

PROGRAM INFORMATION

The Brentano String Quartet

Mark Steinberg, violin
Misha Amory, viola

Serena Canin, violin
Nina Lee, cello

PROGRAM:

Two madrigals (from Books V and VI)

Carlo Gesualdo
1566-1613

Mercè grido piangendo (arranged by Mark Steinberg)
Moro, lasso (arranged by Bruce Adolphe)

String Quartet in C, Op. 20 No. 2 (Hob. III:32) (1772)

Franz Josef Haydn
1732-1809

Moderato
Capriccio: Adagio
Menuetto: Allegretto
Fuga a 4tro soggetti: Allegro

Il tramonto (The Sunset), for voice & string quartet, P. 101 (1914)

Ottorino Respighi
1879-1936

Dawn Upshaw, soprano

-intermission -

Quartet No. 2 in F-sharp minor, for string quartet and soprano, Op. 10 (1910)

Arnold Schoenberg
1874-1951

Allegro
Scherzo (Molto Allegro)
Theme and variations (Litanei)
Finale (Entrueckung)

(text by Stefan George)

Dawn Upshaw, soprano

Program credit(s): The Brentano String Quartet appears by arrangement with David Rowe Artists www.davidroweartists.com

www.brentanoquartet.com

www.sacms.org

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Gesualdo: *Mercè* and *Moro Lasso*

1. The panic-stricken
kink in the neck to be seen
in all of Grünewald's subjects,
exposing the throat and often turning
the face towards a blinding light,
is the extreme response of our bodies
to the absence of balance in nature
2. the event of the century,
awaited with great terror, the eclipse of the sun,
...
the secret sickening away of the world,
in which a phantasmal encroachment of dusk
in the midst of daytime like a fainting fit
poured through the vault of the sky...
a fiery red arose, and colors
such as his eyes had not known
radiantly wandered about, never again to be
driven out of the painter's memory.
W.G. Sebald, from *After Nature*

One could choose among so many passages from this great book, or so many potent and piercing images from Grünewald's paintings, to find signposts toward the expressionistic dungeon that is Gesualdo's province. All chill the soul with the exquisite vibrations of pain; all pulsate with the wretchedness wrung from delicious hypersensitivity to abandonment and the specter of death. In his arresting and abiding juxtapositions, Gesualdo conjures enveloping, luminous onyx, then again oppressive light against which no eyelid dare close. Gesualdo, infamous Prince of Venosa, murderer of his wife and her lover, darts and shifts. Alchemical harmonic transformations ensure the listener remains unbalanced, any hint of rootedness a chimera. The Madrigals of Books V and VI may very well have autobiographical significance; this is a soul that fascinates, that resonates with elements of ours, yet which we can feel fortunate not to inhabit. The texts speak of death, of joy never to be regained, of the cruelty inherent in love. Even with the texts suppressed in instrumental arrangement their shadows allow for ice to have carved their likeness deep into the music left behind. The present string quartet arrangements hew extremely closely to the original, albeit with five voices compressed within the confines of four instrumental parts. So may we feel compressed and confined in the prison of Gesualdo's icy castle, glad for the chance to peer down into the moat and experience the frisson that attends the contemplation of doubt and doom.

Mercè grido piangendo is from Book V. The text reads "‘Mercy!’ I cry, weeping. But who hears me? Alas, I faint. I shall die, therefore, in silence. Ah, for pity! At least, oh treasure of my heart, let me tell you before I die, ‘I die.’" The music is filled with startling chordal progressions, shifting and darting and slipping. *Moro, lasso*, possibly Gesualdo's most well-known madrigal, is from Book VI. The text states "I die, alas, for all my sorrow. And she who could give me life, Ah!, how she wounds me, and will offer no pity. Oh, most painful fate. She who could grant me life renders me death." Mercurial harmonic shifts again abound, as if the music lives in the liminal space between states of being, and the piece is pierced through with cries of "ah!," wounded and stabbing.

