly, aspects of the opening theme appear in the secondary theme of the sonata-form first movement and with great subtlety in all subsequent movements. Schumann offers motives from it in augmentation (in the lyrical first episode of the second-movement rondo), inversion (in the first trio of the Scherzo), and in varied but still recognizable form (in the opening theme of the finale). Along with this thematic underpinning, Schumann also writes lyrical passages of great warmth and melodic breadth in the secondary themes of all four movements. And Schumann goes Beethoven one better in the Scherzo. While Beethoven was one of the first composers to repeat the trio later in the Scherzo, Schumann offers two different trios for his lively Scherzo. In all aspects - thematic development, lyric melody, rich chromaticism, and formal sophistication - this quintet provides a masterful example of Schumann's maturity.

The robust finale, in sonata rondo form, merits some further attention. It begins with another Beethovenian gesture: opening the finale in the wrong key. While Beethoven would quickly right himself, Schumann once again extends this to the breaking point, to wonderful dramatic effect. He sets the refrain theme in C minor, then offers rondo episodes in G minor and E major before restating the primary theme in Eb minor - 170 bars into the piece! And we're still not home yet, as the final establishment of Eb major comes later in the movement, which Schumann dramatizes with a double fugue. As the fugue subjects include both the opening refrain - based on the 1st-movement theme - as well as figuration from the first rondo episode, he creates a gesture of cyclic unity and a marvelous climax to the quintet.

This quintet also held another deeply personal meaning for Schumann. After years of separation, Schumann finally married Clara Wieck in 1840. Schumann wrote this piece for her and she loved it, performing it throughout her life. In addition to being an accomplished composer, Clara established an international career as a piano virtuoso of the first rank. While the strings remain equal partners - more so than in many quintets of Schumann's contemporaries - Clara's piano appears in almost every bar.

BUTLER SEQUENZA NOTTURNA (2003)

The English composer Martin Butler wrote a piano quintet for the Schubert Ensemble entitled "American Rounds" in 1998. With over thirty commissions, the Schubert Ensemble has become England's foremost proponent of chamber music for piano and strings, and the success of "American Rounds" led them to ask Butler for another work. Butler obliged with tonight's piece - "Sequenza Notturna" - which received its concert premiere in July 2003. Given the celebrated name of the ensemble, Butler set his first commission in the same instrumentation of Schubert's "Trout Quintet" (his only piano quintet) - piano, violin, viola, cello and double bass. For the "Sequenza Notturna," however, Butler returns to the more conventional piano quintet scoring (piano and string quartet).

In addition to the Schubert Ensemble, Butler also received commissions from the BBC, London Sinfonietta, English Northern Philharmonia, Paragon Ensemble, and the Oxford Bach Choir, among others. This remarkably diverse composer has written three operas, vocal music (both solo and choral), a host of orchestral works, chamber works for both classical ensembles (String Quartet, Clarinet Quintet, and the two Piano Quintets) and pop scoring (“Jazz Machines” for flute, clarinet, piano, viola, cello, and vibes, and “Hootenanny” for 13 instruments). As those titles indicate, Butler draws upon a wide range of styles, encompassing both American pop and minimalism as well as the European modernist traditions.

He set “Sequenza Notturna” as a single-movement piece, written in a “cool, subtle, pleasingly complex style...sometimes gentle, at other times antagonistic” according to one review. By including the word “Nocturne” in the title, modern composers often mean to evoke peaceful images of the night or twilight. Butler begins in that fashion, with some soft, impressionistic piano chimes against high string accompaniment. This often lyrical work rises towards a late, intense climax before a gentle coda provides “a magical ending [to balance] the stillness of the opening” according to another critic. Listen also for the viola, which states one of the first significant thematic elements in the piece. Among his many awards, Butler won the Mendelssohn Scholarship in 1988, which allowed him to study at Luciano Berio’s workshop in Florence. Berio, who often wrote prominent parts for the viola, died in 2003. Butler was working on “Sequenza Notturna” at that time, and he dedicated this work to Berio in homage.

ELGAR PIANO QUINTET in A MINOR, OP. 84 (1919)

The capacity for change and development in classical music offers some breathtaking surprises. Performance standards change: while the scores of the major operas remain set now, singers in the 18th and early 19th centuries often sang some of their favorite arias regardless of which opera or composer was being performed. Composers (Mozart and Handel among them) often wrote new arias for the revival of both their own operas and other contemporaries as well. Compositions change: Mahler’s 1st Symphony began as a two-part tone poem, and Brahms initially set his Piano Quintet in F Minor as a String Quintet, then as a 4-hand Piano Sonata, before finally settling on the Piano Quintet scoring. And most wonderful of all, composers can surprise us late in their careers. Haydn discovered the English Oratorio tradition in his 60s and promptly wrote two of the greatest 18th-century examples. Schubert’s final work was his only string quintet, Schumann turned to opera just in his final decade, and Stravinsky waited until Schoenberg’s death in 1951 before attempting serialist compositions himself. Both Debussy and Elgar established major international reputations as orchestral composers (among many other achievements), but finished their careers with important contributions in chamber music.

Elgar’s “Enigma Variations” of 1899 became the most distinguished orchestral work in British history to that date, according to the 2001 New Grove Dictionary. Its success firmly established Elgar’s career and reputation. From 1900-1914, Elgar scholar Michael Kennedy says he enjoyed a level of fame on the European continent unmatched by any English composer “including Britten.” However, World War I drastically affected many aspects of European life, including Elgar’s. His conservative style soon fell out of favor, and both his career and health languished in London during the war. Elgar’s wife Alice found them a cottage in the pastoral Sussex countryside in 1917, and her hopes were answered. His spirits and energy revived, and Elgar composed his final important works in that beloved Brinkwells cottage. Writing his only surviving violin sonata, string quartet and piano quintet pleased the Elgar enormously, as he had either destroyed many of his earlier chamber works or left them incomplete.

The quintet remains the most immediately accessible of the three works, reflecting Elgar’s penchant for great melodic writing and many contrasting moods. The gnarled trees around Brinkwells played a role in those contrasting moods. They reminded Elgar of a legend about Spanish moors turned into trees, and he tried to capture some of that spirit in the mildly programmatic first movement (“strange music...ghostly stuff” he called it.) The opening fragments of plainsong chant in the introduction, the following chromatic arpeggio in the cello, and a jaunty “Spanish” secondary theme later in the exposition of this sonata-form movement, recur in the final movement as well. The adagio movement provides the emotional core of the work, as Elgar’s gifts for lush chromatic harmony and counterpoint dominate a movement many refer to as Brahmsian. After opening with the lush cello arpeggio of the first movement, the finale provides a lighter melodic conclusion, with some passages which reminded George Bernard Shaw of jazz in a dance hall. When Elgar worried that he had not given the pianist enough demanding passagework, Shaw also reassured him on his thematic integrity and restraint. Shaw said no “shop pianist” could play it; the part “requires a touch” and artistry few players other than Elgar could produce.

Program notes by Ed Wight