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Szymanowski Quartet
Program Notes - Saturday, November 1, 2008

Beethoven
String Quartet in G Major, Op. 18 no. 2 (1800)

Beethoven moved to Vienna in November 1792 to study with Haydn. These lessons lasted over a year, until Haydn made his second visit to London in January 1794. Beethoven also quickly established himself as Vienna's greatest keyboard virtuoso in the 1790s, Mozart's true heir in that respect. Aside from generous aristocratic patronage, Beethoven scholar Joseph Kerman writes that he earned additional income "...contributing copiously to the ephemera of Viennese musical life: easy piano variations, ballroom dances by the dozens, patriotic marching songs, pieces for mechanical clock-organ..." But the lessons with Haydn, and his continuous growth as composer and artist, led to more substantive achievements as well: he equaled or surpassed Haydn and Mozart in such concert genres as the Piano Sonata, Piano Trio, and String Trio. By 1798, Beethoven biographer Maynard Solomon writes that he was ready for "...the most ambitious single project of his early Vienna years"—the six string quartets of Op. 18.

Out of all 17 of Beethoven's quartets, this one most clearly reflects his studies with Haydn. It captures aspects of Haydn's light textures and wit, along with his unpredictable motivic development and structural ambiguity. A little grace note eight bars into the development section of the **Sonata-form** first movement gives the game away. This simple, light, gesture—unrepeated—brings a brief moment of humor and ironic detachment, mocking the otherwise "serious" activity. The wit briefly disappears a few bars later in the face of a 30-bar triple fugue, a hint of the extraordinary fugues to come later in Beethoven's career. But this too is another lesson from Haydn, who made sure to stress more rigorous counterpoint lessons with Beethoven than Haydn himself received as a young composer.

The warmth and lyricism of the following *Adagio cantabile,* however, belie the radical concepts which govern it. This apparently simple **A B A** movement heralds Beethoven's future revolutionary achievements more than any other passage in the quartet. Both Mozart and Haydn wrote quartet slow movements in **A B A** form—but neither ever set the **B** section at a faster tempo (*Allegro*) and new meter (2/4). This contrast anticipates the increasingly mercurial and fragmentary mood shifts of Beethoven's later work. So does the unprecedented motivic saturation of the **B** section, every bar of which stems from the closing 16th-note cadence of the **A** section.

The spirit of Haydn and Mozart returns in the lighthearted **Scherzo and Trio**. While these illustrious predecessors never wrote a "Scherzo" per se, the playfulness of the violin figuration and the easy-going mood fashion a structure

more akin to a quick Minuet than a powerful Scherzo. (Beware those powerful contrasts in dynamics and the unexpected *sforzando* accents, however.) Beethoven's playful nature continues in the **Sonata-form** *Allegro molto* finale. He offers a long dominant pedal announcing the expected return of the tonic at the beginning of the development, and an even longer one at the end of that section. And both times he comically veers off into unexpected keys, a Haydnesque twinkle in his eye. Joseph Kerman calls this quartet "Beethoven's wittiest composition in the genre." We can all revel in the masterful lyricism, playfulness, and passages of surprising, unexpected power—and also that the serious revolutionary spirit occasionally took a joyful day off.

Szymanowski
String Quartet no. 2, Op. 56 (1927)
In 1905, Karol Szymanowski joined several other composers in forming "Young Poland in Music." This short-lived association held the goal of revitalizing Polish music at the turn of the new century. The irony of Szymanowski's role in this Polish renaissance centers on his resistance to the music of Poland (Polish folk music) throughout most of his career. The 2001 New Grove Dictionary quotes him: "Let our music be national but not provincial...[never] falter in striving to attain universality." His international travel complemented these views, living in Italy, Sicily, North Africa, Vienna, and Paris in the years before World War I.

After the war ended, however, he was increasingly drawn to the resort of Zakopane, in the highlands of southern Poland near the Tatra mountains—and to its folk culture as well. He changed course, and by the 1920s many of his works, including his ballet "Harnasie" and his second string quartet "...[were] inspired directly by the highlander's music" (New Grove). In a further regional influence, he even dedicated this quartet to a highland couple in Zakopane that befriended him.

Unlike the Impressionist style of the "Nocturne and Tarantella" of 1915 (heard on last night's program), the second quartet, written in 1927, approaches the modernist complexity of Bartok. It often sounds similar to Bartok's third and fourth quartets, written at the same time (1927 and 1928, respectively). Also like Bartok, many of the themes and motivic exchanges draw upon folk music (for Szymanowski, the Tatra highlands music), and are presented in rhythmically intense, almost atonal contexts, and frequent contrapuntal imitation. He is a bit more conservative than Bartok in harmony (no quarter tones) and texture (more frequent passages of melody-plus-accompaniment)—but just barely so.

