

PROGRAM NOTES

Blue Hill Concert Association
Chicago String Quartet
January 19, 2003

Felix Mendelssohn - Andante & Scherzo. Op. 81, Nos. 1 & 2

Though his primary instrument as a performer was the piano, Mendelssohn, even during his precocious youth, always enjoyed a special fluency and facility when writing for strings. It is worth noting in this regard that among his many extraordinary talents, Mendelssohn was also a highly gifted violinist. As for string quartets, Mendelssohn has left seven completed examples of the genre (one a student work without opus number). Picking up from late Beethoven and late Schubert, these beautiful works played an important role in keeping the classical string quartet tradition alive and passing it on to the new generation of Romantic composers, at least those with any interest in such a venerable form. In 1847, the last year of his short life, Mendelssohn wrote his final quartet, Op. 80 in F minor, a deeply felt expression of mourning for his beloved sister Fanny. At about the same time, he also seems to have started work on a new quartet, presumably in A Major, but only managed to complete the two middle movements, today's Andante & Scherzo. These were published posthumously as the Quartet Op. 81, with two earlier single movements by Mendelssohn tacked on, a Capriccio from 1843 and a Fugue from 1827. Naturally, this artificial grouping has nothing to do with Mendelssohn's intentions. The Andante consists of a simple, regularly pulsating folk-style melody in E Major, followed by five variations. The variations provide a gradual crescendo of rhythmic and emotional intensity, which finally subsides into a welcome and touching reminiscence of the original theme, combined with the first variation. The brief Scherzo is a fine example of Mendelssohn's trademark light-footed fairy music. It ends most suggestively with soft, tiptoeing notes and a pizzicato close.

Joaquin Turina - *La oracion del torero* (The Bullfighter's Prayer) Op. 34

Like Gershwin's Lullaby, Wolf's Italian Serenade or Puccini's *Crisantemi*, *La oracion del torero* is one of those delightful single movement works for string quartet that frequently shows up as an encore. There is no reason, however, why it should not proudly take its place in the main body of a concert program. Joaquin Turina was a French trained Spanish composer who achieved an international reputation during the first half of the 20th Century. As with his compatriots Albéniz, Granados, and Falla, he allowed a distinctly Spanish flavor and folk element to permeate much of his music. Turina composed a fairly large number of attractive chamber works, but the eight minute long *La oracion del torero* is by far the most popular. It was written in 1927 in an accessible, early 20th Century style, reminiscent of Debussy, and even Puccini. Turina contrasts the stillness and solemnity of the toreador with the colorful and lively setting of the bullfight arena. It is interesting to note that this work was originally conceived for plucked strings, written specifically for a virtuoso Spanish lute quartet. Fortunately, Turina assured its wider popularity by later arranging it for string quartet, and also for string orchestra.

Franz Joseph Haydn - Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 64, No 6

Well, now we go back in time to Franz Joseph Haydn, who more than any other composer established the string quartet as a specific genre with its own distinctive instrumental treatment and exacting compositional standards. Interestingly, of all Haydn's eighty-three string quartets, the one we will hear today was also performed in Blue Hill this summer, by the Borromeo Quartet during their stay at Kneisel Hall. Op. 64, No. 6 is one of the so-called "Tost" Quartets (dedicated to violinist and later merchant Johann Tost), and was composed in 1790 during the period when Haydn was finally ending his nearly thirty year gig with the Esterhazy family, and preparing to embark on his momentous first trip to London. Haydn was 58 years old and in his musical prime.

The gentle, sonorous, essentially monothematic first movement features rich counterpoint in the first half of the development section. Then three of the instruments play catch with a dotted rhythm fragment derived from the main theme, while the second violin keeps up a strikingly insistent staccato 8th note accompaniment. When the recapitulation arrives, it is at first in the wrong key; only gradually does it find its way back to E-flat. The Andante movement is in ABA form, the outer sections offering serene, flowing counterpoint, while the minor key middle section gets a bit more tempestuous as the first violin soars rhapsodically over a steady pulse of repeated 16th notes in the other parts. The trio of the Allegretto minuet has a sweetly Viennese lilt. Haydn clearly anticipated the popular appeal of this landler-style section, for he noted in his manuscript that it would be permissible to repeat the entire trio if desired. The witty Presto Finale at last brings a fast tempo to this otherwise quite moderately paced quartet. A frisky, rhythmically exciting tune featuring staccato repeated notes and sudden dynamic shifts provides the material for an invigorating rondo.

Johannes Brahms - Quartet in A minor, Op. 51, No. 2

Refreshed by our intermission, we now settle down to the serious business of Brahms's A minor Quartet. This is a relatively long work, lasting about 35 minutes, all four movements of which are cast in the minor mode (and start in the same A minor key). With its preponderance of moderato tempos, Op. 51, No. 2 inhabits a characteristically Brahmsian atmosphere combining moodiness with mellowness.

When he was only twenty and just starting his career, Brahms was heralded by Schumann as the long awaited heir to Beethoven's musical legacy. Brahms, grateful, but also somewhat cowed, took this weighty responsibility very much to heart. For years he put off any public forays into the two genres which would lead most directly to comparisons with Beethoven: the symphony and the string quartet. Finally, though, with the publication of the two quartets of Op. 51 in 1873, Brahms, now forty, was prepared to go head to head with the older master. Brahms had already composed many trial string quartets, but he carefully destroyed all these earlier efforts.

It is helpful to consider the A minor Quartet in the context of its companion - Op. 51, No. 1 in heroic, Beethovenian C minor. Here, Brahms directly confronts his idol with an electric first movement tense with drama and struggle. Yes, both quartets are cast in minor, but the relative gentleness, and even occasional sweetness, of today's offering provide an important contrast. Also, "if Beethoven's shadow looms behind the C minor Quartet, the spirit of Bach seems to have taken a hand in the A minor, which is unusually rich in examples of contrapuntal ingenuity" (Peter Latham).

Enough space remains to only briefly highlight some of the bounty contained in the individual movements. The opening *Allegro non troppo* is blessed by a sweetly lilting subordinate theme in major, somewhat troubled, perhaps, by its busy accompaniment. The development section offers contrapuntal marvels and a disguised start to the recapitulation. The rich complexity of rhythm in the constantly accelerating coda makes this potentially exciting ending a real challenge to play effectively. The lyrical and sonorous slow movement is twice briefly interrupted by a loud, dramatic canon, pitting the first violin against the cello, while almost orchestral tremolos sound in the middle parts. The third movement offers us a ghostly and antique sounding minuet, contrasted with a scherzo-style *Allegretto vivace* trio - in major and in duple meter. With the Finale, Brahms rewards our patience and attention by offering us a lively and fiery sonata rondo in his best Hungarian “Gypsy” manner.

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