

Chamber Music at the Clark presents

The Ying Quartet

Sunday, March 22, 2020

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)

String Quartet No. 2 in A minor, op. 13, “Ist es wahr?”

Adagio–Allegro vivace

Adagio non lento

Intermezzo: Allegretto con moto–Allegro di molto

Presto–Adagio non lento

Mendelssohn was eighteen years old when he wrote his A-minor string quartet, the first of his six mature quartets. Beethoven had died recently; and if his influence on Mendelssohn was pervasive (Berlioz once complained that Mendelssohn “was rather too fond of the dead”) his earliest masterpieces are uniquely Mendelssohnian whatever their allegiances to his masters. The op. 13 quartet is surrounded in the Mendelssohn *thematisches verzeichnis* by more famous compositions including the incidental music for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the wonderful Octet, op. 20; and if we extend the context to works written by the age of twenty-one, even the Hebrides overture of 1829, op. 26, is contiguous. The A-minor quartet is much less often heard but it is all the same an extraordinary composition for a late-teenage boy. Nothing that Mozart had written by the age of eighteen was remotely as original, and Saint-Saens, who was as remarkable a prodigy as either Mozart or Mendelssohn, was an old man of twenty-three before his immensely high-spirited first piano concerto announced to the world that the child who could play the piano at thirty months had become a real composer, the “French Mendelssohn.”

It is hardly surprising that the A-minor quartet should allude to the late Beethoven quartets, which had an all-encompassing influence over the form throughout the whole of the nineteenth century and even beyond. Beethoven’s final string quartet, the op. 135 in F major, had asked “Must it be?” in a bit of unusual musico-literary rhetoric, to which the main body of the finale had resolutely answered “It must!” in a grand gesture of acquiescence to fate and mortality. Mendelssohn’s quartet—in particular the theme of the brief introduction to the first movement—is based on a song he published as part of his op. 9 entitled *Die Frage* (The Question), in which a young swain asks his innamorata if it is true (“*Ist es wahr?*”) that she waits for him in copses and hurls questions about his love to the moon and stars. So slender a bit of adolescent eroticism supplies a tiny cell of music that lurks not only at the outset of the quartet, but which returns in its rather unusual slow conclusion.

The first movement sonata-allegro begins with an adagio introduction in A major that includes a quotation from the song that gives the quartet its subtitle. The movement is compact, with no repetition of the exposition and two concise thematic groups. The development section does not

stray very far harmonically and uses a good deal of imitation among the parts. (Mendelssohn, as a close student of J.S. Bach, was very fond of imitative counterpoint. If he did not actually hear Goethe make his famous—and very romantic—remark about Bach, he may well have heard something similar from the master's lips: "As listeners to Bach's music we may feel as if we were present when God created the world.")

The second movement is in F major and begins slowly, but it grows quite warm in the middle section. A brief violin solo leads back to the slower theme which, like the opening melody of the third movement, incorporates the dotted rhythm of the thematic material borrowed from *Die Frage*. The delightful middle section of the third movement is an example of the unique scherzo music with a light touch that we associate so strongly with Mendelssohn. The finale begins with a dramatic tremolo and then unfolds as a highly expressive presto movement that has its roots in late Beethoven. A fugue emerges in the middle as the theme is developed; and throughout, the deeply romantic melodic material is underpinned with conventional but effective contrapuntal strategies. The adagio conclusion comprises the most extensive quotation of the op. 9 song heard in the entire quartet and provides a moving ending in the major key.

Kevin Puts (1972–)

Dark Vigil

The American composer Kevin Puts was born in St. Louis and studied at the Eastman School of Music and at Yale University. His first teaching post was at the University of Texas, but he now teaches at the Peabody Institute at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Not yet fifty, he has composed music in most of the standard genres, and is perhaps best-known for his Pulitzer Prize winning opera *Silent Night* (2012), an opera based on the French film *Joyeux Noël* about a truce declared in the trenches at the end of 1914. He has four symphonies, seven concertos, and many chamber and solo pieces to his credit.

Puts's string quartet *Dark Vigil* was composed in 1999, the year of the Columbine shootings, and the composer has written about how he was moved to write his piece in part by seeing footage of a staged shooting event in a high school meant to give students and teachers an opportunity to rehearse for the real thing. The quartet, he says, "depicts a struggle between innocence and depravity," and it bears an epigraph from Yeats's poem, "The Second Coming"—"The ceremony of innocence is drowned"—that establishes from the beginning its spirit of disquiet. Though structured as one long movement, *Dark Vigil* has many shifts of mood. They are registered in a total of seventeen changing indications of tempo and characterization, a few of which are conventional (*con forza*, *grave*, *affetuoso con moto*, etc.), while most are unusual ("wildly," "hypnotic," "blaring," "desolate"). This continual shifting of character in the music embodies its theme of the war in the human world between

good and evil. The last few pages of the score, which begin with the indication "Gently Pulsing," give one to think that good has triumphed. They are sweet and lovely and composed in the key of F-sharp major, the modal opposite of the opening pages in F-sharp minor. But near the conclusion, Puts inserts a little F-major figure in the second violin part that provides a brief but repeated experience of the clash of keys, as though evil has to show its face, however briefly, when good seems to have won the day, just to remind us that it is never fully vanquished.

