

JULY 22—CHAMBER MUSIC—WORLD TRADITIONS

Wednesday, July 22, 2009, 7:30 PM
United Methodist Church, San Luis Obispo

Last Round (1996)

Oswaldo GOLIJOV (b. 1960)

Few people can think of Argentine music without hearing the tango—and thoughts of the tango bring to mind the great Astor Piazzolla. When Oswaldo Golijov was still a child, he saw Piazzolla perform at a local hotel café in La Plata, Argentina. Golijov was transfixed: “I had never heard a living composer play his own music.” This “defining moment” contributed to his decision to pursue a career in composition.

Golijov was shaken when he heard that Piazzolla had suffered a stroke in 1991, and he started sketching a slow movement for a string quartet. When another stroke carried Piazzolla off in 1992, Golijov began working in earnest, with the encouragement of string-playing friends. He added a first movement, much faster and intense in character, and he increased the ensemble to a nonet of two string quartets plus a string bass (and he later expanded the group even further to encompass a full string orchestra). One instrument that does not figure in either instrumental grouping is the bandoneón, the small accordion-like instrument that Piazzolla helped make famous—yet it is present in an over-arching way, for Golijov uses the strings to create the inward and outward “breathing” of the instrument’s bellows.

The title of *Last Round* comes from a boxing story, for Golijov was trying to give Piazzolla’s feisty spirit one more moment in the ring. Moreover, the plaintive second movement is crafted as a fantasy on the tango melody *Mi Buenos Aires Querido* (*My Beloved Buenos Aires*), composed by another celebrated Argentine, Carlos Gardel.

Cello Sonata in d minor, op. 40 (1934)

Dmitri SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975)

To what extent does a composer’s personal life influence his music? Does he wear his heart on his sleeve, as it were? Or does musical artistry transcend a composer’s specific circumstances? In the case of Shostakovich’s Cello Sonata, the answer is: we don’t know! Certainly Shostakovich’s life was quite eventful in 1934, when he was working on the sonata: he had been married to his wife Nina for two years by that point, and was supporting himself and his bride on proceeds from his recent opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*, which was initially well received. His friend (and, as a cellist, his recital partner) Viktor Kubatsky had been urging him to write chamber music. Since Shostakovich himself had declared that Soviet composers should not neglect this genre, the sonata, crafted in a customary four-movement plan, clearly honored this ideal.

At this juncture, however, the situation grew complicated. While working on the sonata in the summer of 1934, Shostakovich began an affair with a young woman he had met through performances of his opera. The passions ran high enough that Shostakovich separated from his wife (and, in Nina’s version of the events, they actually divorced). By the following year, however, the affair had ended; he and Nina were back together, and their first child Galina was born in May 1936.

Are there turbulent, passionate moments in the sonata? Certainly—just as there is tongue-in-cheek humor and occasional bitterness. The opening is pensive, while the second movement seems relentless in its drive. The stillness of the third movement invites comparisons with icy, frozen landscapes, but the finale’s folksy energy shakes off the chill—perhaps metaphorically stamping the feet in the frequent “hammered” chords.

String Quintet in G Major, op. 111 (comp 1890; pub'd 1891)

Johannes BRAHMS (1833–1897)

The virtuoso violinist Joseph Joachim did not believe in encores—but when he participated in a performance of Brahms' *String Quartet No. 2 in G* in December 1890, not long after the work's official premiere, the continued cheering of the audience forced Joachim to play the slow movement a second time ("against my principles," as he wryly informed the composer). It is not hard to see what the audience found so appealing: the viola starts the "Adagio" with a luscious, Hungarian-tinged tune that is then used as the basis for a series of free variations.

The quintet's first movement opens with a vigorous pulsation, preparing the way for the dramatic melody that is played by—the cello (!)—instead of the customary violin. Brahms, as many listeners know, wrote only four symphonies, but he had sketched ideas for a fifth symphony, and the quintet's energetic opening is borrowed from those sketches. As is typical in a four-movement work, Brahms composed a dance as the third movement, but he set it in the minor mode, giving this "Andantino" an unexpected poignancy. The finale begins quietly, but soon yields to exuberant high spirits.

Max Kalbeck, attending a rehearsal of the quintet, suggested that the work might represent "Brahms in the Prater," referring to a park where the Viennese enjoyed public recreation. Brahms, laughing, agreed: "You've hit it! Among all the pretty girls there, eh?" When Brahms sent the quintet to his publisher, he announced that it represented his retirement. Fortunately for posterity, Brahms couldn't stop himself; he continued to compose for the next seven years.

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