

Notes on the Programs  
Wednesday, July 22, 2009  
Market Square Church

**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**  
**String Quartet in A Major, Op. 18, No. 5**

While categories will never fully explain Beethoven, they remain a way of dealing with his greatness and his elusiveness. The sixteen string quartets of Beethoven's monumental canon span thirty-six of his fifty-seven years and represent, perhaps better than any other of his works, the revered Early, Middle and Late periods of his compositional life. These so-called "periods" are not mere academic divisions but rather a painful and glorious arc of Beethoven's work. So, too, do they encompass his encroaching deafness from its first awareness to its final and awful silence.

The six quartets of Op. 18, begun in 1798 when Beethoven was twenty-eight and completed two years later, represent the Early Period. Joseph Kerman warns us of the over simplicity of Count Waldstein's statement to Beethoven that he would "receive Mozart's spirit from Haydn's hands," but still these quartets represent a complete mastery of Classical form and style in string quartet writing as begun by Haydn and developed by Mozart. Even their grouping into six represents a bow to the earlier masters.

Much has been said of Beethoven's imitation of Mozart in the Op. 18, No. 5 Quartet. Perhaps too much. It is recorded history that Beethoven so admired Mozart's fifth quartet of his six dedicated to Haydn (K. 564) that he modeled his own A Major Quartet after it. As he poured over Mozart's score and even copied out the last two movements, Beethoven exclaimed, "That's what I call a work! In it, Mozart was telling the world: Look what I could create if the time were right!" Yet, as Joseph Kerman observes, F. Daniel Mason's comment that Beethoven was "a tyro evidently at times imitating the finished practitioner," is unwarranted. Kerman takes a different view when he says, "I take this Mozart imitation as the most dramatic sign of his uncertainty and sense of disruption at this particular stage of the quartet project." The "uncertainty" and "disruption" of which Kerman speaks might be better viewed as Beethoven's terror of his own creative powers as he moved towards the Middle and Late quartets—the proverbial look before you leap or calm before the storm, if you will. Never in the Op. 18, No. 5 Quartet does one sense uncertainty or disruption in Beethoven's path to genius.

The accusations of imitation are based more on form than substance. Like Mozart, Beethoven chose to reverse the usual order of the second and third movements, putting the Menuetto with its remarkable Trio section before the Andante with its even more remarkable set of variations. The logic of this is beyond mere imitation since he breaks tradition by giving the most weight of the quartet to the Andante movement. Further similarities to Mozart occur in the fifth variation of the Andante when Beethoven's "circus music" is compared to Mozart's "drum music" in the K. 564 Quartet. The final Allegro is undeniably Mozartean in its sudden changes of tempo and style. The nervous agitation of the movement, however, seems pure Beethoven, as do the sonorities of the whole quartet.

**Leone Sinigaglia (1868-1944)**  
**Twelve Variations on a Theme of Schubert, Op. 19 for Oboe and Piano**

Italian-born Leone Sinigaglia moved to Prague in 1894 where he worked with Dvořák who furthered his interest in folk music but also taught him to infuse his song arrangements with Classical technique. In 1894 he went to Vienna and fell under the shadow of Brahms. It was this influence that encouraged his composition of "pure" music and produced such works as his Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 20 and the Twelve Variations on a Theme of Schubert, Op. 19 of 1898, dedicated to his Viennese teacher, Eusebius Mandyczewski.

With the Variations, Sinigaglia joins the host of composers enamored by Schubert's themes and his superb handling of the demanding variation form. For his set, Sinigaglia was inspired by Schubert's song, "Heidenröslein," the setting of a poem by Goethe that tells the touching tale of a little boy who insists on plucking a rose that resists being torn from its stem.

As the title and form themselves imply, the Variations are an exercise in variety from the simple statement of the theme in the first to the sheer fun of the last. In between are moments of contemplation and shifting moods of light and dark. Not absent from the Variations are virtuosic demands made on both players. Note, for example, the staccato piano part in the fifth Variation. The ninth Variation is given to the piano while the oboe takes center stage with a haunting melody in the tenth. Balance returns before both instruments take the final romp of the last variation.

Sinigaglia's tragic death from a heart attack came at the moment of his arrest as a Jew by Nazi police who occupied his native Turin in 1944. Despite his age, he was to be sent to a labor camp in Germany.

### **Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)**

#### **Quintet for Piano and Strings in G Minor, Op. 57**

The changing face of Soviet policy towards art at first encouraged Shostakovich's style, later condemned it, and everywhere misunderstood it. Threatened with extinction by Stalin in 1936 for his opera *Lady Macbeth at Mtsensk*, Shostakovich was in turn awarded the Stalin Prize in 1940 (and \$25,000) for his Piano Quintet.

There is always danger of artistic compromise when politics toys with art. Shostakovich solved the problem by retreating to the inner sanctum of his genius and expressing it in chamber music which is, for the most part, more abstract and therefore less subject to political controversy. As the Nazis did not comprehend the irony of the concentration camp performance of Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* before five thousand prisoners in 1941, so did the Stalinists miss the impact of Shostakovich's fifteen string quartets, particularly No. 8 and No. 15. The musical appeal of the Piano Quintet is so great that it eluded or transcended, as the case may be, any political opinion and was therefore labeled politically correct despite its dark implications and the personal courage demanded to write it.

A solemn opening introduced by the piano alone gives way to a faster section but solemnity returns before the movement ends. A powerful Fugue follows that displays Shostakovich's full compositional powers in a form he revered and explored so magnificently in his Twenty-four Preludes and Fugues for piano. The folk-like subject is announced by the violin alone and then works its way through the other instruments with many permutations. A fiery Scherzo follows containing dissonances meant to disturb and a contrasting dance-like middle section. It smacks of a joke at which no one laughs. The following Intermezzo combines lyricism and a staccato bass line in an exploration of the five instruments' color ranges. The piano foreshadows the fifth movement that continues without interruption. Here Shostakovich employs a clown theme traditionally used in Russian circuses. While there is a certain lyricism to the movement, the dark underpinnings remain, particularly in the march-like rhythms.

The Quintet was received with such enthusiasm in Moscow on November 23, 1940, that the performers were forced to repeat the *Scherzo* and *Finale*, a practice often followed today should the audience demand it.

© 2009 Lucy Miller Murray

*Lucy Miller Murray is Founder of Market Square Concerts and served as director of the series from 1982 to 2009. Her book, Adams to Zemlinsky: A Friendly Guide to Chamber Music, was published by Concert Artists Guild of New York and is available at amazon.com.*