

Parker Quartet

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

Selections from Madrigals Book VI

Claudio Monteverdi
(1567-1643)

Dove è la fede
Darà la notte il sol
Zefiro torna e il bel tempo rimena

String Quartet No. 3 in G major, Op. 94

Benjamin Britten
(1913-1976)

Duets. With moderate movement
Ostinato. Very fast
Solo. Very calm
Burlesque. Fast – *con fuoco*
Recitative and Passacaglia (*La Serenissima*). Slow

- INTERMISSION -

Quartet in C minor, Op. 51, No. 1

Johannes Brahms
(1770-1827)

Allegro
Romanze: Poco Adagio
Allegretto molto moderato e comodo
Allegro

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

Recordings: Naxos Records, Nimbus Records, and Albany Records

<http://www.parkerquartet.com/>

www.sacms.org

Program Notes

Selections from Madrigals Book VI

Claudio Monteverdi

- I. Dove è la fede
- II. Darà la notte il sol
- III. Zefiro torna e il bel tempo rimena

Arguably one of the most influential and vital musical forces in bridging the Renaissance and the Baroque, Claudio Monteverdi is best known for his extensive contribution in several genres, including liturgical music, madrigals, and operas.

Monteverdi's Sixth Book of Madrigals finds the composer in a period of transition. He had recently left his working home of Mantua after 22 years, and while it was published in his new base of Venice (where he would remain until his death), much of it was most likely written during his last years in Mantua. This book also contains his last collection of a cappella —voice-only—madrigals before he turned exclusively to the concertato style—voice with instrumental accompaniment—for the rest of his madrigal output.

The Renaissance madrigal is a secular vocal composition whose primary focus is to musically paint its text. The importance of text was such that Monteverdi managed to offend his critics in the famous "Seconda pratica" controversy in 1600 due to his inappropriate usage of dissonances, which his brother Giulio Cesare defended by stating that madrigals must "make the oration the mistress of harmony and not the servant": if one could best musically represent its text by breaking hitherto conventions, so be it. In utilizing unconventional methods to best evoke the text's expressive potential, Monteverdi paved the way towards a freer, liberated use of harmony and counterpoint and ultimately a wider musical palette.

Book VI—written as a tribute to the recent deaths of his wife and a close pupil—contains two extended song cycles, the first of which is a polyphonic transcription of his popular opera Arianna . " Dove è la fede " is the third song of this cycle, Lamento d'Arianna , the only surviving portion of the otherwise lost work.

" Dara la notte il sol " is from the other cycle in Book VI, Sestina , which Monteverdi wrote as a lament for the early death of Caterina Martinelli, the "little Roman girl" who was to perform the titular role of Arianna . It opens with a sombre chant before oscillating between various conversational interchanges.

A standalone work within the collection, " Zefiro torna e il bel tempo rimena " is often considered to be one of his more cheerful compositions. Beginning with an animated, dance-like chase around the ensemble, the madrigal's many shifts in tempo and meter follow the narrator's inner thoughts in contrast to his surrounding reality.

-Ken Hamao © 2020

Quartet No. 3 in G major, Op. 94
Benjamin Britten

Born in the fishing port of Lowestoft in southeast England, Benjamin Britten began composing as a child. He was encouraged in this activity by his mother, a talented amateur musician, but his father permitted neither a gramophone nor a radio in the house, and he had little exposure to music beyond his local music teachers. Quite unaccountably, as he later wrote, he composed “reams and reams” of music despite these limitations. At age eleven, a chance introduction to English composer Frank Bridge led to an invitation to study with him in London.

After attending the Royal Conservatory of Music, Britten composed in relative obscurity until 1945, when his opera *Peter Grimes* premiered in London to rapturous praise and confirmed him as one of England’s leading composers. Britten was mainly a composer of vocal music, but he often wrote chamber music at the request of friends. His third string quartet was composed at the request of the Amadeus Quartet and completed in 1975. Frail and in ill health, Britten knew he did not have long to live when he began the quartet. It was his last major work. He died just days before the quartet’s scheduled premier performance on December 19, 1975.

