

THE AMERICAN STRING QUARTET

PETER WINOGRAD, VIOLIN
LAURIE CARNEY, VIOLIN
DANIEL AVSHALOMOV, VIOLA
MARGO TATGENHORST DRAKOS, CELLO

WITH JAMES DUNHAM, VIOLA & NORMAN FISCHER, CELLO

TUESDAY, APRIL 25, 2006

- PROGRAM -

Quartet in B-flat Major, K. 589

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)

Allegro

Larghetto

Menuetto: Moderato

Allegro assai

Quartet No. 2, "Shadow Dances" (1992)

RICHARD DANIELPOUR (1956-)

Stomping Ground

The Little Dictator

My Father's Song

The Trickster

- INTERMISSION -

Sextet in G Major for strings, Op. 36, "Agathe"

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Allegro non troppo

Scherzo: Allegro non troppo

Poco Adagio

Poco Allegro

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)

String Quartet No. 22 in B major, K. 589 (Vienna, 1790)

From the Köchel numbers, which stop at 616, one can gather that tonight's quartet was written late in Mozart's short life. It was, indeed, composed in 1790, the second of three actually completed out of an original commission for six string quartets for the King of Prussia, himself a cellist and serious musician. Thus Mozart's last three quartets are known either as the "Prussian" quartets by reason of their provenance, or as the "solo" quartets by virtue of the starring rôle of the cello.

The first movement of K. 589 starts as an elegant, easy-going duet between the two violins; the cello soon takes over this first theme and then goes on to introduce the second theme, as well. The exposition is gracious and transparent. In the short development and in the recapitulation all the instruments have their moment but the cello continues to play its role as the lead among equals.

The Larghetto which follows is unabashedly a solo aria for the cello, joined later primarily by the first violin and with a brief but important glimpse at the viola.

Until this point, there have been no surprises. In form the quartet has been easy to follow; the arias have been tuneful and courtly and the instrumentalists have been congratulating themselves on how beautiful they sound. The Menuetto, too, starts in the same vein. But then things begin to heat up, and by the time the Trio arrives, the devil himself makes an appearance, for it contains the most ferociously difficult passages in all of Mozart's chamber music! This change of character is heralded at the beginning of the Trio's second section by an abrupt and unprepared key change fraught with serious difficulties of intonation for all and leading to a dark place as if blown off course by an ominous force. Performer beware! What was Mozart thinking? And would the Emperor have been amused by this Haydnesque joke? (We want to point out that the brunt of the joke falls on the first violinist). If tonight's performance of this movement sounds effortless, it is only because superbly trained musicians are playing.

Mozart had some difficulty deciding on an appropriate ending for this work. He settled on a movement which appears light-hearted at its outset by virtue of its gigue-like theme, but soon becomes dense in texture as contrapuntal lines are tightly interwoven in sometimes unexpected ways among all four voices, completely changing the nature of the composition. The movement is in sonata-rondo form but rather than merely repeating

the initial theme, Mozart returns it in inversion, or fragmented, or in surprising keys, subjecting it to a scholarly variety of manipulations - yet done in such a facile manner as to be hardly noticed as such. The blend of sound is perfect; the phrases are seamlessly interwoven; the music effortlessly glides along a three-dimensional path. The movement ends with a final short coda, an exquisite sigh of sweetness and light.

This *Allegro assai* is by far the most structurally complex movement of the quartet, crowning it with a fitting ending of melodic beauty, harmonic sophistication and a learned display of counterpoint - fit, that is, for a king.

Program note © by Nora Avins Klein, January, 2006

RICHARD DANIELPOUR (1956-)
String Quartet No. 2 ("Shadow Dances") 1992

Included among the many organizations that have commissioned works from Mr. Danielpour are the New York Philharmonic, the San Francisco Symphony, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Recent releases on the Sony label, with which the composer has an exclusive recording contract, include the Grammy Award-nominated recordings of *Anima Mundi* and the *Cello Concerto*.

Numbered among the composer's awards are a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Rockefeller Foundation Grant, and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He has recently completed a three-year composer residency with the Pacific Symphony.

Mr. Danielpour is a member of the composition faculty at the Curtis Institute and the Manhattan School of Music. He studied at the New England Conservatory of Music and the Juilliard School as both a composer and pianist.

The composer writes:

In this work each movement is an evocation of hidden, recessive, or "shadow" aspects (used in a Jungian vein) of personality. As Joseph Campbell spoke of a man as "one being with many personas" so this quartet is one work with four faces that hopefully complement and contradict one another within a unified whole.