Note by Mark Steinberg

Franz Josef Haydn: String Quartet in C, Op. 20 No. 2 (Hob. III:32) (1772)

Haydn's Quartet in C Major, Op. 20 No. 2 seems much like a palimpsest. In an often florid and elegant work in many respects typical of the classical period, the faded hand of the baroque still shows through. And the composer engages in a kind of game with this faded, or fading, past, showing his respect and love through gentle teasing.

As if to announce immediately that a set of four homogeneous instruments need be no impediment to imaginative textures, Haydn opens the piece with a trio sonata texture, typically baroque, but one where no one plays his proper role. The instrument who should anchor the proceedings with a bass line plays the top melodic part, and the viola, who should fill in the middle of the texture, takes over that role. The second violin plays its usual role, but in a duet with the wrong person, as the first violinist sits and listens. It is as if the instruments are children playing dress-up. The tune, itself, is charming, and features a moment of getting stuck, oscillating in a flutter. This will come again in the piece, and, most importantly, the triple hit on the top note, which he does twice in succession, will show up in varying guises in each movement, an ingenious and unusual binding agent. When the first violin does enter, in imitation of the opening 'cello melody, the interval that announces the tune is unnecessarily altered. This is the province of a most important baroque form, the fugue, termed a "tonal" rather than a "real" answer. In the normal course of events in the classical period this wouldn't happen in a situation of pure imitation, but here it is curiously and charmingly out of place, and, not coincidentally, a harbinger of things to come later in the work. Many times in the movement the idea of fugal imitation seems to be essayed, but it is never followed through in any serious way. Any threat of debate dissolves into good-natured agreement.

Virtuosity abounds not only in the kaleidoscopic rearrangements of the voices of the group but also in individual textures. The start of the second part of the movement sees the 'cello and first violin engaged in dialogue, each obeying the rules of etiquette and waiting until his companion has reached his final word before finishing the thought or posing a question. But meanwhile the second violin seems overexcited and expertly juggles notes in many registers in a figuration worthy of a Vivaldi or a Corelli in its fiddly panache. When this ushers in a seemingly more serious consideration of the opening idea the music instead begins to babble, weakening until finally it grinds to a halt, having landed exactly nowhere. A further attempt to bring this to a conclusion also fails, until the movement seems to stumble back upon the home key. With a shrug, the 'cello reinstigates the opening tune, nonchalant and unfazed. The endings of both halves of the first movement are, in fact, a collection of ending gestures, one after the other, the buffoon who keeps having one more thing to say when all present are ready to move on, certain he has wrapped it up.

The Capriccio slow movement is a fantasia, formally exploratory rather than neatly balanced, obeying the dictates of stream-of-consciousness more than architectural premeditation. Austere in a unison proclamation, the jagged opening, garishly ornamented, seems a kind of oracular prophecy. Immediately a dichotomy is set up between that outer announcement and its internalization by the 'cello, cloaked in a espressivo pulsation by the other instruments. The first part of the movement consists of alternations of this ilk, the imposing cathedral and the vulnerable doubter within, tremulous and contemplative. The first is grounded, rooted, imposing; the second floating: the world of thoughts of the cowering mortal. When this musical alternation is brought to a close it is with an open half-cadence, one that should return us to the world of the prophecy, vindicated, perhaps fulfilled. (Incognito, this is a version of the thrice-repeated top notes from the first movement's main tune.) But instead the possibility of the supernal beyond reveals itself in a moment of transcendence, and the sense that a new movement is beginning. This music is discovered afresh, unrelated to what precedes it. Akin to some of the music from Haydn's Seven Last Words of Christ in its luminous beauty, it seems to speak of divine love. Perhaps, as well, it addresses human love in the brief duet between the two violins that is Mozartean in its touching eloquence, and, to music lovers hearing it from a later vantage point, seems even to look forward to the Cavatina of Beethoven's Quartet Op. 130. When a brief violin cadenza (drawn from the world of memory, from the first movement's opening's fluttering figurations) interrupts this reverie it breaks the mood and the prophetic voice from earlier in the movement reappears. The strands of the movement are interwoven now and eventually wend their way back to the same open half-cadence that prefaced the heavenly interpolation. Now, however, it punningly becomes a portal offering an escape from the cathedral of concerns entirely, into the out of doors.

