

Manchester Summer Chamber Music

Program Notes for August 26, 2011 at the Congregational Chapel

Credited as the “father of the string quartet”, we have **Joseph Haydn** to thank both for the concept of the modern string quartet, and for leaving us over sixty compositions for the genre. Haydn wrote his Op. 76 quartets between 1796-1797 to fulfill a commission by Count Joseph Erdödy. They are generally agreed to be the apex of Haydn’s string quartet output as symphonic scope and emotional breadth deepened Haydn’s already sophisticated and witty style.

With its slow harmonic progression and yet ever present rhythmic motion, the slow movement of Op. 76 No. 1 is like a sneak preview of the next mammoth of string quartet composition: Beethoven. Very few artists have ever contributed so much to a genre as Haydn did with the string quartet, ushering it in to existence and then modifying it until he passed off on in the form that later composers accepted and worked with virtually unchanged.

Zoltán Kodály is a name probably most familiar to us today as the founder of the Kodaly Method of music education which has been extremely influential in the theory and practice of general music education. Along with his pedagogical studies, however, Kodály was a renowned composer, sharing in the development of Hungarian national music with none other than Béla Bartók. Both Kodály and Bartók found their inspiration in the folk music of their country. For Bartók these melodies formed the basis for his explorations in to atonal contemporary art music, while Kodály kept closer to the vocal heart of the folk song and rarely left tonality completely. As Bartók himself said of the Serenade, “Despite unusual chord combinations and surprising originality [The Serenade] is still firmly based on tonality...The time will come when it will be realized that despite the atonal inclination of modern music, the possibilities of building new structures on key systems have not been exhausted.”

The first movement of the Serenade, written in 1919-1920 for the unusual combination of two violins and a viola, alternates between a march like regularity and a rhapsodic lyricism. As with much Hungarian music, you will notice a marked emphasis on the downbeats as in mimicry of the spoken Hungarian language with its emphasis on the first syllable.

The child of wealthy, ethnically Jewish, intellectual German family, **Felix Mendelssohn** grew up with a life of privilege in a large house in Berlin. Unlike so many composers, Mendelssohn did not hone his art while struggling through hunger or searching for patronage, and this very fact of his life’s comfort, combined with

anti-Semitism, kept Mendelssohn's depth of artistry from being fully recognized until fairly recently. It now seems fairly indisputable to apply the label of genius to someone who wrote his stunning String Octet at the ripe age of sixteen, and who had the musical insight to bring the music of J.S. Bach from academic obscurity in to popular fame.

Written in 1838, Op. 44 No. 1 is a vivacious piece that sparkles from the beginning to end. The last movement is an exuberant expression of joy inspired by the fiery Italian dance of the tarentella. As with all of Mendelssohn's works, his own skill as a violinist informs his compositions and gives the first violinist a work out!

Dmitri Shostakovich was one of the incredible composers that the USSR produced in spite of itself. Shostakovich enjoyed patronage under Trotsky, but had a complex relationship with Stalin, receiving both condemnation and accolades at different times throughout his life. Unlike his peers Prokofiev and Stravinsky, Shostakovich felt inextricably tied to his homeland and never emigrated despite his often harsh treatment. This love for Russia, contempt for Stalinist policy, but decision to maintain his loyalty to his country is likely at the root of Shostakovich's signature sardonic tone which is demonstrated in almost all of his music, even if it is often sandwiched between moments of agony and sorrow.

Most likely written in 1931, this Polka for string quartet predates Shostakovich's considerable string quartet output by almost a decade. It seems to be either a draft for or transcription of an excerpt from his ballet, *The Age of Gold*. It is paired with another short string quartet piece, *Elegy*, but tonight you will hear the trademark sardonic Shostakovich isolated from usual accompanying pathos as we perform the Polka by itself.