The opening passage may remind listeners of the second string quartet of Janáček or the music of Ravel and Debussy. Though in the minor key, it sounds almost prelapsarian. The music grows increasingly restive, and finally shifts in a section marked "Wildly" to a passage based in glissandos in all the instruments except the cello. But the little thematic cell of the opening page (it contains a figure of sixteenth and thirty-second notes) returns and leads to a contemplative section, marked "Sanctified; reverential." After several transformations and a return of the glissandos, the music reaches what feels like a moment of deep emotion, with sustained chords connected by a *portamento* figure that becomes one of the defining cells of the entire piece. After a brief cadenza for the viola that is anything but bravura in nature, the final section—"Gently pulsing" as remarked above—begins. With some beautiful melodic writing in the upper parts, the music eventually fades away to silence on an F-sharp major triad.

Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884)

String Quartet No. 1 in E Minor, *Z mého života* (From My Life)

Allegro vivo appassionato

Allegro moderato à la polka

Largo sostenuto

Vivace

Among all of life's tragic turns and unjust or ironic inheritances, what rude twist of physiological fate could be more difficult for a composer to accept than deafness? We think of Beethoven as an heroic human being for several cogent reasons, but not least because so many of his most perdurable scores were written when he could no longer hear them performed. Other composers too, less famously perhaps, bore with the seemingly insuperable hurdle that deafness presents to a musician: Gabriel Fauré in his older age, Ethel Smyth in mid-career, and Smetana—we can be precise—from age fifty. All of them went on composing. Smetana wrote some of his most famous music in silence: the six symphonic poems that comprise *Má Vlast* and the First String Quartet. The latter memorializes the onset of Smetana's deafness in the high E heard towards the conclusion of the finale, for that note deliberately represents the ringing in his ears that preceded the composer's complete loss of hearing.

Bohemia had produced many fine musicians before Smetana but no tradition of distinctively Czech art music. Indeed, Smetana can be said to have created that tradition in the 1860s. His vision of Czech music developed against the background of the European art music of his time. A devoted Wagnerian and Lisztian, he spent his earliest years as a professional musician in Gothenburg, Sweden. European influences and experiences stood him in good stead when he returned to Prague permanently in June 1862, for they gave him the short-term exile's clear vision of just what, exactly, music in his homeland required. It required the Czech language on stage; it required romantic drama rather than folksong; and it definitely did not require a slavish imitation of Wagnerian ideals. Smetana translated these ideals into his own compositions, in the process creating the tradition of Czech music that we know today. He announced the new tradition in his first two operas, *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* and *The Bartered Bride*. He also put his ideas into practice, as conductor of the Czech Opera from 1866 to 1874. He thereby revolutionized the world of Czech music performance as well as the music itself.

The last ten years of Smetana's life, from 1874 to 1884, were increasingly isolated and painful. Relations with his second wife, Betty, were rancorous, money was always a problem, and the syphilis that caused his deafness eventually led to insanity. The composer spent his last days in an asylum, ranting much of the time, unable to hear, and of course incapable of composing music.

The first of Smetana's two string quartets was written during the final three months of 1876, before the worst effects of his illness had set in, and Smetana made its autobiographical basis clear in a letter he wrote in April 1878 to his great friend, Josef Srb-Debrnov. There he described the first movement of the quartet as a depiction of his "youthful leanings towards art... [an] inexpressible yearning... [and] a kind of warning of my future misfortune." The movement is in sonata form, with two highly contrasting themes heard in the exposition, of which only the tender second theme appears in the recapitulation. The second movement is a polka, and its several themes successfully represent Smetana's love of dance tunes and dancing. The passionate third movement is full of unrepressed erotic energy. Smetana said that it was meant to body forth "the happiness of my first love, the girl who later became my first wife." The finale is a marvelously unbuttoned piece of writing in which Smetana sought to describe his pleasure in using "national elements in music." Just when the score bids fair to collapse in a postcoital epiphany, the composer, as it were, utters a cry (it is actually a seventh chord on C); and over tremolos played in the other three instruments, the first violin plays the high E that represents "the catastrophe of the onset of [his] deafness." In the concluding bars, where allusions are made to the three earlier movements of the work, the sheer joy of the movement's opening bars has definitely disappeared, replaced by feelings of resignation and acceptance.

Copyright, Bruce Whiteman, 2020.

To license these notes for use please contact: dbrucewhiteman@gmail.com