

Friday, July 16, 2010

Hearst Castle

Chamber 2

Quintet in G major, op. 77 (1875)

Allegro con fuoco

Scherzo—Trio—Scherzo

Poco andante

Finale: Allegro assai

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)

Sextet No. 2 in G major, op. 36 (1865)

Allegro non troppo

Scherzo: Allegro non troppo

Poco adagio

Poco allegro

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)—*Quintet in G major*, op. 77 (1875)

Ah, wily music publishers! When the German firm Simrock accepted Antonín Dvořák as a new client (thanks to an enthusiastic recommendation from Johannes Brahms), Dvořák sent them a prize-winning quintet he had composed in 1875 for a Prague-based “Artistic Circle” competition. While writing the quintet, Dvořák had been financially supported by an 1874 Austrian State Stipendium; when he applied to renew his stipend in 1875, Brahms had joined the panel of judges, and was quite impressed by the young Czech composer. However, year after year went by before Simrock finally published the quintet, and it was 1888 before the quintet was ready to go to press. Although the work *had* undergone some revisions in the intervening period (such as the elimination of a fifth movement), it was largely the same piece Dvořák had submitted many years before—and if it had been published when first written, it would have been properly numbered as Dvořák’s opus 18. Simrock was reluctant to admit the work was so old, so they arbitrarily designated it as “Opus 77” to make the quintet seem like a recent composition—a move that undermined Dvořák’s reputation slightly, since knowledgeable critics could tell that it didn’t resemble the other pieces he was writing in the late 1880s.

This is not to say that the youthful *Bass Quintet in G* was an inferior piece—but music, like clothing, goes through changes of fashion, and the quintet belonged to an earlier time. The combination of instruments was quite unusual: Dvořák called for a string bass to supplement the standard string quartet of two violins, viola, and cello. There had been earlier chamber works with bass, such as Schubert’s well-known “Trout” quintet in 1819, but Schubert had employed a piano instead of a second violin. Nevertheless, the addition of the low bass voice gives Dvořák’s quintet extra robustness, which suits its sometimes folksy quality—for Dvořák was one of the Romantic Era’s “nationalists,” meaning that he celebrated the music of his (often beleaguered) native land by incorporating its folksongs and idioms into his art music. Dvořák’s Slavonic heritage is especially apparent in the “Scherzo,” a rollicking dance that interweaves sharp string blows and racing melodic lines around a more peaceful central “Trio.” The slow movement is fluid and tender, much like a *romanza*, and the “Finale” is filled with the energy we would expect from a composer in his early thirties.

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)—*Sextet No. 2 in G major, op. 36 (1865)*

Just because a composer belongs to the “Romantic” era doesn't mean he will make a good romantic partner, as the soprano Agathe von Siebold learned—to her cost—after meeting Johannes Brahms in 1858. The 26-year-old Brahms was infatuated with Agathe, whose voice sounded to him like an Amati violin. Rings were exchanged, but when a friend noted that it was time to set a wedding date, Brahms panicked. He wrote to Agathe: “I love you! I must see you again! But I cannot wear fetters. Write to me, whether I am to come back . . .” Agathe was devastated by Brahms’ suggestion that marriage to her represented shackles; she replied that he needn’t bother coming to see her—ever again.

To Brahms’ credit, he recognized that he had “played the scoundrel toward Agathe,” although he does not seem to have attempted a reconciliation. His feelings of guilt remained with him for years, but in time, he wrote to a friend, saying, “I have freed myself from my last love.” It seems that in his *Sextet No. 2*, Brahms had devised a repetitive theme with the pitches A-G-A-B-E. There is no musical pitch labeled “T,” but in German practice, the pitch B is designated H (since, in German, the letter “B” is applied to the pitch B-flat). Therefore, Brahms had imbedded the phrase “A-G-A-(T)-H-E” within the texture. Some commentators believe that the frequent A’s, D’s, and E’s that appear in the following passage are a musical depiction of “ade,” German for “farewell.”

Besides conveying his bittersweet message, Brahms summoned a wide variety of moods and textures from the sextet’s paired violins, violas, and cellos. The trembling background oscillation of the first movement might evoke the buzzing bees of summer—dare we suggest that this represents the season in which he had first met Agathe? The “joke” of the Scherzo is immediately apparent: its outer sections are set in duple meter, rather than the conventional triple pulsation—are the lovers out of step with each other? The critic Eduard Hanslick quipped that the third movement consisted of “variations on no theme.” Its opening phrases are indeed not really singable, but they lend themselves very well to wide-ranging transformations. The exuberant energy of the finale contrasts sharply with the somewhat plaintive variations, and Brahms himself called this movement “jolly.” It might be best *not* to speculate why he felt this way.