

THE KUSS QUARTET

JANA KUSS, VIOLIN WILLIAM KOHLMAN, VIOLA
OLIVER WILLE, VIOLIN FELIX NICKEL, CELLO

THURSDAY, JANUARY 19, 2006

- PROGRAM -

The Art of the Fugue, BWV 1080

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

Contrapunctus 1

Contrapunctus 4

Contrapunctus 6, a 4, im Stile francese

Chorale

Adagio and Fugue in C Minor, K. 546

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)

Hommage à Mihály András

12 Microludes for string quartet, Op. 13

GYÖRGI KURTÁG (1926-)

I. [♩=20]

II. [♩=60-80]

III. ♪ =160-152

IV. Presto

V. Lontano, calmo, appena sentito

VI. [♩=20-30]

VII. (no tempo markings)

VIII. Con slancio

IX. Pesante, con moto/Leggiero

X. Molto agitato

XI. [♩=20]

XII. Leggiero, con moto, non dolce

- INTERMISSION -

Quartet in C Minor, Op. 51, No. 1

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Allegro

Romanze: Poco Adagio

Allegretto molto moderato e comodo

Allegro

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JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

The Art of Fugue

The *Art of Fugue* is considered one of the greatest achievements of Western man. While most of Bach's compositions were composed for utilitarian purposes---usually of a religious nature--- the *Art of Fugue* must have been written as an intellectual activity, almost as a teaching work for advanced players. It carried the Baroque tradition of counterpoint to its peak.

The story of the life of Johann Sebastian Bach is well known to most listeners of classical music. Bach was born into an extraordinary and extended family of musicians, and fathered twenty children of his own. He was a rather stubborn, self-confident man and had no tolerance for mediocrity, even among the students whom he was assigned to teach. Bach was a conscientious worker at a time in Germany when composing and performing music were professions that filled specific needs in the community---a cantata for Sunday or other church-related holidays, an exercise book for young students, an organ piece that demonstrated a particular instrument or voice. As a virtuosic keyboard player and sometimes violinist or violist, Bach composed for each occasion, without anticipating that his work would be published. Organist and teacher in the courts and churches of Arnstadt, Muhlhausen, Weimar, and finally Cothen, he probably expected that much of his music would disappear after his death.

In several instances, however, it is clear that Bach intended to pass particular works on to posterity. The *Art of Fugue* was begun in the mid-1740's and was still being worked on at the time of Bach's death in 1750. Played in its entirety, it lasts for nearly an hour and a half. Bach did not specify how he intended the piece to be played---whether on the organ, by an orchestra, or by something in between. Many scholars feel that it seems best suited to the organ. The clarity of the voice leading is of prime importance as opposed to the production of particular instrumental colors.

The Latin term *fuga* translates into English as "fleeing" or "chasing" and, in the case of music, refers to the contrapuntal technique of imitation. The *Art of Fugue* consists of variations based on a single twelve-note theme. There are four initial fugues, followed by counter-fugues, double and triple fugues, several canons and mirror fugues, all proceeding in increasing complexity---enough for a lifetime of study. The work summarizes everything there is to know about counterpoint. And yet it endures as music of majesty and beauty in its own right to even an uninformed listener.

In the closing fugue, Bach apparently decided to insert his own name (B=B flat and H=B natural in German nomenclature). Just as his name appears, the piece stops abruptly. The emotional shock of hearing the B-A-C-H theme, followed by sudden silence, is a shattering experience. A final chorale is often added to conclude the performance of this great work.

Some of the notes played by the second violinist and violist fall below the range of their instruments. These notes must be either transposed to a different register, or played on a viola and/or tenor viola respectively.

Several interesting performance issues that might be encountered by a string quartet performing this work are considered in Vikram Seth's novel, *An Equal Music*.

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WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)
Adagio and Fugue in C Minor, K. 526 (1788)

Mozart made his final break from the Archduke of Salzburg and moved to Vienna in 1781. The move, necessary from a professional standpoint, also served to rid Mozart of some of the control that had been exerted over him by his father, Leopold. Mozart was virtually on his own for the first time in his life, and he began the period of his greatest creativity.

