

## Mozart, Adagio and Fugue in c minor, K. 546

During the summer of 1788, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) was working feverishly to complete what would be his final trilogy of symphonies. His need for money was dire, and very likely he would have put aside work on the symphonies to satisfy a publisher's request, which normally involved a fee. We know that F.A. Hoffmeister did publish Mozart's Adagio and Fugue in c minor, so quite probably he requested the music at that time. Rather than compose something entirely new, Mozart chose to arrange his two-piano fugue, K. 426, adding to it an *Adagio* introduction. The result was a remarkable contribution to string literature.

Music of the Baroque era was still echoing in people's ears at that time, and this work pays homage to the grandeur and intellectual prowess of that period. The *Adagio* is made up of alternating sections in two quite different in moods. One features forceful and grandiose rhythms derived from the French Overture (such as the opening of Handel's *Messiah*). The other is a tender plaint, at times displaying an unearthly character.

This dualism is Mozart's way of introducing a similar dualism in the theme of the following fugue. Biographer Alfred Einstein summarizes:

It is a strict four-voiced fugue with a deeply serious "dualistic" theme — half imperious and half complaining; and it contains all the devices of inversion [the theme presented upside down] and *stretto* [overlapping statements of the theme].

Thus, the *Adagio and Fugue in c minor* stands, in one respect, as Mozart's tribute to a bygone era. In another respect, it is his tribute to all he had learned from Handel and J.S. Bach.

## Copland, Two Pieces for String Quartet

Aaron Copland (1900-1990), the 20<sup>th</sup> century's "Dean of America Composers," spent many years of the 1920s in the environs of Paris. There he studied with and was mentored by the famous musical pedagogue Nadia Boulanger and received some of his earliest premiere performances, usually replicated later in the U.S.A.

Copland composed the piece titled *Lento Molto* during the first half of 1928 and sent a copy of the score to Boulanger with a note:

When I look back at the winter it seems to me that the only real thing accomplished was the fact that I have finished my slow movement for string quartet. I have just made a copy for you because I am most anxious to know what you think of it....

She replied, "This piece for string quartet is a masterpiece — so moving, so deep, so simple...."

Simplicity is certainly the watchword for the *Lento Molto*. It is chiefly a study in chords with mild dissonances added. Occasional snippets of melody are shared between players. The dynamic build in the first half is capped by small vignettes featuring one or two players at a time. Then the music softens, returning to the mood and gestures of the opening.

Copland wrote the *Lento Molto* as something of a prelude to the second piece in the set, titled *Rondino*. This is a peppy piece composed in 1923 and dedicated to Gabriel Fauré, then nearing his 78<sup>th</sup> birthday. A multi-sectional movement with occasional returns to the opening material, the music is highly syncopated, lending it more of a jazzy American feeling than French.

The Two Pieces for String Quartet were given their premiere in a concert of contemporary American music on June 17, 1929, at the Salle Chopin. About ten years later they were published by an American music press. During his career, Aaron Copland composed only

occasional chamber music: for example, sonatas for violin and for flute along with a string sextet. However, these Two Pieces were his only works for string quartet.

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## **Barber, String Quartet in B Major, Op. 11**

In the years following his graduation from the Curtis Institute, Samuel Barber (1910-1981) spent time traveling and composing in Europe under various stipends and grants. Between 1935 and 1937, he won the Prix de Rome and two Pulitzer Travel Scholarships. Barber's stay in Rome had a far-reaching effect on his career, for it was there in 1935 that he met Arturo Toscanini. Three years later, when Toscanini became conductor of the newly formed NBC Symphony Orchestra, he premiered two new works by Barber: the *First Essay* and the *Adagio for Strings*.

Originally, the *Adagio* was the slow movement of Barber's String Quartet, written in Rome in 1936. For Toscanini, Barber adapted the *Adagio* for full string orchestra. Its long, mellifluous lines, lyric intensity, and heartfelt sincerity had an immediate impact on audiences and critics alike. Olin Downes wrote of the premiere, "There is an arch of melody and form. The composition is most simple at the climaxes, when it develops that the simplest chord, or figure, is the one most significant."

In the string quartet, two *Molto allegro* movements surround the *Adagio*. The first presents three contrasting themes: the first is frenetic and stop-and-start; the second is lyrical and texturally hymn-like; the third is playful and brief. Barber works out a development involving all three themes, displaying great craftsmanship alongside deep emotional expression. In classic

sonata fashion, the three themes are reprised, but in an unexpected way. Barber continues to develop each, expressing new possibilities, even as he concludes the movement.

The brief finale follows the *Adagio* after a short pause. Beginning with a recollection of the first movement's opening theme, it then proceeds to new material, some of which has that same nervous character, while other music is more pensive, introverted, and lyrical in the mood of the *Adagio*. In the two-and-a-half minute finale, Barber manages to sum up all that has come before.

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### **Schumann, String Quartet in A Major, Op. 41, no. 3**

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 the three string quartets of Op. 41 plus several other works. He wrote the 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 by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. Possibly, one of the Haydn quartets he studied was the d minor “*Quinten*” (Op. 76, no. 2), since the interval of a falling fifth is important in Schumann's first movement, as in Haydn's. This “sighing” or so-called “Cla-ra” motive is prominent in the introduction and in both of the principal themes and becomes a motto permeating the entire movement.

The second movement is a set of variations on a theme not explicitly stated until after the first three variations: a restless *agitato*, a Schumannesque galloping variation, and a fugato. After

stating the theme, the composer presents a final broad-rhythm waltz variation.

In the third movement, Schumann's harmonic genius is prominent as he fleshes out an otherwise undistinguished first theme. Here (as in most of the quartet) all instruments play most of the time. Wisely, Schumann thins the texture in much of the dotted-rhythm middle section, allowing the first violin and viola to hold a close dialogue.

Critic A.E.F. Dickinson has called the fourth movement of this quartet "a well-organized ballet-movement rather than a finale." Whether one agrees or not, the dance impulse of the movement is indisputable. This movement in rondo form is highly sectionalized and repetitive, often giving full voice to the stamping main theme. In contrast, digressions appear: delicate, balletic rhythms; minor-key gypsy-like strains; and a "Quasi Trio" (Schumann's marking), which undeniably is a Gavotte. The main theme is at last developed during a long coda that caps this ingratiating quartet.

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