

Notes on the Program

Thursday, August 8, 2019

Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959)

Three Madrigals for Violin and Viola, H. 313 (1947)

In reading about the life Bohuslav Martinů, one inevitably meets the phrase 'incorrigible negligence', which was used as grounds for his expulsion from the conservatory in Prague. But this description only suits his relationship to life in school. Outside of his academic career, he was prolific, focused, cosmopolitan, experimental, and successful. As both composer and citizen of the world, he traveled bravely through the 20th century.

Martinů worked rather quietly as a composer and violinist in Prague from 1906 to 1923, but decided then to go to Paris. There he found an experimental musical culture heavily under the influence of Stravinsky and avant-gardists of all stripes. He remained in Paris until 1938, when he fled Paris for the United States. (The day after he left, his Prague apartment was raided by the Gestapo.) In the United States, he did well, falling in remarkably easily with the Tanglewood circle of musicians on the East Coast. Serge Koussevitsky performed his symphonies in Boston; Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge championed his chamber music. He taught at Princeton, Curtis and the Mannes College of Music in New York. (One of his students at Mannes was Burt Bacharach.)

The Three Madrigals were inspired by a performance of Mozart's Duos for violin and viola by Joseph and Lilian Fuchs. The name 'Madrigals' is not so clear a description of the tone of the three pieces, generally speaking — they seem to derive most of their energy and style from Czech folk idioms. 'Madrigals' is perhaps a loose reference to the uneven (text-based) phrase lengths which Martinů admired in early English song. The equal writing and surprisingly playful homophonic writing come together beautifully on the two sibling instruments.

—Tim Summers

Gabriela Lena Frank (b. 1972)

***Hilos* for Clarinet, Violin, Cello, and Piano (2010)**

Hilos (*Threads*, 2010), written for the ALIAS Chamber Ensemble, is scored for clarinet, violin, cello and piano. Alluding to the beauty of Peruvian textiles, both in their construction and in their pictorial content of everyday life, the short movements of *Hilos* are a kind of Peruvian "pictures at an exhibition." Players are mixed and matched in various combinations, and draw on a myriad of sounds evocative of indigenous music. These include fanciful pizzicatos and widely-spaced tremolos

suggesting guitar-like instruments, strong attacks and surging releases suggesting zampona panpipes and quena flutes, glissandi and scratch tones suggesting vocal coloristic effects, and so forth. The movements are:

1. Canto del Altiplano (Songs of the Highlands): A bold piano opening of tremolos sets up rhapsodic lines decorated with the strong attacks and releases one would hear in highland wind instruments.
2. Zapatos de Chincha (Shoes of Chincha): This light-footed movement is inspired by Chincha, a southern coastal town known for its afro-peruano music and dance (including a unique brand of tap). The cello part is especially reminiscent of the cajon, a wooden box that percussionists sit on and strike with hands and feet, extracting a remarkable array of sounds and rhythms.
3. Charanguista Viejo (Old Charango Player): The charango, a ukulele-like instrument traditionally constructed with an armadillo shell, is evoked through tight broken chords and odd tremolos in the piano part alongside quick pizzicato notes in the violin. The violin also has a highly emotional melody line decoration with hints of scratch tones to convey the sounds of an old man's voice as he accompanies himself singing.
4. Danza de los Diablos (Devil Dance): A tribute to the devil dances of the southern Puno regions of Peru, this movement features "stompy" rhythms, quick dissonant grace notes and a general boldness of spirit.
5. Zumballyu (Spinning Top): A musical depiction of a popular children's toy in Quechua Indian culture.
6. Juegos (Games): A romp inspired by the teasing games that children play.
7. Yaravillosa: A play on the words "maraviollosa" (marvelous) and "yaravi" (an ancient melancholy Inca song), this movement especially draws on glissandi, tremolo, and surges to evoke typical vocal performance practices.
8. Bombines (Bowler Hats): A humorous dance in homage to the ubiquitous bowler hats worn by mountain women. The "karnavalito" rhythm punctuates throughout.

—Gabriela Lena Frank

Ernő Dohnányi (1877-1960)

Piano Quintet No. 1 in C minor (1895)

Although their musical styles are utterly different — the difference of a generation, though they were born only four years apart — the relationship between Ernő Dohnányi and the younger Béla Bartók was quite close. Bartók, who had spent a huge amount of time and energy collecting Hungarian folk music, said "you can sum up Hungarian music in one word, 'Dohnányi'." (However much he believed it, it was a nice thing to say.) And Dohnányi, from his more conventional musical standpoint, not

only defended but promoted the music of the Hungarian folk-modern innovators, especially Bartók and Kodály (who needed both promotion and defense). Dohnányi was, in his way, conservative, but he was extraordinarily generous in his outlook and output.

Amidst his career as a virtuoso pianist, conservatory director, and composer, Dohnányi led a remarkable and strange life. His career spanned both world wars, and his non-communist political outlook got him into trouble throughout his life. Most significantly, in 1946 he was purged from his role as director of the conservatory in Budapest for being a Nazi — which (it bears repeating if not elaboration in this space) he absolutely was not. He then took a position at Florida State University in Tallahassee, which he held until he died in 1960.

The Piano Quintet, Dohnányi's first published work, was recognized and promoted by the elderly Johannes Brahms in Vienna. Dohnányi's style is sometimes compared to Brahms', and it makes sense that Brahms should have admired this new work. But Dohnányi's style is far more ebullient than that of Brahms; and though he writes in a conservative style for the 20th century, Dohnányi is liberal with gifts for an audience.

Dohnányi's life also bears some comparison to Rachmaninoff, in that both were very-late-Romantic pianist-composers. But the Hungarian's techniques are much more refined and specific, and they are certainly more suited to chamber music. There is some danger of the sentimentally-Romantic in his music, but he worked with a sure, light touch, and a great deal of humor — even in this his first opus, which he wrote when he was in his late teens. It is not only a work full of promise; it is a promise delivered.

—Tim Summers