In Vienna, Mozart made the acquaintance of several influential people, one being the Austrian ambassador to Prussia, Baron Gottfried van Sweiten. A fan of the work of Bach and Handel, the Baron had brought to Vienna the scores of many works by the two composers. Van Sweiten held regular musicales in his home, which Mozart attended, and where he was able to familiarize himself with the contrapuntal writing of Bach. In 1782 he wrote to his father, "I go every Sunday at 12 o'clock to Baron van Swieten, where nothing is played but Handel and Bach." It was apparently during the reading sessions at van Sweiten's home that Mozart became acquainted with the *Art of Fugue*.

Mozart married Constanze Weber in August 1782, an act which totally disgusted his father. Perhaps to placate his father, he wrote the following words concerning the new interest in fugues: "When Constanze heard the fugues she fell absolutely in love with them. Now she will listen to nothing but fugues.... Well, as she had often heard me play fugues out of my head, she asked me if I had ever written any down, and when I said I

had not, she scolded me roundly for not recording some of my compositions in this most artistic and beautiful of all musical forms.”

Mozart arranged a few of Bach's fugues for string trio and for quartet (K. 404a, 405). Another result of his newfound interest was the Fugue in C minor for two pianos (K.426), composed in 1783. It is written in strict four-part counterpoint, is of a very serious nature, and makes ample use of inversions and of *stretto*, (imitation of the subject in such close proximity that the subjects begin to overlap). Mozart's initial subject for this fugue is Baroque in nature.

In 1788, Mozart returned to the work for two pianos and rescored it for strings. This time he preceded it with a dark and mysterious Adagio. The Adagio and newly scored Fugue became the composition that we will hear tonight. It is sometimes performed by full string orchestra. After Mozart's exposure to the music of Bach, a more polyphonic texture began to appear in his work and continued to be evident in his works until the end of his life.

Program notes © by Margaret Bragg, October, 2005

GYÖRGY KURTÁG(1926-)

Hommage à Mihály András

12 Microludes for string quartet, Op. 13

Kurtág's second *String Quartet* was written in 1977/78 for the sixtieth birthday of composer, conductor and cellist András Mihály. Mihály steadfastly fostered Kurtág's music in Budapest and conducted all of his early work. The quartet is dedicated to the German town of Witten where it was premiered by the Éder Quartet in 1978. The composer called it *12 Microludes*, twelve "mini-pieces." Kurtág initially worked with cycles of twelve "microludes" in the *Játékok*, originally composing them as didactic pieces for his son's piano studies. But these *Játékok*, of which four volumes have been published to date, are also a "reservoir of material" on which Kurtág repeatedly drew in later compositions. Many of the pieces in these collections were subsequently elaborated, scored for ensembles and integrated in other cycles, for example, in his Stockhausen homage, *Rückblick*, of 1993.

The second volume of the *Játékok* ends with two cycles of microludes: an *Hommage à Kadosa*, a second cycle whose concluding pieces are *Hommage à André Hajdu* and *Hommage à Nancy Sinatra*. Each of the twelve miniatures- often consisting of only one line- begins on a different

note, from C upwards to B. Thus, these explicit homages are complemented by an implicit homage to the composer of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Johann Sebastian Bach. Kurtág speaks of "a micro-well-tempered series without tonal constraints." Similarly, the second String Quartet consists of a cycle of twelve miniatures, most of them extremely brief and all of them extremely diverse. In twelve stages, the composer spans his entire spectrum of expression, from extreme stillness to "molto agitato," from dramatic eruptions to soft, limpid serenity, like Bach in his collection or Bartók in his *Mikrokosmos* for piano. Finally movements 1, 6 and 11 pay tacit homage to Girolamo Frescobaldi, the composer of a highly dissonant and enigmatic *Toccata di durezze e ligature*.

These 12 *Microludes* are one of two homages written for András Mihály: the third volume of the *Játékok* contains the other, in which Kurtág incorporated the first notes of Mihály's Cello Concerto.

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JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

String Quartet in C Minor, Op. 51, No.1 (1873)

For all that we associate Brahms with Romantic music of the richest color, he was in fact a Classicist, deeply preoccupied with the musical forms which had preceded him - the constructions and techniques of composers from Bach through Beethoven. He spent many years disciplining himself in these constructs, so much so that critics of his day considered him old fashioned. Greatly influenced by Beethoven's Op. 59 quartets (the Razumovskys), to say nothing of the last five, Brahms worked long and hard to compose quartets of structural unity in which each movement would contribute to the overall form of the whole and in which the form and content would be related. In the process of working out these ideas, he wrote and discarded many a quartet - twenty by his own reckoning - over a period of at least ten years, before allowing three to be published in 1873. Analysis of the musical material as well as the key relationships in his quartets shows just how well he accomplished his goal, yet the audience might well remain completely oblivious to these mechanics, so gorgeous, spontaneous and "right" does the music strike our ear.

