

Friday, July 23, 2010

Chamber 4

Director's Circle

Piano Trio in G major, Hob. XV: 25 “Gypsy Rondo” (1795)

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732–1809)

Andante

Poco adagio

Finale: Rondo all’Ongarese: Presto

Piano Quartet No. 1 in C minor, op. 15 (1884)

Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924)

Allegro molto moderato

Scherzo: Allegro vivo

Adagio

Allegro molto

Piano Trio No. 1 (2002)

Patrick Zimmerli (b. 1968)

Allegro

Semplice

Energico

Molto rubato—Largo—Presto

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732–1809)—*Piano Trio in G major*, Hob. XV: 25 “Gypsy Rondo” (1795)

Although Haydn was never a slouch of a composer, three of his late piano trios—published in 1795 during his second stay in London—are among his most admired chamber pieces. They were dedicated to one Rebecca Schroeter—but who was she? She was (as commentators modestly put it) more than a close friend, as we can tell from one of her many letters to Haydn: “My thoughts have been CONSTANTLY with you, and indeed My Dear Love, no words can express half the tenderness and AFFECTION I FEEL FOR YOU. I thought you seemed out of Spirits this morning, I wish I cou’d always remove every trouble from your mind. Be assured, my Dear, I partake with the most perfect Sympathy in ALL YOUR SENSATIONS, and my regard for you is STRONGER EVERY DAY. My best Wishes always attend you and I ever am, my Dear Haydn, most sincerely your faithful ----” In short, she was, according to Haydn, “a beautiful and charming woman, whom I, if I had been single at the time, would very easily have married.”

The *Trio in G major* opens with the violin doubled by the keyboard’s right hand, and the result is a charming, bell-like sound. The “Poco adagio,” on the other hand, is a type of “miniaturization” of the slow movement from Haydn’s own Symphony No. 102, written the same year. However, it is the trio’s “Finale” that has earned it the nickname “Gypsy Rondo”; the mode shifts between major and minor, and the tempo surges ahead, then relaxes, as if it were controlled by a mesmerizing Romany violinist.

Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924)—*Piano Quartet No. 1 in C minor*, op. 15 (1884)

We often forget that music—and musicians—can be politically motivated. A case in point was the establishment of the Société Nationale de Musique in 1871. Frenchmen wanted the society to celebrate French music—in other words, music that was *not* German, since France was still licking its wounds after the Franco-

Prussian War. Regardless of the initial impetus, the society provided a wonderful venue for up-and-coming composers. One of the premieres in 1880 was that of Fauré's *Piano Quartet in c minor*—which, alas, bombed. Fauré later explained, “They found my music noisy and discordant,” and he continued revising it after the premiere. Although this quartet would come to be regarded as one of Fauré's first masterpieces, he had great difficulty in finding a publisher, and he experienced more than one demoralizing rejection; he later referred to the firm of Choudons as the “Terror of Quartets.”

With the passage of time (and perhaps because of the revisions), it is hard for us now to hear what had disturbed Fauré's early listeners. After a majestic opening, the first movement alternates between forcefulness and dreaminess. The lively scherzo has a carefree melodic line dancing above an energetic accompaniment, with the strings playing pizzicato for long stretches. The subsequent “Adagio” is a deliberate and solemn meditation—a last period of thoughtfulness before launching into the “Allegro molto.” This finale ebbs and flows through both lyrical moods and passages of ominous urgency until climbing to an enormous climax of almost orchestral intensity—it is possible to forget that it is a “mere” quartet that is playing.

Patrick Zimmerli (b. 1968)—*Piano Trio No. 1* (2002)

When Mark Lehman, writing for *American Record Guide*, reviewed Patrick Zimmerli's piano trios, he observed that the young composer had “a powerful desire to please his audience”—an interesting comment, in light of the fact that Zimmerli specifically examined the relationships between composers and audiences for his doctoral degree at Columbia. Zimmerli acknowledged the rift that often occurs between listeners and new music, despite the “years of intensive labor” that composers may have expended on those works. In many ways, he's become a bridge-builder between the esoteric and the popular, writing pieces that are skillfully and intricately crafted, yet sparkle with energy and visceral appeal—qualities that certainly characterize his *Piano Trio No. 1*.

Since Zimmerli was twice named “Best Young Jazz Soloist” by *Downbeat Magazine*, we would expect jazz to play a strong role, and it does—but jazz must jockey for attention among a host of other techniques, many of which are still firmly grounded in the classical world. The four-movement architecture resembles numerous Romantic masterpieces, as do many of the internal structures: the “Allegro,” for instance, is a sonata form that opens with a powerful, Brahmsian upward-arching unison for the full ensemble; the rest of the movement has an underlying sense of urgency. The pizzicato cello at the start of “Semplice” hints at a cool jazz texture, but the harp-like sweeps of the piano echo the harmonies of Impressionist composers. The “Scherzo” is a wild collage, with glimpses of country fiddling, Spanish dance rhythms, and perhaps even a plaintive Hasidic tune. The finale's slow opening is a much-needed breather before the tempestuous “Presto” and its stormy conclusion.