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Schumann, String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 41, No. 1

During his most productive periods, Robert Schumann (1810-1856) would concentrate on a single musical medium over an extended time. For example, we are acquainted with his “song year” (1840) and his “symphony year” (1841). During his “chamber music years” (1842-43), Schumann composed several works, including the three string quartets of Op. 41. In a burst of enthusiasm, he wrote all three quartets in less than two weeks.

As was his habit before embarking on a new medium, Schumann immersed himself in the music of that medium which Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven had composed. Apparently, J.S. Bach was also on his mind as he began the A Minor Quartet, for the *Introduzione* in the home key is a contrapuntal essay opening with smooth canonic entrances by the instruments in order. The flowing *Allegro* itself begins and ends in the “wrong” key of F major. However, this type of bifocal harmony was intentional with Schumann, as the first song of *Dichterliebe* had demonstrated a year earlier.

Schumann dedicated the entire Opus 41 to Mendelssohn, and the Scherzo has some of the *presto* effervescence we associate with Mendelssohn. However, the main section projects the kind of galloping character found in some of Schumann’s piano pieces. The Trio section, in the major mode and marked *Intermezzo*, changes to a more genteel character.

The *Adagio* movement is an extensive, impassioned Song Without Words. In fact, some of this music (in particular, the arpeggios) sounds like Schumann may have conceived it first for the piano.

The main theme of the finale introduces a spiky gesture that permeates much of the remainder of the movement. The transition is cut from that cloth as is the counterpoint to the second theme. In the course of this

modified sonata form, there is ample emphasis on major mode. However, from the minor, the coda plunges suddenly and unexpectedly into A major, presenting at the same time an altogether new theme. The new material is quickly cast aside in favor the original spiky idea, which moves the work to its final conclusion.

Berg, String Quartet, Op. 3

Alban Berg (1885-1935) was a member of the “Second Viennese School” of composers (the First having consisted of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven). The Second also numbered three: Berg, Anton Webern, and the teacher of the other two, Arnold Schoenberg. Berg had shown distinctive talent for the piano and for composition from an early age, composing about 80 songs and other works from the ages of 15-19. He then began a six-year period of study with Schoenberg, who introduced him to the concept of free atonality (music without a key).

The String Quartet was Berg’s graduation piece, so to speak — the first in which he found his own idiom and techniques without Schoenberg’s tutelage. The work was premiered in 1911, but unsuccessfully. It was not until well after World War I (1914-1918) that the String Quartet received another performance. In 1923, Webern used his influence to place the work on a program of the Salzburg Music Festival of that year. It was beautifully performed received enthusiastically by the audience. The director of Universal Edition (who had turned down Berg’s Piano Sonata), eagerly asked Berg to allow his firm to publish the String Quartet.

According to the composer’s later student, Theodor W. Adorno, “Berg liked to say that he wrote the String Quartet, Op. 3, in defiance, after a publishing firm turned down the Piano Sonata.” The mood of defiance is more apparent in the second movement than the first. However, we may hear at the beginning and end of the first an attitude of bold self-assertion.

In between, we can hear a musical reflection of two novel scientific developments of that time. Atomic theory is one. Instead of complete themes or full-blown musical motives, Berg works with musical “atoms” — tiny melodic ideas woven into a multi-part fabric, worked, re-worked, developed, restated, etc. These he treats in more or less traditional fashion by varying and developing.

The other is the exploration of the human subconscious. We know that Berg was very interested in the writings of his fellow Viennese, Sigmund Freud. Was Berg expressing some of the dark, troubled passages of the mind in the passages of his music? These ideas became outwardly expressed musically in his two operas, *Wozzeck* (1921) and *Lulu* (1935). Might we consider the String Quartet to be Berg’s early study in psychological music?

Dvořák, String Quartet in C Major, Op. 61

With the premiere of the Slavonic Dances in 1878 came instant recognition for Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904). Immediately, musical Europe flooded him with requests for new works tinged with Slavonic flavor. This demand led to an entire period of composition between 1878 and 1890 in which native elements predominated. During those years, Dvorak composed no fewer than nine pieces of chamber music. Most of these contain numerous “Czech” themes and dance rhythms in keeping with what the public expected. (Otakar Šourek)

The C Major Quartet, however, is notable for *not* containing many of these cultural references — at least not in the first two movements. Completed in November 1881, the quartet was Dvořák’s response to a commission from the Hellmesberger Quartet, presumably arranged by Brahms. This ensemble held a leading position in the music of Vienna, where the long shadows of Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven still loomed. Because the quartet would premiere in Vienna, Dvořák purposely cast the music in an extremely Classical style,

owing much of its inspiration to the string quartets of Beethoven. Biographer Karel Hoffmeister effusively asserts:

So far, Dvořák has led us through his native land . . . [but] here he spreads his wings and soars in bold flight up to the classic sun — to Beethoven’s ideal beauty. It seems as though he would shut out all vision of his own land.

If folkloric color is at first hidden in the C Major Quartet, harmonic color is not. The first movement in particular is a tour of some unexpectedly remote regions. In form, the movement *loosely* follows the classic sonata-form model. However, Dvořák starts his second theme in the unusual key of E-flat major, then veers to the more conventional key of G major. The development section does not lead back to the principal theme as expected, but to a subordinate theme. The principal theme appears in A major (perhaps a counterpart to the E-flat major passage in the exposition) then down to E major. When, in the coda, C major is finally reestablished, Dvořák obscures it with an unexpected harmonic excursion.

The *Poco adagio* is one of Dvořák’s more romantic, melodically conceived movements. The focus on the two violins in dialogue during the opening sets the tone for this intimate, songlike essay. The middle section in a new key presents a new theme, one perhaps more melancholy than the first. A return to the first theme (now developed further) and a brief allusion to the second bring the movement to a dreamy close.

As the main theme of the Scherzo, Dvořák transforms the main theme of the first movement. In doing so, he seemingly cannot resist giving us a glimpse of his Czech colors. Experts on Czech music tell us that this theme is also related to both his own cello Polonaise of 1879 and a theme from Smetana’s opera *The Secret* (1878). Through the spirit and colorful harmonies of the Trio, the composer delves even deeper into Bohemian culture.

By now, Dvořák the Czech is thoroughly warmed up, and for the quartet’s sonata-rondo finale, he unabashedly gives us his best. His “best” consists of shaping and balancing the movement according to the highest Beethovenian principles, while infusing it with energetic Slavonic feeling. The first movement theme,

now something of a motto, is transformed yet again into what John Clapham characterizes as “a skittish Slavonic tune in 2/4.” In a brief respite, the first violin presents a reflective, lovely cadenza just before the jubilant, powerful conclusion.