

JULY 24—CHAMBER MUSIC—DIRECTOR'S CIRCLE

Friday, July 24, 2009, 7:30 PM
United Methodist Church, San Luis Obispo

Duo for Violin and Cello, op. 7 (1914)

Zoltán KODÁLY (1882–1967)

Who is Zoltán Kodály? Among music educators, Kodály is celebrated as the founder of a highly influential approach to teaching music—a methodology predicated on the simple belief that “music is for everyone.” Kodály developed systematic tools to help Hungarian schoolchildren attain musical literacy, and after presenting his ideas at an international education conference in 1958, his approach began to be used in schools throughout the world; many teachers use his techniques to this day.

Ethnomusicologists, on the other hand, who study music in the context of culture, claim Kodály as a pioneer in their field. For decades, Kodály hauled cumbersome early recording equipment all over eastern Europe, collecting folksongs from villages near and far and thereby helping to preserve the folk legacy of his native region.

For audiences, however, Kodály is a composer who skillfully blended characteristics from Hungarian folk music into the new currents of contemporary art music, and his *Duo for Violin and Cello, Op. 7*, is one example. Although the Duo contains a full array of “modern” string-playing challenges—pizzicato, harmonics and other virtuosic techniques—Kodály melds these into a partnership that often resembles the give-and-take of Magyar musicians. Sometimes the players take turns in the “starring” role, sometimes they go their separate ways in rapid flurries of sound, and sometimes they come together for tight-knit unison playing. Kodály also borrows some of the modal scales and rhythmic freedom that are found in Hungarian folksong, and it is possible to hear echoes of the old verbunkos recruiting dance in the finale—a dance that alternates between stately passages and stretches of wild abandon.

Viola Quintet in E-flat Major, op. 97 “The American” (1894)

Antonín DVOŘÁK (1841–1904)

When newcomers arrive in America, they often head to popular destinations: New York, of course, and sometimes Las Vegas and Hollywood, or perhaps natural wonders such as the Grand Canyon and Yosemite. Not many people set their sights on Spillville, Iowa, but this was Antonín Dvořák’s target during the summer of 1893. He had come to the United States to serve as director of the newly founded National Conservatory of Music in New York, and he travelled to Iowa during his first vacation because of the substantial expatriate Czech population that had settled there. It was comforting to be surrounded by speakers of his native language, and he found the quiet atmosphere stimulating for composition. After finishing his twelfth string quartet, Op. 96, he turned his pen to Op. 97, the *String Quintet in E-flat*.

Both the quartet and quintet carry the nickname “American” because of their place of origin; they also share a clarity and directness that contrasts with Dvořák’s earlier chamber music. Dvořák had said he “wanted to write something really melodious and simple.” The quintet requires an ensemble of two violins, two violas, and a cello, and Dvořák puts special emphasis on the extra viola right at the start, allowing it to play a solo opening melody before bringing in the rest of the ensemble. The tune’s pentatonic quality and later stretches of steady rhythmic patterns have led to the suggestion that Dvořák was influenced by the music of Iroquois Indians. Regardless of his inspiration, the quintet reflects Dvořák’s gift for writing soulful themes as well as passages of exuberant cheerfulness.

Piano Trio No. 2 (2003)

Patrick ZIMMERLI (b. 1968)

Patrick Zimmerli is the youngest composer to be represented in this year's Festival Mozaic repertory; he earned his bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees at Columbia University, where he now teaches as an adjunct assistant professor. Although he is himself a saxophone player with strong interests in jazz (*Downbeat* Magazine twice named him "Best Young Jazz Soloist"), his compositions span a much wider gamut of styles and approaches—some written for familiar ensembles, and others for more unusual combinations of instruments.

Zimmerli's *Piano Trio No. 2* is a perfect illustration of his compositional eclecticism. The trio premiered in July 2004, commissioned by the Seattle Chamber Music Festival (which had also commissioned Zimmerli's first trio); Zimmerli regards the second trio as a "pendant" to the first, in the "companion piece" sense. Scored for a conventional grouping of violin, cello and piano, the trio also uses a four-movement framework that is found in thousands of chamber works. Astute listeners may even recognize the first movement's sonata form structure, as well as the fact that Zimmerli never wanders too far away from traditional tonality. A quick fanfare opens and then punctuates the throbbing slow introduction, which eases into the energetic "Vivace" tempo. The intertwining melodies are somewhat Brahmsian; the unexpected rhythmic complexities are entirely modern. Jazz elements are sprinkled into the texture as well. The other three movements also keep listeners (and the performers) on their toes: the pianist plucks the piano strings during the "Andante," the instruments play passages in an off-balance 7/4 meter, and a host of other virtuosic elements unfold as the players approach the last movement's exciting "grand finale."

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