The promise of full cadence at first suggests the sealing of the prophecy, the natural outcome of what Fate decrees. But in fact we discover this to be the gateway to the third movement of the quartet. It resolves into the major mode and into a musette, a dance taking its name from an instrument of the bagpipe family; the drone-infused texture is readily apparent. When this drone appears the music is earth-tethered, the moment of dance paradoxically suspended in time. And in fact Haydn even tantalizingly arrests the motion soon after it starts, so that we are for a moment uncertain of whether the movement will actually take off. Once bitten twice shy, perhaps — that half cadence has fooled us before! The second section begins with a chromatic bagpipe line that creates a different kind of stasis within motion: it goes nowhere at all, a bit of sound and fury signifying nothing. (This musical moment will prove important in the next movement as well.) As the final, whispered version of this drone allows the minuet proper to drift away it also prepares for a

change of register, in the literary sense of changing social strata. Whilst the minuet suggests the open air and a fancy-free hopping dance, the trio returns to the circumscribed world of, and the actual music of, the prophecy from the second movement, oddly out of place and unsettling. (And again, brings in the idea, on another level, of being stuck in place rather than moving forward.) A stern, stentorian unison, recalling the start of the second movement, reminds without returning. It slips away, again with a version of the open half-cadence, and thus of the opening tune's flutterings, that helped us to discover not only the vision of the beyond in the previous movement but also the musette-minuet itself, more self-referential mirror-work.

Remember the moment at the opening of the second strain of the minuet with the chromatically slipping lines that turn out to be pure ornament, not advancing the argument in the least. Chromatic lines often feature in very serious fugue subjects in the baroque. Filling in the "in between pitches" is like having a collection of notes that act as a prism for harmony; they most often are replete with innuendo and complication and the piece unfolds accordingly, exploring the implications of each pitch of the main idea. But here we have a light, Puckish fugue where the chromatic descending line is nothing but ornament and could easily be replaced with a gentler, less busy diatonic descent with no effect on the rhetoric of the subject. It almost teases the idea of a particularly erudite fugue, instead offering a rather more nimble and playful one, its subject slipping before it rights itself. And the first three notes of the subject are, as one might almost guess at this point, the three repeated pitches from the top of first movement tune, the three-time repetition in the half-cadences of the second and third movements, and the top notes of the "stuck" strain in the minuet that births as well the chromatic idea. This most learned of baroque forms, one akin to a scholarly debate, is kept sotto voce throughout, whispered almost as if it were a form of gossip. Haydn late in the movement introduces the subject upside down, "al roverscio," a Bachian trick, but does it not as the start of an equal section but more as a tease, a playful display of mettle. Not long after this is introduced the entire fugal apparatus is dropped, the veil removed as the voices jump out at full throttle and chase each other more simply, a game of tag, joyful and unleashed. A last laugh about the "al roverscio" ushers in a flamboyantly grandiloquent summing up. Over this final flurrying passage Haydn writes "Laus omnip: Deo / Sic fugit amicus amicum" ('Praise to Almighty God / Thus one friend flees another'). Haydn chases the baroque idea of counterpoint with more decorative and simpler ideas, and all in good fun.

A recent poem by Joyce Carol Oates (The First Room) reads:

In every dream of a room
the first room intrudes.
No matter the years, the tears dried
and forgotten, it is the skeleton
of the first that protrudes.

This idea seems to exist on two levels in this quartet. First, the palimpsest idea whereby we can see the traces of baroque figurations, forms and concepts that leave their legible traces on this classical work. But also in the piece's development itself. Each movement refers back to the movement preceding it, borrowing from it some salient detail, a fertile seed that will shape and color the new movement in some crucial way. Every new journey is rooted in the steps of the past, and creative transformation is new life.

