

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM
Saturday, July 25, 8 PM
Glen Allen Mill

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
String Quartet in C Minor, Op. 18, No. 4

Perusing even a portion of the lavish writing on Beethoven's string quartets and, in particular, the C Minor quartet, one is struck by the number of disagreements among the impressive entries. For example, in his liner notes accompanying the Alban Berg Quartet recording of Op. 18, No 4, Bernard Jacobson refers to the work as "less assured stylistically" than the second and sixth quartets of the opus. On the other hand, Joseph de Marleave (*Beethoven Quartets*) calls it "the most polished work of Op. 18 and one of the most advanced in style of Beethoven's early manner."

Jacobson weakens his own argument—but increases our interest—by discussing the "role reversal" Beethoven imposes on the two inner movements of the work. In other words, the scherzo takes on more the character of the dance movement and vice versa, an idea which was to fascinate Beethoven for years.

While Jacobson is characteristically sour on the outer movements of the work, calling them "less exploratory," Marleave says, "the first allegro and the finale alone are enough to lift (the quartet) to the high level of achievement it as a whole attains." Jacobson barely mentions the ominous and riveting opening of the first movement that is so artfully repeated in the third movement. He writes off the delicious Gypsy rondo as lacking the sparkle of Haydn and Brahms. About this last movement, he is most contentious: "...the Prestissimo coda provides a suitably tear away conclusion in the hands of a quartet willing to dispense with caution."

Joseph Kerman, in his book on the Beethoven quartets, enters the fray by calling the C Minor Quartet "exceptional, by its weakness, in the entire corpus of the Beethoven quartets." One must remember, however, to be the weakest among Beethoven's quartets is still to be one of the strongest among *all* quartets.

This disagreement, of course, invites personal opinion differing from those of these esteemed critics. In fact, among listeners, the C Minor Quartet is probably the most beloved of the six quartets of Op. 18, Beethoven's earliest essay in that form, published in 1801 as he was first admitting to his deafness. It also marks an early exploration of C minor, the key in which Beethoven would write some of his greatest works.

Charles Martin Loeffler (1861-1935)
Two Rhapsodies: L'Étang (The Pool); La Cornemuse (The Bagpipe)

Although Loeffler claimed Alsatian birth, Helen Knight's 1993 biography reveals that he was born in Germany. His denial of German origins was based on his resentment concerning his father's death when he was imprisoned by Prussian authorities because of his liberal ideals. From that point on, Loeffler claimed to be French both politically and in his musical tastes. After violin studies in Berlin with Joseph Joachim, he continued his education in France in violin and, notably, in composition with Ernest Guiraud, the teacher of Debussy. In 1881, Loeffler immigrated to America where he spent the rest of his life deeply involved in American musical affairs. He played briefly in the New York Symphony Orchestra under Leopold Damrosch and then served for twenty-one years as assistant concert master of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which premiered many of his symphonic works. He retired from the BSO in 1903 and concentrated on composing. During all of these years, he maintained a close and complicated relationship with the great patroness of the arts, Isabella Stewart Gardner. Her many gifts to him

included a Stradavarius violin and his portrait painted by John Singer Sargeant. One of his gifts to her was a viola d'amore now on display in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. As Sara Lambert Bloom suggests in her lavish and wonderful notes that accompany Robert Bloom's recording of the Rhapsodies, Loeffler may have used that instrument for performances of the works.

Ms. Bloom also quotes *The New York Herald Tribune* on Loeffler's death in 1935: "There will not be another like him. The spiritual seed is gone. Loeffler's music was perhaps the final efflorescence of a creative epoch when composers had not yet become ashamed of being poets engrossed in immemorial things—in the magic and mystery of the world, in sorrow and destiny, death and faith, in man's long dream of beauty and felicity and peace, in all those convictions and experiences that issue from regions deeper than the mind."

Like Debussy, Loeffler was influenced by the French Symbolist poets Verlaine and Baudelaire. The *Two Rhapsodies* were originally vocal settings of two poems by Maurice Rollinat (1853-1903), a later disciple of the Symbolists drawn to dark and death-haunted subjects as clearly exemplified in his poems *L'Etang* (The Pool) and *La Corneuse* (The Bagpipe).

