

Parker Quartet

Daniel Chong, violin
Ken Hamao, violin
Jessica Bodner, viola
Kee-Hyun Kim, cello

Homunculus

Esa-Pekka Salonen
(b. 1958)

Quartet No. 2, Op. 56

Karol Szymanowski
(1882-1937)

Moderato, dolce e tranquillo
Vivace scherzando
Lento

- INTERMISSION -

Quartet in A minor, Op. 132

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Assai sostenuto
Allegro ma non tanto
Molto adagio
Alla marcia, assai vivace
Allegro appassionato

Parker Quartet is represented by MKI Artists; One Lawson Lane, Suite 320, Burlington, VT 05401.

Recordings: Naxos Records, Nimbus Records, and Albany Records

www.parkerquartet.com

www.sacms.org

Program Notes

Homunculus

Esa-Pekka Salonen

Homunculus is a short (circa 15 minutes) work for string quartet, which I wrote during the autumn months of 2007 for the Johannes Quartet.

I wanted to compose a piece that would be very compact in form and duration, but still contain many different characters and textures. In other words, a little piece that behaves like a big piece.

In Homunculus the four main characters (in order of appearance) are “Scherzo”, irregularly pulsating, jagged music; “Slow movement”, continuous metamorphose of an easily identifiable slow phrase; “Main movement”, intricate mid-tempo web of four voices densely woven together, and “Chorale”, a static, somewhat melancholy progression of chords. These characters, which in a traditional string quartet form would each form their own movement, are here interrupted by each other, and interspersed throughout the single movement of Homunculus. They keep developing and changing throughout the piece however, so when a character reappears it is rarely, if ever, an exact repetition of a previous appearance.

At the end the “Scherzo” music brings the piece to a violent climax on a C major chord in an impossibly high register followed by a long glissando down. All the other characters appear one more time. Homunculus ends with a prolonged chorale which in my ears sounds somewhat sad and deeply nostalgic.

The title of the piece refers to the arcane spermists’ theory, who held the belief that the sperm was in fact a “little man” (homunculus) that was placed inside a woman for growth into a child. This seemed to them to neatly explain many of the mysteries of conception.

I decided to call my piece Homunculus despite the obvious weaknesses of the 17th century theory, as my goal was to write a small scale piece that would nevertheless contain all the elements of a “fully grown” string quartet.

--note by Esa-Pekka Salonen

Quartet No. 2, Op. 56

Karol Szymanowski

“Competitions are for horses, not artists.”

These are the words of the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók who famously refused to sit on competition juries because he wished to avoid making decisions that would weigh upon his conscience.

Polish composer Karol Szymanowski must have not feared such events for in 1927, when Philadelphia’s Musical Fund Society announced its international chamber work competition, he enthusiastically submitted a string quartet. According to the Society, the competition’s objective was “to add valuable works to the repertoire of chamber music.” The winner was to receive \$3,000 and one of the subsequent prizes must have included a purse of \$2,000 as Szymanowski wrote in a letter to his good friend Zofia Kochońska at the time, “Zofia...what a delight it would be to get even the last one of \$2,000.”

1927 was most certainly a notable time in Szymanowski's life. While composing his second string quartet and continuing his work on his ballet, *Harnasie*, he was offered directorships at the music conservatory in both Cairo and Warsaw, was devoted to developing a new model of music education and searching for ways to foster the young composers of Poland. All of this while battling tuberculosis. He completed his String Quartet No. 2 and chose Warsaw over Cairo, but unfortunately, his advancing tuberculosis prevented him from fulfilling his other endeavors. Szymanowski eventually moved temporarily into a sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland.

The String Quartet No. 2, Op. 56 is one of his most bold and avant-garde compositions. Its main influence is the incorporation of Podhale folk music from the foothills of the Tatra mountains. Although it carries a strong modernist slant, the structures themselves are classical – a hauntingly gorgeous first movement in sonata form, a blistering scherzo in the middle and an ambitious double fugue in the final movement that opens with a soulful, expressive second violin solo before transforming into thrilling rhapsodic episodes. Folk motifs can be heard throughout all three movements, several of which also appear in his ballet, *Harnasie*.