The first movement, "Stomping Ground," is a return to the child within, to the exuberance and uninhibited wonder, energy and sense of surprise that we experience(d) as children. There is a play on words with this movement's title as much of the music revolves around a repeated bass line, or "ground."

The second movement, "the Little Dictator," is a scherzo which addresses the controller in us: the one who would rule and reign

partly in an effort to hide the true pain and vulnerability within. The movement alternates between a driven, almost obsessive march, and a gentler, more tender music to illustrate this.

"My Father's Song," the third movement, is actually music inspired by memories of my father's funeral. It involves the "shadowed" relationship we have with death, and the surrender and acceptance that we must submit to in order to confront this great and awesome mystery. This adagio – imbued with an air of mourning – is the darkest and at times, most despairing of the movements in the quartet. The slow descending scale figures that repeat in the movement's coda are an evocation of the "laying to rest" that occurs in bidding farewell to a loved one.

The finale, "The Trickster," refers to the character that often appears in folklore and literature in various guises: the jester, the coyote, the clown. In some cultures the symbol of the trickster had negative connotations. In almost all interpretations however, the trickster refers to a mercurial, highly spontaneous unpredictability; it is also an energy and a persona that teaches us that life cannot be controlled. Often the trickster appears in an event or through a person. Whatever the focus, the result is always accompanied by sudden change.

The music in this fast, frenetic movement recalls much of the material in the other three movements, transforming and transmuting the ideas into new but familiar ones. In this way, the quartet refers (as many works do) to its own inner nostalgia, and in doing so, acknowledges the connections inherent between the movements.

Program notes courtesy of the composer.

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)
Sextet in G Major, Op. 36 (1866)

"How are things in all those houses one liked so much to visit?...that particular house and garden near the city gate--" Obliquely, as was his way, Johannes Brahms was asking an old friend for news of Agathe von Siebold, the 23-year-old professor's daughter he had fallen in love with one summer in Göttingen, six years past. Apparently still not entirely free of the entanglements of his romance, he set to work on his second string sextet soon after writing the letter quoted above, weaving Agathe's name firmly into the first movement.

Brahms already had one string sextet to his credit (Op. 18 in B flat), the composition which first spread his name beyond a very small circle of admirers. It remains one of his most popular works to this day. But now, as frequently happened when Brahms wrote a pair of works in the same

genre, his second sextet would have a very different character, more complex on the whole, less immediately accessible to some, but perhaps ultimately even more rewarding.

The work begins with an unusual sound effect, the first viola playing a continuous two-note warble one half-step apart. This viola drone is the core of the music for the first 32 measures, around which the rest of the music swirls. "I could do without that first theme," Clara Schumann wrote to Brahms when he sent the work to her, "but what wonders you do with it!" It is easy to share her enthusiasm; you will hear Brahms using his two-note motive in various ingenious ways throughout the sonata-form movement, but a theme it is not. The actual first theme is a long, broadly contoured, sweeping yet serene melody played first by the violin and then by the cello. And in this expansive first movement there are several other themes that flow by in the resonant keys of G and D major, keys which allow string instruments to use open strings and vibrate at their best. Along with delicate, translucent scoring, that is what gives this movement its particular glow.

It is at the end of the second theme that Agathe makes her appearance, in a phrase with the notes A G A B E repeated urgently in the first violin and viola (the note B is called H in German practice). Brahms then expands this phrase into the entire closing section, and even in the recapitulation much later into the movement, he manages to work in the same notes in a canonic cascade of Agathes.

The second movement, in textbook ABA form, is wonderful not only to listen to, but to watch. The two violins, two violas, and two cellos are paired in every imaginable way, producing a kaleidoscope of timbres in an otherwise straightforward piece of music. Watch especially the beginning, as the cellos hand the pizzicato bass line back and forth, in ensemble playing that must be perfectly timed to sound as one instrument. You'll discover other groupings of two, three, and even four instruments, but what you will not hear are all six instruments playing either notes or rhythms in unison. With the B section we've stumbled on a countryside um-pa-pa band, in a startling change of pace. Here too, though, you can clearly hear and see pairs of instruments interspersed throughout the general gaiety.

The third movement is a Nocturne Fantasy disguised as a set of variations, or vice versa--a rhapsodic movement of great rhythmic complexity. The very theme, an unusual one in that the first part takes four measures and the second part eight, is rhythmically complex, not the kind of theme most composers would choose for a set of variations. As the piece progresses, cross rhythms, syncopations, and a sometimes dense polyphony

abound. Each individual part is exciting to play; only long training in communal self-denial enables the members of a good chamber ensemble to subdue their own parts in favor of the main voice of the moment and so avoid producing a continuous dull roar in the ear of the listener. But by the end of the movement rhythmic calm is restored, and the music ends in a shimmer of gorgeous sound.

