

Prazak String Quartet

November 9th, 2008

Haydn, Quartet in D Major, Op. 50, No. 6 (“The Frog”)

In April 1787, Joseph Haydn (1733-1809) received a letter from Friedrich Wilhelm II, King of Prussia. The letter read, in part,

There is no doubt that His Majesty has always appreciated Herr Kapellmeister Haydn’s works To provide concrete assurance of the same, he sends him the enclosed ring as a mark of His Majesty’s satisfaction and of the favor in which he holds him.

The ring was a token of gratitude for receiving a group of six symphonies (nos. 82-87). The King was a noted musical amateur (a cellist) and his interest in Haydn caused the composer to write and dedicate to him the set of six string quartets that became Op. 50.

The first movement of the D Major quartet typifies the sonata forms of the entire set, since it is monothematic. Instead of a distinctly different second theme, the first theme, stated initially by the first violin, is restated in a new key. This lends unity to the movement but presents some interesting development problems to the composer. Haydn’s solutions show both imagination and economy of means.

Haydn’s “Prussian” quartets do not feature or make demands on the cello to the extent of Mozart’s three “Prussian” works, but Haydn is effective when he does spotlight this instrument. The heartfelt Poco adagio is a particularly good example. It is based on a single theme heard two ways: first in a minor key and then in major. Around this simple theme, Haydn weaves rich counterpoints, some of which make greater than usual demands on the cello.

The Menuet is noteworthy for its broad contrasts. Its outer sections are loud and forceful. The central Trio section is more graceful and reserved. Possibly, Haydn had in mind a contrast between masculine and feminine temperaments.

The quartet’s finale is where the work gets its nickname. In its opening, the violin uses a technique called bariolage, a rapid alternation between an open string and a stopped one playing the same note. The result is a subtle mixture of colors. Someone (other than Haydn) thought it sounded like a frog croaking, and the nickname stuck. The movement’s second theme is remarkably like that of the first movement, providing a cyclic unity to the quartet. However, the bariolage idea permeates the movement right up to the end.

Program Notes by Dr. Michael Fink

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Janáček, String Quartet No. 1 (“Kreutzer Sonata”)

Janáček’s chamber music exists in a world of its own when compared with his other work. One reason is that the chamber works are more concerned with classical form than his music in other genres. Another is that Leoš Janáček (1854-1928) came to concentrate seriously on chamber writing late in his development. There were only a few chamber works from his student years, including a lost string quartet (1880) from his period at the Vienna Conservatory.

The First String Quartet quite likely incorporated much of one such youthful work, a lost piano trio from 1908 or 1909 entitled “After Tolstoy’s Kreutzer Sonata.” The quartet bears a similar subtitle: “Inspired by L.N. Tolstoy’s Kreutzer Sonata.” In spite of probable similarities, Janáček must have intensively remodeled the material before using it in his First Quartet, which was written in 1923 and distinctly represents the composer’s late style.

As in much of Janáček’s music, folkloristic inferences are present in this music. Yet, they represent not just the primal folk spirit. At times, perhaps a folk feeling illustrates the violence in the Tolstoy story. In any case, Janáček masterfully subordinates folklore to his individual voice as a composer.

We also find Janáček trying to resolve the perennial problems of structural unity. Seen also in his well-known Sinfonietta, the cyclic use of themes for unity and coherence was of deep concern to the composer during the 1920s, when he wrote both works. In the First Quartet, the struggle takes the form of thematic transformations of the Adagio that opens the first movement. The main transformation occurs as a theme in the Scherzo. Also in that movement, Janáček quotes briefly from Beethoven’s Kreutzer Sonata. Later, Janáček’s theme is further disguised as the main theme of the finale.

Perhaps because Janáček did not leave a written program for the quartet, several writers have attempted to describe it. One of the most compelling descriptions was by Max Brod, who wrote that the music “ranges over the whole gamut of the emotions, the ceaseless agitation swelling to a yearning cry, and finally in the last movement to tragic despair.”

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Smetana, Quartet No. 1 in E Minor (“From My Life”)

Throughout his career, Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884) was drawn to a compositional style with specific, descriptive aims: program music. His symphonic poems and operas attest to this and were his most natural media. Famous works such as the symphonic cycle *Má Vlast* (containing “The Moldau”) and his operatic masterpiece, *The Bartered Bride*, partake of a brand of external illustrative music closely and constantly associated with Czech nationalism.

Late in life, however, Smetana was stricken with complete deafness, and this grave blow caused him gradually to withdraw into himself, to think and communicate through certain works in a more subjective and intimate way than before. Programmatic music from this period (1876- 1878), therefore, often comes from an internally directed, reflective composer.

The E Minor Quartet, written in late 1878, is one such internal, reflective, and even nostalgic work. Its program, “From My Life,” is best described in Smetana’s own words from a letter of 1879 addressed to Josef Srb-Debrnov:

My intention was to paint a tone picture of my life. The first movement depicts my youthful leanings toward art, the Romantic atmosphere, the inexpressible yearning for something I could neither express nor define, and also a kind of warning of my future misfortune The long insistent note in the finale owes its origin to this. It is the fateful ringing in my ears of the high-pitched tones which in 1874 announced the beginning of my deafness. I permitted myself this little joke, because it was so disastrous to me. The second movement, a quasi- polka, brings to mind the joyful days of youth when I composed dance tunes and was known everywhere as a passionate lover of dancing. The third movement . . . reminds me of the happiness of my first love, the girl who later became my wife. The fourth movement describes the discovery that I could treat national elements in music and my joy in following this path until it was checked by the catastrophe of the onset of my deafness, the outlook into the sad future, the tiny rays of hope of recovery — but remembering all the promise of my early career, a feeling of painful regret.

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