The quartet is divided into five unrelated movements of different lengths and characters. The movements are paired in an arch structure similar to Bartók’s fourth and fifth string quartets. The opening and closing movements are the most weighty and exploratory. The second and fourth movements are short, fast, and act as intermezzos between more substantial movements. The middle movement, the arch form’s apex, is spare and trancelike in an ethereal sound-world. Allusions to the music of both Bartók and Shostakovich, two composers whose music Britten admired, are sprinkled throughout the quartet.

Britten traveled to Venice to write the quartet’s final movement. Known for centuries as “La Serenissima”, Venice was a city Britten loved and one that had special significance for him as the setting for his opera *Death in Venice*, composed in 1973. The opera’s principal character is an aging man who goes to Venice to seek spiritual redemption before he dies but is torn by his passionate desire for a beautiful young boy. *Death in Venice* was the first major work in which Britten dealt openly with the subject of homosexuality, a criminal offense in Britain until 1967.

The last movement’s opening section, *Recitative*, quotes passages from *Death in Venice*, including the shimmering barcarolle Britten used to indicate the movement of gondolas on the water. The *Passacaglia* section is set in the key of E major, the tonality associated with the opera’s main character. Solo lines pass among the voices in both sections. The *Recitative* is quietly abuzz with tremolos and pizzicatos under its forthright solos. Without a break, the syncopated theme of the *Passacaglia* emerges together with the cello’s steady ‘walking’ bass. Hushed and melancholy at first, the music gradually rises to a gentle climax, then dissolves slowly and serenely until the quartet ends with an unresolved chord. Britten commented that he “wanted the work to end with a question.”

Quartet in C minor, Op. 51, No. 1

Johannes Brahms

Brahms' career as a composer took flight after Robert Schumann famously introduced the young pianist to the public—and publishers—in 1853 as one of the musical “elect” who would “give ideal expression of his times.” Brahms' composing style reflects his love of the great Classical tradition, and he quickly became known as the musical heir of Beethoven. This proved to be a burden for the cautious, self-critical Brahms. He had difficulty composing his first symphony and string quartets, the two forms in which Beethoven's achievements were supreme. Pressed by critics and publishers to compose a symphony, he asked for “more time,” and he wrote despairingly to a friend, “You have no idea what it is like to hear [Beethoven's] footsteps constantly behind me.”

For fourteen years Brahms struggled to create a string quartet that met his exacting standards. By his own count he destroyed 20 different versions in the process. In 1873 he was finally satisfied and published his two Op. 51 string quartets. He was 40 years old. A third and final string quartet was published three years later as Op. 67. The long delay was beneficial. Brahms was at the height of his creative powers in the 1870s and fully capable of composing powerful, large-scale works. Each of his quartets displays a superb blend of rich melodic texture, rhythmic and harmonic freedom, and well-crafted technique.

The forceful first movement of Op. 51, no. 1 quickly presents its dominant musical idea—a rising dotted-rhythm figure in the violins over an agitated accompaniment in the lower instruments. This driving seven-bar passage shapes the character of the entire first movement. The contrasting second theme is gentle but dark, and it provides little relief from the movement's restless intensity.

In the second movement the rising dotted-rhythm motif is transformed into a slow accompaniment beneath the first violin's calm, lyrical melody. Here Brahms marks the score “expressive” and “sweet.” The music darkens somewhat in its middle section with a halting, unstable rhythm that conveys a sense of anxiety. The movement returns to its opening calm and closes with orchestral sonorities.

Following the second movement's lyrical beauty, the Allegretto brings back the restless quality of the first movement, although without its fierce concentration. Contrasting melody lines are joined together uneasily in the first violin and viola when the movement opens. The movement's harmonic ambiguity, steady rhythmic pulse in the cello, and prominent descending lines impart a melancholy mood. The middle section is a naive little dance tune in the first violin over a sustained unison bariolage—the same note played alternately on two different strings—in the second violin.

The passionate finale returns to the driving energy of the first movement, and its themes are modified versions of the first movement's rising dotted-rhythm figure. Brahms creates a dramatic musical texture with intricate part-writing and many quick exchanges between the players. The movement's intensity rarely flags, and it accelerates to an exciting conclusion.

--notes by Robert Strong