Note by Mark Steinberg

Respighi: Il tramonto (The Sunset), for voice & string quartet, P. 101 (1914)

[Respighi](#) set several of [Percy Bysshe Shelley](#)'s poems, but only three were set for mezzo-soprano and orchestra: Arethusa in 1910, Il tramonto in 1914, and La Sensitiva between 1914 and 1915. Of the three, Il tramonto (The Sunset) was also written for voice and string quartet, and is heard in this version as often as in the chamber orchestral version. The smaller accompanimental forces give the piece a much more intimate feeling, beautifully suiting the nature of the poem. The strings open the work dramatically, then settle down to a calm lyricism. The singer describes the "One within whose subtle being...genius and death contended." The music swells as the poem tells of his love for a Lady. It then serenely describes the field they walk through, the nature around them, and the colors of the sunset with a repeated, rounded-contour figure similar to what is found in a [Field](#) or [Chopin](#) nocturne. Very quietly, with the strings almost still, the Youth wonders "Is it not strange...I never saw the sun?/We will walk here To-morrow; thou shall look on it with me." A brief interlude follows, and the nature figure returns before the music turns to hard chords as the Lady finds the Youth dead the next morning. The chords soften as the poem describes how she "died not, nor grew wild, but year by year lived on..." A lighter texture with moving musical lines underscores the poem's description of her life, with the lower strings sometimes moving in

parallel lines to the voice. The Lady's final appeal for the same peace that the Youth found in death is uttered with a calm weariness before a violin solo concludes the piece in the major. The impression of the whole work is that of a romantic ballad or a tone poem in miniature, because the strings do not just provide a harmony to the voice's melody, but actually describe the text as well. The mezzo-soprano then fits in as essentially another instrument, reciting the poem in an arioso fashion. [Respighi's](#) wonderfully textured music not only convincingly evokes the scenes of the poem, but also expresses the sentiments of the two characters, revealing a more personal aspect of his talent.

Note by Patsy Morita

Schoenberg Quartet #2

Arnold Schoenberg's Second String Quartet, Op. 10, is widely considered to be a visionary work. But whereas it is oft remarked about this work that it sees into and points the way toward the future of musical rhetoric, it is interior seeing which lends it power and mesmerizing depth.

Schoenberg, active as a painter as well as a composer, produced a series of haunting paintings which he called "Visions." These are portraits whose searing eyes gaze intensely at, through, even into the viewer, searching for truth. This spirit is felt as well in the Second Quartet, a piece searching for a new world of self-expression. A hearing of this work convinced Wassily Kandinsky that he and Schoenberg were kindred spirits. Having attended a performance of the quartet, Kandinsky initiated a correspondence and a friendship with the composer. Like Kandinsky, Schoenberg was concerned with the primacy of introspection and emotion in art. Form was to arise out of the inner compulsion for self-expression; if necessary, the boundaries of the art form would shift to accommodate understanding won through interior questioning. In the case of this piece the gravitational relationships inherent in the tonal system, writing in a key, begin to yield to a freer treatment of pitch. Kandinsky writes to Schoenberg:

In your works. you have realized what I, albeit in uncertain form, have so greatly longed for in music. The independent progress through their own destinies, the independent life of the individual voices in your compositions, is exactly what I am trying to find in my paintings....I am certain that our own modern harmony is not to be found in the "geometric" way, but rather in the anti- geometric, antilogical way.

Certainly there is much of interest in the artistic links between these two great figures. However, one might argue that in terms of emotional sensibility Schoenberg may be closer to painters such as Kokoschka and Schiele, as well as to a writer such as Strindberg, in whose plays Schoenberg had great interest. This work not only occupies a pivotal place in the history of music, but is as well very much a child of its own historical period, pre-war Vienna. This is the Vienna of Freud, of Klimt, of Kokoschka, of Wittgenstein, a simmering cauldron of intellectual and artistic ferment. Dialogue between disciplines was commonplace and highly stimulating.