Szymanowski did not win the Musical Fund Society's competition. He did, however, contribute a more than valuable work to the chamber music repertoire – a work that is daring, highly expressive and unique.

The jury on this occasion was made up of five notable figures – Willem Mengelberg (conductor of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra), Frederick Stock (conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra), Thaddeus Rich (concertmaster of the Philadelphia Orchestra), Gilbert Reynolds Combs (president of the MFS) and lastly, Fritz Reiner (conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra). In a pool of 600 works, any applicant would have faced tough odds. Coincidentally, the winner was a pianist who in the same year was scheduled to give the U.S. premiere of his first piano concerto in Carnegie Hall with Mengelberg and the New York Philharmonic. He also happened to be Reiner's piano teacher at the Liszt Academy in Budapest, and would eventually compose arguably the greatest cycle of string quartets of the 20th century. His name, of course, was Béla Bartók—the winning composition his String Quartet No. 3.

--note by Daniel Chong

Quartet in A minor, Op. 132

Ludwig van Beethoven

Beethoven produced relatively few compositions from 1813 until the early 1820s. However, some work from this period, such as the Op. 102 Cello Sonata and Op. 106 *Hammerklavier* Piano Sonata, shows that it was one of creative renewal rather than a hiatus. In 1822 he wrote to his publisher, "I feel I am on the threshold of great things," and from 1823 until his death he completed many of his greatest masterpieces, among them the *Missa Solemnis*, the Ninth Symphony, and the five late string quartets.

Beethoven's last five quartets were written between May 1824 and November 1826. The first three—Opp. 127, 132, and 130 with the Great Fugue—fulfilled a commission from Prince Nikolai Galitzin, a Russian nobleman. The others—Opp. 131 and 135—he wrote without commission. Audiences were bewildered. Beethoven had entered a new aesthetic realm, reaching back to older techniques of counterpoint and recitative and experimenting radically with late-18th-century forms and proportions. As professor Robert Winter has observed, there is a sense that while some of the music is intended to please or engage the

audience, much of it turns inward and the audience is forgotten while Beethoven wrestles alone with musical ideas. The late quartets were rarely performed for fifty years after Beethoven's death.

Op. 132 opens with the first movement's four-note main theme played slowly by the cello—a rising half-step followed by a large leap and a descending half-step. A tiny eight-bar fugue is constructed from these intervals as the other voices enter one by one. This austere *cantus firmus* is suddenly interrupted by an impassioned *arpeggio* in the first violin, the first of many extreme contrasts in the quartet. Contradicting the first theme's dark mood, the second theme is sweetly lyrical with etched rhythmic undercurrents. These disparate themes and their musical elements rub against each other in an unsettled atmosphere throughout the movement.

The dancelike second movement, sounding relatively simple despite its intricate contrapuntal structure, seems open and direct after the emotionally complex first movement.

The heart of the quartet is the great "*Heiliger Dankgesang*" ("Holy Song of Thanks to the Godhead from a Convalescent, in the Lydian mode"), Beethoven's expression of thanks for his recovery from serious illness in April 1825. Contrasts of feeling and musical texture are especially profound in this movement. The slow modal chorale, ethereal and intensely spiritual in character, is interrupted by sections of elaborate dancelike music that Beethoven marks "feeling new strength."

A marchlike dance movement follows the "*Heiliger Dankgesang*" in startling contrast to its emotional intensity and thematic refinement. After a cry of recitative in the first violin, the final movement begins. Marked *Allegro appassionato*, it is a rondo recalling many passages from earlier movements. The lyrical main theme opens with a rolling accompaniment containing part of the first movement's painful opening four-note motif. Rather than unfolding sequentially, contrasting elements are pressed together. Poignant inflections enter the main theme, and the rhythmic underlying voices grow in strength. After a quiet fugal section, the main theme and accompaniment merge into the rapid, highly rhythmic concluding section. Now in the 'wrong' key of A major, the frenzied music is stripped down to a series of quick chords and the quartet's closing cadence.

—note by Robert Strong