The Quintet is a "late" work of **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's** (31 qualifies as late when you only live to be 37), and arguably one of his most successful chamber works. Written in 1787, in between the *Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, Mozart was certainly at an expansive point of his career as is clear by the breadth of this work. It is unclear how Mozart came to the unprecedented decision to double the viola, instead of the cello as was the accepted practice for string quartets. It may be that his own preference for playing the viola influenced him in this direction. While he may have been the first to double the viola, he was certainly not the last, with composers such as Mendelssohn, Brahms, and Dvorak following his lead. Another composer that K. 515 seems to have influenced is Schubert, who wrote his own monumental string quintet (albeit with doubled cellos) also in C Major and with similar melodic contours and rhythmic interest.

More people have undoubtedly heard **Maurice Ravel's** Bolero than recognize the name of this French composer. He would not be pleased by the overshadowing popularity that his study in orchestration garnered, but it is a credit to his ability to play with color and texture which was perhaps the aspect of composition that he found most fascinating. The Duo Violin and Cello exemplifies this skill as Ravel conjures remarkable depth and variation from only two instruments.

Ravel was a child prodigy who developed into an acclaimed composer by his early adult life, and was considered the leading French composer after the death of Claude Debussy, in 1918. The first movement of this Sonata for Violin and Cello was composed for a commemoration of Debussy in 1920; it took Ravel another four years to complete the piece. Dedicated to the memory of Debussy, this piece honors some of the hallmarks of Debussy's late style, including the very sparseness of the music. The folk flair of the melody, however, is inspired by entirely different composer, Zoltan Kodaly, who had written his own Duo for Violin and Cello a number of years earlier. Despite his external influences, the combination of rustic folk melody, the strict formal composition, and the varied textures makes this piece unmistakably Ravel.

While **Franz Schubert** may owe his most enduring fame to the art song, he was also a masterful composer of the string quartet. Schubert was experienced not only as a composer, but also as a performer of string quartets, having been the violist in his family quartet as a youth. Both the angst and lyricism that are so prevalent in Schubert's songs are present in Quartettsatz, the lone movement of an unfinished quartet. It is considered the first of his mature works (composed at the age of 24), and as such is considerably more difficult than his previous eleven quartets that he had composed for the amateur musicians of his own family quartet. It is unclear why Schubert abandoned the piece after writing the complete first movement and a 41-measure fragment of a second movement, but regardless of his opinion of it, Quartettsatz has become a beloved staple of the quartet literature.

Jacques Duran on the Beach | for 2 violins and viola
Caroline Shaw, August 2011

Who is Jacques Duran? I'm not sure, since we've never actually met. He is a physics professor at the University of Paris and probably dines in nicer restaurants than I do. He is also the author of a physics textbook called "Sands, Powders, and Grains: An Introduction to the Physics of Granular Materials (Partially Ordered Systems)" -- a book I came across while trying to figure out what makes sand "sing".

The beach of Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts, is called "Singing Beach" -- named for those squeaking tones the dry sand makes when walking along in bare feet on a hot summer day. I remember that sound from August 2009, when I came to play at Manchester Summer Chamber Music and spent an afternoon by the water. So when Sage asked me to write a piece for the festival, I thought of that day and remembered that sound and feeling of the sand under my heels.

"Jacques Duran on the Beach" opens with a gesture of a single note growing to a sudden halt, with a little squeak of the bow as the friction of the horsehair on the string grows to a breaking point. It sounds like a miniature, delicate explosion, in reverse. While this gesture doesn't exactly mimic the behavior of the grains of sand under shear stress, it is my way, as a violinist, of translating that event through my instrument. These gestures soon multiply and spin out into a diatonic kaleidoscope until they collectively arrive at a new breaking point and the real heart of the piece appears in pizzicato. This wordless hymn is a nod to the rich singing tradition of the early settlers on the coast of Massachusetts.

The title is a play on the name of Philip Glass' famous opera, Einstein on the Beach. Thanks to Sage, Lorna, and Jonina for playing!