One may see here connections to Mahler, a composer with whom Schoenberg had a complicated relationship. Like Mahler's First Symphony, this quartet features a quotation of a popular folk tune (more on this soon), and like Mahler's Second Symphony it features vocal writing in the third and fourth movements. More importantly, the expressive seed from which this quartet germinates finds itself firmly planted in Mahlerian soil. The rich, dark palette and late Romantic sensibility of Mahler inform the overall affect of the piece.

Much has been made of the progression of this piece from relative tonal stability to the instability of atonal writing, but in fact there is more ambiguity here than such a view suggests. The first movement starts firmly in f-sharp minor, but somewhat tentatively, quickly collapsing into a single, foreign pitch, catapulting the music into breathless uncertainty. (This quick move away from the opening material is reminiscent of Brahms' first string quartet.) The second theme we encounter evokes the world of the Viennese waltz, but fraught with anxiety, an early suggestion of the hallucinatory waltzes to be found in the String Trio, Op. 45, much later in the composer's life. Herein can be felt the central issue of the piece, familiar steps in an unfamiliar landscape. The movement ends temporarily at rest, but with a feeling of defeat.

The second movement, a scherzo, opens disembodied, drum-like on a single low cello pitch, perhaps an echo of the parallel movement in Beethoven's Quartet Op. 59 No. 1. As various spectral themes are brought in the movement takes on a macabre cast. One of the two most famous moments in the piece comes when the second violin begins the popular tune "Ach, du lieber Augustin, alles ist hin," music that would ordinarily be accompanied by the simplest of harmonies. However here it finds itself out of place, torn from its natural milieu. Schoenberg remarked to a student of his that the "alles ist hin" (all is lost) was "not ironical [but has] a true emotional significance." As the tune fades away fragmented wisps of the waltz theme from the first movement are heard, disoriented. After a wild unison passage for all four instruments a quickened version of the drum motive from the start of the movement flashes by as the music seems almost to vaporize.

The Litany that follows is a setting of a Stefan George poem, one where the speaker pleads for solace, for release from worldly passions in order to find peace. Significantly, all the musical material is drawn from the earlier movements; for example, the lonely viola line which starts the movement is a distended version of the opening theme of the piece, accompanied by a prolonged sigh in the first violin drawn from the waltz theme from that movement. Thus there is a sense of looking backwards, reflecting on one's past while searching for a way forward. The music unfolds as a continuous set of variations, embodying the feeling of wrestling with ideas. This is music of heart-wrenching drama, featuring one of the largest vocal leaps in the literature, a plummeting from the highest register to the soprano's lowest ("take from me love," after which the singer continues "and give me thy peace"). The brief answering coda for the quartet alone grows to a shattering cry which is choked off at its peak.

As if in shock from this suffocated outburst the final movement takes this passionate human cry and answers it with music which is cold and spare. There is no sense of anchor, of tonal underpinnings, and this introductory texture leads to the entrance of the soprano in what is one of the most famous lines in musical history: "I feel the air of another planet." Here is embodied a vision of a whole new space, having wandered far from the Viennese waltzes, the societal references of the first part of the piece. It is a world of subjectivity, of sensitivity to the sometimes alienated feelings of the individual. The poem, however, ends "Carried aloft beyond the highest cloud, / I am afloat upon a sea of crystal splendor, / I am only a sparkle of the holy fire, / I am only a roaring of the holy voice." Schoenberg saw this piece as the gateway to the next stage of his development as a composer. The initial performance of the quartet created a scandal, the cries of the public eventually completely obliterating the music. But the piece itself ends in an earned state of tranquility, a turn to F-sharp major, having traveled far from the ending of the first movement. Despite the fear of the new acted out by the Viennese public, we can see now that there is much beauty here, much imagination and color, and much profundity.

Note by Mark Steinberg