

SOU Chamber Music Concerts
www.ChamberMusicConcerts.org

Cypress Quartet
January 15, 2010

MOZART: STRING QUARTET in D MAJOR, K. 575 (1789)

The European music community, in mourning over Mozart's unexpected and early death, received a surprising gift at the end of December 1791. A few weeks after Mozart's death, the Viennese music printer Artaria announced the publication of "Three entirely new concertante string quartets...by Mozart. Op. 18...written not long before his untimely death." They are, in fact, authentic late works, and we know them as the "Prussian" string quartets, in D Major (K. 575), B-flat Major (K. 589), and F Major (K.590). As they constituted his last works in this genre, lovers of chamber music everywhere welcomed them, and have continued that embrace for over two centuries.

Tonight's D Major quartet remains unique among the three. Mozart wrote it immediately upon his return from a trip to Germany in May 1789. During that trip he met King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia, a cello-playing enthusiast. He decided to write a set of six quartets dedicated to the King, in hopes of either a position or financial reward, or both. So he gave the cello part unprecedented prominence in tonight's quartet. For balance, he wrote more solos than usual for the other players as well, leading to the publisher's description of them as "concertante" quartets. But this remains the only quartet he finished with the King Friedrich in mind: every movement includes solo passages or dialogue for the cello. After the first two movements in the next quartet (K.589), he abandoned the project for almost a year, and wrote the remainder of the last two quartets in a more conventional style. In June 1790 he told Michael Puchberg (a Masonic brother and frequent benefactor) that he was forced to sell them to Artaria for a pittance "a [mere] song" — and without any dedication to the King.

These late quartets contain several new stylistic features beyond the style of the six quartets Mozart dedicated to Haydn four years earlier. In Vienna, Baron van Swieten opened his library of Bach and Handel to Mozart, who also encountered more Bach scores on this German trip in 1789. So it comes as no surprise to find a canon (led by the cello, of course!) in the development section of the first movement. That section also closes with eighth-note runs in invertible counterpoint. Mozart takes a step beyond this in the development section of the

finale, once again turning to invertible counterpoint but now in simultaneous pairs (imitative refrain-theme motives for cello and viola against imitative triplet counterpoint in the violins). Studies of Bach led to such passages of greater polyphonic complexity.

Other new features include an increasingly Haydnesque tendency towards thematic economy and Mozart's late-period formal sophistication. The opening theme of the **Sonata-form** first movement generates all three secondary themes as well (including the closing theme). Mozart sets the tender *Andante* movement in **A B A** form, but in typical late fashion blurs the distinction between these two sections. The **B** section, with its four solos and harmonically pungent counterpoint, opens in the same key as the **A** section.

The **Minuet and Trio** no longer constitute two completely independent sections. Mozart now links them thematically via the sixteenth-note pickup to the Minuet – which also occurs in the Trio theme (once again for the cello). And Mozart was not yet finished with the opening theme of the quartet. It now provides both themes of the **Sonata Rondo** finale as well, anticipating the cyclic, multi-movement structures more typical of the 19th century. Listen as he also varies the main theme (refrain) on each return, and the striking A Major / A Minor contrasts in the secondary theme

The posthumous appearance of these quartets that he gave away 'for a song' provided a truly wonderful late gift. They offer a compendium of his latest styles of formal sophistication, rich harmony, and dense motivic and contrapuntal textures — yet always leavened by glorious Mozart melody.

SCHULHOFF: FIVE PIECES for STRING QUARTET (1923)

The Czech composer Erwin Schulhoff was also a child prodigy on the piano. Dvorak's 1901 recommendation helped him enter the Prague Conservatory at age 10, several years later. Yet like so many Czech composers, he spent a great deal of time in Germany and Austria. Schulhoff also studied piano in Vienna, composition with Max Reger at the Leipzig conservatory, served in the Austrian Army in World War I and lived in Dresden after the war. This German influence exposed him to the Expressionism of the Second Viennese School (Schoenberg, Berg and Webern), and he wrote several atonal works in the 1920s.

Yet his vivid reaction against the war also led to an embrace of Dadaism, with its humorous, anti-rational denunciations of Western

bourgeois culture. Thirty years before John Cage, Schulhoff wrote a movement in silent pauses – “In futurum” — notated in 3/5 and 7/10 meter, with the bass clef staff written above the treble clef throughout. The first movement of tonight’s quartet captures that same spirit, a Viennese Waltz written in 4/4 time. That spirit of humor and parody might also account for the work’s dedication to Darius Milhaud, a member of Les Six that in part represented French anti-bourgeois satire.

Schulhoff recaptured much of his Czech heritage when he returned to Prague in 1923. Studies with Janacek focused on Slavic folk music and the vivid rhythmic patterns of its dances. Under this influence for tonight’s “Five Pieces,” his first piece after settling in Prague, it’s not surprising Schulhoff turns to a neo-classical Baroque dance suite. He fashions a grand tour of international dances: the Viennese Waltz already mentioned, a delightful Czech Polka (third movement), a Tango Milonga from Argentina (fourth movement), and an Italian Tarantella at presto tempo to provide a lively closing flourish.