The opening of tonight's quartet, marked Allegro, starts with a sweeping and agitated ascending theme which dominates the entire movement, although later one hears a loving and tender descending theme briefly played by the upper strings. It has been pointed out that except for

the third movement of this quartet, each is dominated by a single idea - a rising motif set against a falling one.

The *Poco adagio (Romanze)* starts out with a three-note phrase which is a paraphrase of the opening of the first movement, albeit in a major key, with the first violin playing as it were a counter theme. One could look at this movement as a loose variation or expansion of the first movement.

Although not clearly thematically related to the other movements, the Allegretto is, like the first movement, agitated, almost breathless, and made up of contrasting rising and falling motifs with seamless interplay among the four instruments. In the *animato* middle section, which shifts into a major key, Brahms makes use of a favorite device known as *bariolage* in which an instrument plays the same note on two different strings, setting up rich, penetrating overtones as a background to the other instruments.

The work ends with an Allegro in which the main theme is generated from the opening movement. It is symphonic in its powerful utterances and contrasting tenderness, again making masterful use of counterpoint - the interweaving of the voices. In a letter to its dedicatee, his close friend the famous surgeon Theodor Billroth, Brahms indicated that he had finally produced a string quartet worthy of publication. Performers and audiences agree.

Program notes © by Nora Avins Klein, October, 2005

The Kuss Quartet

JANA KUSS, VIOLIN

OLIVER WILLE, VIOLIN

WILLIAM KOHLMAN, VIOLA

FELIX NICKEL, CELLO

Founded in 1991 when its members were still students, the Kuss Quartet began its work with the support of Eberhard Feltz at the Hanns-Eisler Academy in Berlin. Its current members have played together since October 2001. The Kuss Quartet's teachers include the Alban Berg Quartet, Walter Levin of the LaSalle Quartet, pianist Ferenc Rados as well as Martha and Paul Katz - formerly of the Cleveland Quartet - who invited the young musicians to study with them at Boston's New England Conservatory during the 2001/2002 school year.

The ensemble has been internationally acclaimed since the begin-

ning of its career. In 2002, in addition to winning the prize of the Deutsche Musikrat, it also received First Prize in the renowned Borciani Competition. One year later, it was selected by the European Concert Hall Organization (ECHO) for the "Rising Stars" program and debuted on the most important concert stages in the world, including the Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Carnegie Hall, the Cologne Philharmonic, the Musée du Louvre Paris, Wigmore Hall London, the Teatro della Pergola in Florence and the Mozarteum in Salzburg. These debuts were followed by invitations which took the quartet on tours of the USA, Japan, Australia and South Africa. It guests at major festivals during summer months as well, appearing in 2005, for example, in Salzburg, Edinburgh and at the Schubertiade Schwarzenberg.

The Kuss Quartet's chamber music partners include Kim Kashkashian, Yuri Bashmet, Sharon Kam and Jörg Widmann. It regularly develops programs with actor Udo Samel that combine music and literature.

The young musicians consciously identify with the music of our time, maintaining close contact to contemporary composers. They have worked intensively with György Kurtág as well as accompanied two young, highly successful composers as they created their first works for quartet: Jörg Widmann and Lera Auerbach.

The quartet chose a very special juxtaposition of works for its first CD in 2003: Adorno's "Zwei Stücke" and Schönberg's String Quartet, op. 7. In August 2005, it released a recording with early and late works by Mozart and Mendelssohn on OehmsClassics.

In addition to concertizing, the Kuss Quartet makes it a point to engage audiences – both young and old – in discussion. Visits at schools, concerts for children as well as discussion concerts are a regular part of its work. Since 2005, a series of discussion concerts entitled "Discovering the string quartet" has been held in the Königs Wusterhausen castle near Berlin. A broad cooperation with the rbb (a cultural radio program) enables the quartet to present evening programs with guests from other arts in the Berlin club "Café Moskau" under the title "Kuss plus".

In February 2005, the ensemble accompanied German President Horst Köhler on his first official visit to Israel and gave a highly acclaimed concert in Jerusalem.

*The Kuss Quartet is represented by Melvin Kaplan, Inc.
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