Saturday, July 24, 2010
Chamber 5

Introduction and Allegro (1905) — Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

String Quartet in E minor, op. 44, no. 2 (1837) — Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)
Allegro assai appassionato
Scherzo: Allegro di molto
Andante
Presto agitato

Impresiones de la Puna (1934) — Alberto Ginastera (1916–1983)
Quena: Lento
Canción: Moderato
Danza: Animado

Octet in C minor, op. 15a (1849–50) — Woldemar Bargiel (1828–1897)
Adagio—Allegro appassionato
Andante sostenuto—Allegro
Allegro

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)—*Introduction and Allegro* (1905)

We often believe that composers should write music as the spirit leads them—that art should be "for art's sake"—but outstanding works may result even from commercial impulses. Ravel's *Introduction and Allegro* is one example: it exists because of the competition between rival harp manufacturers, Érard and Pleyel. Érard had the edge because it supplied harps to the prestigious Paris Conservatoire. When Pleyel developed a chromatic harp model—and persuaded the Brussels Conservatory to offer an instructional course in the instrument—the firm also commissioned Debussy to write a work featuring the new instrument's capabilities. *Danse sacrée et danse profane* (1904) was the result, and Érard clearly felt that the gauntlet had been thrown, since they immediately asked Ravel to write a new work to feature *their* harp.

Anxious to finish the commission before a summer canal cruise, Ravel devoted a "week of continuous work and three sleepless nights" to the septet, consisting of a string quartet, flute, clarinet, and of course harp. Parallel thirds in the winds present an almost eerie opening, quickly warmed by the strings and then transformed by the harp. Two main themes intertwine in various supple combinations, and the overall result is magical.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)—*String Quartet in E minor,* op. 44, no. 2 (1837)

Eyebrows are usually raised upon learning that Mendelssohn's *String Quartet in E minor* was composed during his honeymoon. What we must remember, however, is that many nineteenth-century wedding trips were no fleeting "five days, four nights" excursions to Cancún; instead, a honeymoon journey might last more than a month, as was the case for Mendelssohn and his new bride Cécile: they left for the Black Forest in March and didn't return to Frankfurt until May. Moreover, the quartet was not completed until they had been home for several weeks.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting the circumstances that gave rise to the quartet, since Mendelssohn's marriage seems to have been especially happy. It is easy to persuade ourselves that the quartet reflects that contentment, despite its use of the minor mode. Analysts can demonstrate that Mendelssohn employs an ambitious sonata-form architecture in all movements, but listeners will probably choose to focus on the song-like themes of the opening or the skittering drive of the "Scherzo." Mendelssohn refuses to let the players drag during the "Andante," and as if the "Presto agitato" wasn't brilliant enough, he requires the quartet to play "con fuoco" (with fire) near the end.

Alberto Ginastera (1916–1983)—*Impresiones de la Puna* (1934)

Many a young man has been mortified when he brings home his fiancée to meet his family, only to have his mother unearth a childhood photo album. More often than not, though, both his mother and his bride-to-be are delighted to coo over those photographic legacies, since they can see what he cannot: that the photos show a fresh-faced, innocent boy whose eyes reflect his curiosity and wonder about the world. In a way, this situation resembles Ginastera's attitude toward *Impresiones de la Puna*; he wrote it when he was only eighteen, and later withdrew it from his catalogue, claiming that it was merely "the essay of a good student." Fortunately, he allowed it to be reinstated, for it is a beautiful evocation of the Argentine puna—the treeless, windswept wasteland in the high Andes.

The flute and string quartet also celebrate the traditional music of the pre-Columbian tribes who resided in that desolate landscape. "Quena" is a South American flute, so the modern flute's solo cadenza mimics that older instrument. The "Canción" (Song) sways gently, but contains a central "Yaraví," a plaintive Andean lament. The "Danza" is filled with syncopated rhythms and spirited energy, as promised by its "dance" title.

Woldemar Bargiel (1828–1897)—*Octet in C minor*, op. 15a (c. 1850)

It is fairly well known that Robert Schumann studied piano with Friedrich Wieck and ended up marrying Wieck's daughter Clara (much against Wieck's wishes). It is a little less widely known that Wieck and Clara's mother Marianne had divorced when Clara was five, but Wieck had retained custody of his talented daughter (as was his legal right). Marianne remarried much more happily in 1825, and she bore Adolph Bargiel a son in 1828, christened Woldemar. Clara re-established relations with her mother after her own marriage in 1840, and thus she and Robert came to know her young half-brother. When Woldemar showed musical talent in 1846, Robert advised him to attend the Leipzig Conservatory, recently founded by Felix Mendelssohn.

Bargiel distinguished himself with his *Octet in C minor*, which was performed at one of the public examinations at the conservatory. It was not published until 1877, but it stands as one of his most popular works. A somewhat ominous slow introduction explodes into a stormy "Allegro appassionato," and the second movement—in a more cheerful F major—has a similar tempo contrast, but jumps back and forth between tempos four more times. The rollicking finale in C major brings the octet to an exuberant close.

Copyright 2010 by Dr. Alyson McLamore