

Notes on the Program

Thursday, August 15, 2019

By Tim Summers

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Clarinet Quintet in A Major, K. 581 (1789)

A quality of uncanny simplicity pervades Mozart's Clarinet Quintet, K. 581. Perhaps this feeling arises from the slight hierarchical division between the clarinet and the strings, which simplifies its texture; perhaps it comes from the fleet smoothness of figuration for clarinet; perhaps it comes from a rising Magic Flute aesthetic in the composer; or perhaps it's the pure pentatonic feel at the opening. The quintet is, in any case, extraordinary for being so much more than simple. The first movement seems to grow from a bare juxtaposition of notes in the strings, which the clarinet unlocks with a filigreed arpeggio. A great deal of the movement comes from this clarinet figure, which flows through the strings throughout the middle section. The second movement is a pure aria for clarinet, with muted strings — again with watery figuration. The third movement seems at first to be a straightforward minuet – and for the most part it is – but the first Trio section, with its rhythmic oddity and beat displacement, can give a listener a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the compositional expertise which makes the quintet tick. By the last movement, it is back to strange simplicity, in a set of variations of the 'Twinkle, Twinkle little star' type.

Mozart completed his clarinet quintet in late September, 1789. It was written for the clarinetist Anton Stadler, for whom Mozart also wrote his Clarinet Concerto in 1791. He was probably also working on *Così fan tutte* at the time, and the 'Prussian' string quartets.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Sonata for Two Violins in C Major, Op. 56 (1932)

Where did the twentieth century go? There were times, within living memory, when all seemed to hinge on bookish ideologies, when over-determined systems and slogans of social distribution would define friendships, careers, artistic styles, political borders, and even the survival of populations. And where are they now, these ideas poured in concrete? Sergei Prokofiev, wandering from the tumult of Tsarist/Revolutionary Moscow to the surprises of Paris and San Francisco, witnessed a great deal of it. There were times when he was revolutionary, and times when he was counter-revolutionary. And all he could do was make music — Modern music, in the now-archaic sense of that word.

Prokofiev wrote two violin concertos, each from a different side of the early 20th century modern. The first violin concerto (premiered in Paris in 1923), is full of lyric fantasy and Fabergé ornament; the second violin concerto leans toward People-oriented Russian realism — the ‘new simplicity’, as it was then called. Between these large works — having perhaps stolen its soloists — sits the *Sonata for Two Violins*, Op. 56. This little sonata seems to draw from a great deal of Prokofiev’s compositional resources, even with its limited instrumentation. There are proto-military *Kijé*-esque moments; there are moments reminiscent of socialist anthems; there are moments of fairy-tale distance; there are moments of silent-movie humor; there are moments of pure virtuosity; there are moments of *Romeo and Juliet*. There are very sharp shadows of Prokofiev in this slim work.

Ideology and history notwithstanding, almost no music for two violins can escape being folk music. It is too portable and too dependent on fiddle traditions of one stripe or another to be deadly serious. But this is a beautiful fact for the people who gather around the *Sonata for Two Violins*. The slim, winding smoke of two well-used violins contains so much music that need not seek its meanings in the experience of a century or a biography. It is rather the experience of a moment, guided by two near-weightless instruments at play, which gives delights that are not merely Modern. They are the delights of the moments Prokofiev managed to conjure, and continues to conjure, from almost nothing.

Robert Schumann (1839-1856)

Piano Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 47 (1842)

For Robert Schumann, 1842 was the ‘chamber music year’. After writing mostly for piano until 1839, and then mostly for voice in the year 1840, Schumann began to extend his ambitions toward larger forces and forms. So in 1841 he wrote two symphonies, and in 1842 (with more symphonies in mind), Schumann spent a year studying counterpoint and exploring the public/private genre of chamber music. That year, a fruitful though rather turbulent time at the Schumann/Wieck household, Robert Schumann composed three String Quartets, the Piano Quintet, the *Phantasiestücke*, and the Piano Quartet, Op. 47. All these chamber works have the curious quality of seeming simultaneously grand and intimate — something in-between a song and symphony, just as his biography would suggest — and they were all Romantic in the purest sense that the word can be meant.

The Piano Quartet and Piano Quintet are curious to consider as a matched pair: one is larger, one smaller; one tends toward the public, one tends toward the private. They also both play on the inward and the outward within themselves: whereas the Piano

Quintet strikes a clear balance between the epic and the lyric, the Piano Quartet finds its mood between something one might merely call ‘personal’ and something one might cheerfully call ‘sentimental’. The Romantic depths of the Piano Quartet are especially clear in its third movement, whose theme dissolves through such a sequence of keys that the cello must be tuned downward (in real time) to make room for a magic resolution at its end. Along similar lines, one might compare the noble choral writing in the outer movements with a third movement scherzo that seems to disappear into a ghost-story.

There’s often something almost frustrating about Schumann — one can feel the need for study, the need for Romantic genius, the need for release, perhaps even the (unmet) need for fame. And sometimes his tools can seem a bit rough (for example, the simple re-doubling of melodies to make them buzzily exciting can be almost silly. ‘No wonder he was studying counterpoint’, you might think). But then, so often, there will come some surprise resolution, some compositional tear or revelation, that will make the whole thing make sense, as though he (and we) had been looking for something else anyway. The tools that seemed rough a minute before seem only to have been a cage; and Schumann, in the meantime, will have found some way out that made it all not only worthwhile, but something one is grateful to have heard and followed in every detail.