The last movement brings us back to bright daylight. This boisterous sonata-allegro movement is full of Brahmsian tricks: an introduction that turns out also to be the bridge to the second theme and the basic ingredient of the development section; a recap that appears so unassumingly and unannounced that it is hard to catch; a double coda, the second of which is a recap of the development section; and measures of modernistic pointillism worthy of Anton Webern.

Brahms once commented that the public (and therefore publishers) expect a composer to continue to produce music of the sort he has already composed. For him this was unthinkable. One hundred and fifty years later, therefore, we are the beneficiaries of his independence, the fortunate possessors of two masterful string sextets, each with an entirely distinct personality.

Program notes © by Styra Avins, 1997

The American String Quartet

PETER WINOGRAD, VIOLIN LAURIE CARNEY, VIOLIN

DANIEL AVSHALOMOV, VIOLA MARGO TATGENHORST DRAKOS, CELLO

Internationally recognized as one of the world's finest quartets, the American String Quartet is celebrating its 30th anniversary during 2005-2006. Highlighting the anniversary is the Quartet's debut in a new series of recordings on the Arabesque label, including quartets of celebrated composer Richard Danielpour and the launch of the Complete Brahms String Chamber Music featuring a stellar list of collaborative artists.

In three decades of touring, the American has performed in all fifty states and appeared in virtually every important concert hall throughout the world. Their presentations of the complete quartets of Beethoven, Schubert, Schoenberg, Bartók and Mozart have won widespread critical acclaim. The 1998 Music Masters Complete Mozart String Quartets performed on a matched quartet set of instruments by Stradivarius are widely considered to have set the standard for this repertoire.

The American's innovative approach to concert programming has

won them a number of notable residencies in recent years, including "Beethoven the Contemporary" at the University of Michigan; The Six Mozart Viola Quintets at the Aspen Music Festival with Guarneri Quartet violist Michael Tree (broadcast live nationally via Chicago superstation WFMT); and a just-concluded 4-year cycle titled "4-5-6..." at Princeton University, where the Quartet performed the complete quintets and sextets of Mozart and Brahms, joined in each concert by renowned guest artists. Resident quartet at the Aspen Music Festival since 1974 and the Manhattan School of Music in New York since 1984, the American has also served as resident quartet at the Taos School of Music (1979 to 1998), the Peabody Conservatory, and the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. The Quartet's diverse activities have also included numerous international radio and television broadcasts, tours of Asia, and performances with the New York City Ballet, the Montreal Symphony and the Philadelphia Orchestra.

As champions of new music, the American has given numerous premières, most recently including Richard Danielpour's Quartet No. 4, commissioned by Kansas City Friends of Chamber Music, and Curt Cacioppo's "a distant voice calling", commissioned by Arizona Friends of Chamber Music. Albany Records released their recording of three quartets by Kenneth Fuchs in 2001.

Their extensive discography can be heard on the Albany, CRI, MusicMasters, Musical Heritage Society, Nonesuch and RCA labels. The Quartet is popular with national radio audiences and has been featured on Minnesota Public Radio's St. Paul Sunday Morning, National Public Radio's All Things Considered and live broadcasts on WFMT.

Formed in 1974, when its original members were students at the Juilliard School, The American String Quartet was launched by winning both the Coleman Competition and the Naumburg Award in the same year. Individually, the members devote additional time outside the quartet's active performance and teaching schedule to solo appearances, recitals and master classes.

JAMES DUNHAM, VIOLA

Soloist, chamber musician and teacher, James Dunham is active internationally as a recitalist and guest artist. He has collaborated with such renowned artists as Emmanuel Ax, Joshua Bell, Lynn Harrell, Cho-Liang Lin and members of the American, Guarneri, Juilliard, Takacs and Tokyo Quartets. An advocate of new music, he recently gave the premiere of Libby

Larsen's Viola Sonata, written for him. Summers are spent at festivals including Aspen, Santa Fe, Sarasota, and Ernen (Switzerland) Festival der Zukunft. Mr. Dunham is Professor of Viola at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music.

NORMAN FISCHER, CELLO

Norman Fischer is a founding member of the Concord String Quartet with which he performed throughout its 16- year career. Since 1971 Mr. Fischer has collaborated with pianist Jeanne Kierman as the Fischer Duo. His guest performances include appearances with the American, Chiara, Cleveland, Enso, Emerson, Julliard, Mendelssohn, and Schoenberg string quartets. A devoted teacher and mentor to younger players, Mr. Fischer has taught at Dartmouth College, the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, and currently is Professor of Violoncello at the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University.