Two movements deserve further comment. The humor in his Waltz setting (with its characteristic triple meter figuration in the tonic pedal of the cello part cutting across the 4/4 bar lines) also continues in the second movement, “Alla Serenata.” This is the only non-dance movement, and recalls the orchestral serenades of the 18th and 19th century. You won’t find too many of them set in 5/8 meter, though, as Schulhoff maintains his assault on bourgeois expectations. This movement also features his closest approach to the German atonality of his earlier works, with the harshness of stacked fifths and major sevenths in the fortissimo second theme of the movement. However, the opening theme carries the day with its humorous technique. The relentless, distinctively Slavic repetition of the viola pattern in D-flat resolves to the “correct” tonic C in the cello on the last eighth note of the bar throughout the movement.

Schulhoff’s fourth-movement tango combines two different Argentinean traditions, both the tango and the distinctive 2/4 rhythm (dotted eighth and sixteenth note, followed by two eighth notes) of the milonga. The harmony also reflects his love of jazz throughout the 1920s, an embrace deeper “than any other single European composer who is considered classical” according to music critic Kai Chistensen. Schulhoff’s “Five Pieces” thus fashions an accessible and lively essay on dance in a wide-ranging variety of styles.

DVORAK: STRING QUARTET no. 13 in G MAJOR, OP. 106 (1895)

If you wish to know Dvorak, study his chamber music. His skills as a violist helped him write idiomatically for chamber ensembles. Dvorak composed in all the major 19th-century chamber genres, and turned to chamber music at every phase of his career. Dvorak scholar John Clapham writes that “It is hardly surprising that his Op. 1 is a string quintet, and Op. 2 is a string quartet.” At the other end of his career, Dvorak wrote his 13th string quartet in December 1895, shortly after returning to Bohemia (Czechoslovakia) from a three-year residency in the United States. Though nothing should surprise us about his chamber music by this time, the work is extraordinary. Dvorak follows the deliberately simplified style of his 12th quartet — the very popular “American” Quartet in F Major — with a work of remarkable complexity and scope. It is the largest of all his quartets and “arguably Dvorak’s finest achievement in string quartet form” according to music critic Paul Schiavo.

Celebrated for such folk-oriented pieces as the sets of “Slavonic Dances,” Dvorak nonetheless rarely quoted actual folk tunes. He developed a more subtle approach to folk music while also mastering the traditional European art music genres of opera, symphony, overture, concerto, and string quartet, as well as sonata form, rondo, variations and thematic transformation. Tonight’s quartet provides a case in point. It opens with three statements of the primary theme, each in a different key. This seems unremarkable, yet such thrice-opening presentations are “a common feature of Czech folk song” (Schiavo).

This gesture also heralds the enormous scale of the quartet. The three different keys for the opening theme lead to a passage lasting 40 bars before G Major returns at bar 48. Dvorak thus creates 50 bars of gorgeous harmonic color in a **Sonata-form** movement — and he has not even begun the transition section to the secondary key area. At 368 bars, he writes the longest sonata-form movement of his late quartets. And after the three keys in the opening section, the richness of Dvorak’s late-career harmonic palette surfaces in the secondary section of the exposition as well. He opens it with a lyrical theme in the surprising key of B-flat Major, yet also turns to B Major later in that same section.

The set of **Variations** in the second-movement *Adagio* provides the dramatic heart of the quartet. Dvorak revered the music of Schubert, and this passionate variation theme reflects Schubert’s colorful alternations between major and minor forms of the tonic. Dvorak

opens the theme in E-flat Minor, but already closes the opening six-bar phrase in Major. Dvorak also fashions a remarkably free set of variations. The opening theme lasts 23 bars, while the first variation totals 56 — and the dramatic fortissimo climax of the movement occurs in the penultimate variation with a sudden shift to C Major. The powerful drama of this movement led quartet scholar Paul Griffiths to consider this Dvorak's "most inward quartet slow movement."

Such late-period harmonic sophistication continues in the B Minor **Scherzo** movement. One of the few times Beethoven wrote two trio sections for a scherzo, for his Seventh Symphony, he simply put both statements in a closely related key (the subdominant). Dvorak not only writes two different trios, but also explores more remote harmonic territory in A-flat Major and D Major. And the spacious dimensions typical of every movement in this quartet make this feel more like a rondo movement than a scherzo.

That breadth also characterizes the triumphant **Sonata-rondo** finale, at 547 bars one of the largest movements of his career. Listen for the slow introduction to return in varied format as an episode in the development section. Throughout his career, Dvorak alternated between quartets oriented more towards folk style and those which focused on the high art of the Viennese style. This quartet would make any Viennese composer proud.

Program notes by Ed Wight