Though all three movements feature passionate outbursts coupled with tempo fluctuation, the opening tempo (and mood) by and large governs each movement. Szymanowski designates the first movement *Moderato*, the second movement an intense, driving *Vivace*, and the finale as a *Lento* fugue. The quartet's opening theme is played in octaves by the violin and cello. A triplet figure is soon introduced in imitation, and it governs much of the movement from

then on.

The accompaniment for this theme is also noteworthy; the second violin and viola play constant tremolos *con sordino (*with mutes) and *sul tasto* (on the fingerboard). Szymanowski runs the full gauntlet of demanding 20th-century string effects, also turning to *pizzicato*, harmonics, and *sul ponticello* (on the bridge). In the second movement, the rising *pizzicato* arpeggio in the cello and viola which begins in bar eight is a Tatra "mountaineering theme." Both the opening fugal theme of the third movement and following theme in 16th-notes are folk tunes as well. In his late works, Szymanowski wrote in a far more dissonant, complex style than the extended tonality of Shostakovich and Britten later in the century. Yet, again like Bartok, his *avante garde* contrapuntal vitality established an alternative to the serialism of Arnold Schoenberg, which also appeared in the 1920s.

Schubert
String Quartet in D Minor, D. 810 "Death and the Maiden" (1824)
Vienna reveled in its international reputation for great food and music. An English visitor to Vienna in 1828 wrote: "No place of refreshment, from the highest to lowest, is without music; bassoonists and clarinets are as plentiful as blackberries" (from musicologist Alice Hansen). The phrase "place of refreshment"—restaurants and taverns—is significant, for despite Vienna's astounding musical heritage, it did not build a public concert hall until 1831. No public concerts of string quartets took place during the lifetime of Haydn and Mozart; there was no concert hall for them. Instead, private concerts in the flourishing Viennese salons sated the appetite for music. "Home concerts for family and friends [and invited guests] easily outnumbered those given in public [theaters and] halls in the 1820s." (Hansen).

Schubert was born into such a family; they made music together in the home. His music reflected this, as much of it was "written for *Liebhaber*, lovers of music, amateurs...he showed relatively little interest in composing for virtuosos" according to Schubert scholar Martin Chusid. The "Schubertiades" in the 1820s continued this approach—social evenings of camaraderie and music making, often with Schubert at the piano. Conversely, he did not often associate with the great musicians of the day until late in his career. But in the 1820s, court violinist and virtuoso Ignaz Schuppanzigh instituted a series of string quartet concerts, focusing on Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Schubert's exposure to these musicians "resulted in a series of masterpieces" (Chusid)—the Piano Trios in B-flat and E-flat, the string quintet, and the last three string quartets.

Schubert finished both the A Minor and D Minor quartets in March 1824, and the G Major quartet in 1826. He originally planned to publish these three quartets together, as shown when he published the A Minor quartet as Op. 29 no. 1 "three quartets dedicated to my friend Ignaz Schuppanzigh." However, the A Minor work remains the only one of Schubert's 15 quartets published during his lifetime.

Today's D Minor quartet was published posthumously in 1831. And in typical Viennese fashion, Schuppanzigh and company gave the premier performance in a private residence, the home of Josef Barth, in 1826.

The opening theme of the **Sonata-form** first movement heralds both the power and beauty ahead. Schubert begins with a dramatic, fortissimo opening phrase, and contrasts it with a surprisingly tender and soft response. Schubert then withholds both this theme and the one immediately following from their expected position at the opening of the recap, saving variants of them for the wonderful coda that closes the movement. Schubert bases the G Minor **Theme and Variations** second movement on his song "Death and the Maiden. It is the "finest set of variations Schubert ever wrote" (Chusid), due in part to a dramatic surprise. Schubert's penchant for sophisticated modal contrast leads him to write a remarkably tender coda in G Major.

In similar fashion, Schubert opens the dramatic **Scherzo** in D Minor, making the sudden warmth of the modal shift to a D Major **Trio** all the more appealing. Schubert saves the dance-like spirits typically found in Minuet or Scherzo movements for the sprightly themes of the **Sonata-Rondo** finale, at times tinged with a folk-like Gypsy flavor. Schubert dedicated this quartet to Schuppanzigh. Beethoven's own commission for three quartets had languished for two years, but after the Schuppanzigh's premier of Schubert's A Minor quartet in 1824, Beethoven began to work on them in earnest. Given Schuppanzigh's comments about Schubert's mature quartets in A Minor and D Minor, the timing may not have been coincidence.

Program notes by Ed Wight