With *L'Etang* we are immediately thrust into a wash of emotion suggesting the gloom of Rollinat's poem but not limited to that. There are flashes of light and even a scherzo-like mood before a return to the opening theme. Yet just before that return, there is a reference to the *Dies Irae* played *sul ponticello* (close to the bridge) by the viola. Most noticeable in *L'Etang* is the exquisite and complex balance of instruments: The viola, often assigned to accompaniment, plays a spectacular soloistic role; The piano part is no less than concerto-like; and the oboe continuously sings forth its central song.

Most evident in *La Corneuse* is the use of modal scales, so favored by Debussy and Ravel, which lend an exotic feeling to the piece. Here, indeed, we have Loeffler the mystic. The oboe, suggesting the bagpipe, is rich with musical ornaments ("fiotures"). The piano is forcefully dramatic and virtuosic.

As Sara Lambert Bloom bravely points out, not everyone is enamored with the Rhapsodies. In 1964, Arno Safran of the *Princeton Packet* called them "meandering exercises in Brahmsian Impressionism." The date of that opinion explains the reviewer's ire towards anything suggesting Late Romanticism. Yet it also suggests Loeffler's amazing accomplishment in the Rhapsodies. He combined the best of two past musical worlds, the Romantic and the Impressionistic, and put them forth in his own voice. That many new modern voices were emerging at the time may be a partial explanation of the relative obscurity of the Rhapsodies. How lucky we are to hear them now!

L'Etang was dedicated to the memory of the French painter Leon Pourteau (1872-1898) and *La Corneuse* to George Longy, the acclaimed first oboist of the Boston Symphony.

Ernest Chausson (1855-1899)

Concerto for Violin, Piano and String Quartet in D Major, Op. 21

A certain sadness pervaded Chausson's peaceful and prosperous life and reveals itself in much of his music including the Concerto for Piano, Violin and String Quartet. The source of the sadness was probably one all too common among creative people born in comfortable circumstances. A strong father discouraged the study of music, and it was only after Chausson received two law degrees that he turned to music. Despite his studies with Massenet and Franck and his own remarkable output, he always felt the amateur, although the splendid Concerto for Piano, Violin and String Quartet belies that notion. Chausson died an untimely death in a cycling accident at the age of forty-four.

The work comes from 1889-91 during Chausson's second of three compositional periods when he was Secretary of the renowned Société Nationale de Musique founded in 1871 by Saint-Saëns, Bussine, Franck, and Castillon. The period was dominated by large-scale dramatic works, which perhaps explains the grand scale of this piece of chamber music. Essentially a sextet, the work is referred to variously as *concerto* and *concertare*. Those who would argue for the *concertare* label (literally to compete side by

side) would do so because of its adherence to the idea of an equal distribution of virtuosic and soloistic demands among the piano, violin, and string quartet—a multiple concerto, if you will, rather than a symphony with solo parts.

The first statement of the opening theme accounts for the tempo marking *Décidé*. That theme is restated in a calmer, less decided way, and then again with great animation. A lovely pastoral feeling takes over in the second movement *Sicilienne* with its bow to Bach. The third movement *Grave* is almost desolate in nature. It may have even given rise to writer Jean Gallois's comment concerning the "certain indefinable oppressiveness in Chausson's world of heightened post-Romanticism." Better, however, to sense it than define it. A theme from the first movement is reintroduced into the final movement, but this time with great animation by all instruments. This theme is constantly developed in the manner suggested by Brahms in his concept of the "developing variation," a notion that melodic (horizontal) and harmonic (vertical) material could be unified and that one musical idea evolves into another and continues to develop throughout the work rather than in an isolated "development section."

The Concerto for Piano, Violin, and String Quartet is considered one of Chausson's finest works and a unique composition in the chamber music repertoire. It was dedicated to the great Belgian violinist, conductor, and composer, Eugène Ysaÿe, who participated in its first performance on March 4, 1892 in Brussels.

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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.