

THE VERMEER QUARTET

SHMUEL ASHKENASI - VIOLIN

MATHIAS TACKE - VIOLIN

RICHARD YOUNG - VIOLA

MARC JOHNSON - CELLO

THURSDAY, APRIL 5, 2007

~ PROGRAM ~

Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 125, No. 1 (D. 87)

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

Allegro moderato

Scherzo: Prestissimo

Adagio

Allegro

Quartet in E minor (1906)

Frank Bridge (1879-1941)

Adagio; Allegro appassionato

Adagio molto

Allegretto grazioso

Allegro agitato

~ INTERMISSION ~

Quartet in E minor, Op. 44, No. 2

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)

Allegro assai appassionato

Scherzo: Allegro di molto

Andante

Presto agitato

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

String Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 125, No. 1, D. 87 (1813)

Fortunately for us, Schubert began writing quartets when he was a youngster away at school, an activity encouraged by his family who made it a ritual to perform the young composer's efforts during his holiday visits home. I say fortunately, because his death at the appalling age of 31 meant that he was writing his last quartets at the age when Beethoven was writing his first.

Tonight's quartet, until recently infrequently heard in concert, is from the year he left school at the age of 16. It is clearly a work of youth - full of cheer and energy - but already drawing on experience gained from producing more than half a dozen youthful string quartets. It has several intriguing features. First, all the movements are in the same key - a bold concept implying confidence he could generate interest by other means - melodic, rhythmic or formal. One can speculate that he was trying his hand at a Haydn-like experiment in musical economy. Next, we find extreme contrasts in tempi between the two middle movements - *Adagio* and *Prestissimo* - and then there is the absence of any written indication that the Trio section of the Scherzo needs to slow down. Finally, it already speaks in the recognizable voice of the future master.

In form this quartet follows the classical outline of Haydn and Mozart, movement by movement (the *Prestissimo*, often played before the *Adagio*, was intended to precede it). However, the first theme in both the first and last movements is repeated almost without making any advance, for its own sake rather than as a bridge to a second theme. On first hearing, one briefly wonders if the inexperienced Schubert may have got stuck in a rut. But then the second theme does appear and a lovely lyrical thing it is in each case. In particular, the exuberant last movement bubbles like champagne from a popped bottle, leading us into a theme of exceptional and exquisite Viennese charm - a stupendous achievement for one so young. This is probably the earliest Schubert chamber work one is likely to hear in the concert hall. It personifies the graceful optimism and high musical achievement of his youth, and we should be grateful that it is finally getting its due.

Program note © by Nora Avins Klein, January, 2007

FRANK BRIDGE (1879-1941)
String Quartet No. 1 in E minor (1906)

The compositions of Frank Bridge, one of the most beloved and influential English musicians of the early 20th century, have regained some of their former prestige in recent years. Born in Brighton, Bridge inherited from his father William, a professional lithographer and accomplished violinist and conductor, a love of string instruments. The younger Bridge eventually mastered the violin and viola, gaining admission to the Royal College of Music in London as a violinist at age 17. Only after 1899, when he received a scholarship to study with Charles Villiers Stanford, did Bridge cultivate his latent interest in composition.

Following graduation, Bridge performed in theater orchestras and with a variety of string quartets. His regular ensembles included the Grimson Quartet (2nd violin), the Motto String Quartet (viola) and the English String Quartet (viola). Bridge also appeared as a guest artist with the renowned Joachim String Quartet. His original compositions from these early years, not surprisingly, also favored chamber ensembles. In fact, Bridge's enormous lifetime output – including two dozen works for string quartet – make him perhaps the most prolific English chamber music composer from the first half of the century.

Bridge wrote his *String Quartet in E minor* “in under a month” before Oct. 31, 1906, the closing date for submissions to an international composition competition sponsored by the Accademica Filarmonica in Bologna. His score won honorable mention and was subsequently nicknamed the “Bologna” or “Italian” quartet. Bridge waited two and one-half years for the Accademica to return the individual string parts to his first quartet; the score remained in Bologna for several more years. The English String Quartet (with Bridge as violist) gave the world premiere on June 16, 1909 at Bechstein Hall in London. American audiences became acquainted with Bridge's chamber music through this work, which was performed in 1922 at the Berkshire Chamber Music Festival, founded two years earlier by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge.

Already in this early work, Bridge displays his multifaceted approach to composition, a unique blend of formal technique, adventurous chromaticism and an instinct for audience appeal. An important thematic fragment emerges in the sliding half-step motion and disjunct rhythms of the slow, melancholy cello soliloquy. Two full chords follow, then there is a passionate outburst as the first violin introduces a faster version of the opening theme. Expressive intensity steadily builds, but a viola melody

lends new calm. Bridge develops both themes, with particular emphasis on the lyrical second. The composer further reshapes his main melodies in the recapitulation; he abbreviates the dramatic opening theme, but compensates by casually extending the contrasting melody into all four string parts. The coda restates the opening theme fragment.

A heartfelt *Adagio molto* – described by some authors, chief among them Anthony Payne, as a “song without words” – comes next. The initial section contains two thematic ideas: three chords leading to a plaintive first-violin line, and a viola melody written beneath a syncopated accompaniment. Following a change of key, a tonally meandering lyrical theme inaugurates a series of quasi-variations that grow increasingly more impassioned. Bridge returns to his original thematic pairing in the final section.

The *Allegretto grazioso* is a scherzo imbued with a Mendelssohnian lightness enhanced by the danceable *siciliano* rhythm. A dotted-rhythm pattern soon emerges, recalling the opening movement. Pizzicato lower strings support a first-violin melody (alternating duplet and triplet rhythms) in the trio, then the scherzo music returns at a *pianissimo* dynamic level.

Bridge concludes with an *Allegro agitato* sonata movement. Rhythmic and chromatic reference to the “kernel theme” emerge in the violin melody, shadowed in parallel motion by the second violin and viola. The first violin also introduces a contrasting theme above throbbing offbeats in the cello. A sense of musical suspense builds in the development, then the two main themes return in mildly varied form. The coda boldly alternates thematic fragments from the first and final movements. This work concludes with a reappearance of the cello soliloquy heard in the opening measures of the quartet.

Program note © the Vermeer Quartet, 2007.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)
String Quartet in E minor, Op 44, No.2 (1837)

Although Felix Mendelssohn lived at a time when Romanticism was beginning to flower in Europe, he preferred in his own compositions to remain close to the classical forms and traditions. Born into a wealthy and cultured Jewish family of high ideals, Mendelssohn was recognized early as a musical prodigy and he quickly developed into an outstanding pianist, violinist, and composer. As is generally well known, he composed his famous String Octet when he was sixteen years old. The Mendelssohns' home in Berlin was a gathering place for the outstanding artists and intellectuals of the day. In stark contrast to the sufferings of most composers of his time,

Mendelssohn lived a life of relative ease. He received a broad and complete University education and during his lifetime, a brief thirty-seven years, Mendelssohn was known not only for his fine musicianship and outstanding compositions, but also for his fine drawings and paintings, his writings, and his mastery of many languages. He was also credited with bringing the neglected music of J. S. Bach to the foreground of musical life once more.

The String Quartet in E Minor was composed in 1837 during a very happy period in Mendelssohn's life. He had attained international recognition as a composer and was conductor of the highly regarded Gewandhaus Orchestra. He had married on March 28 of that year and was celebrating his honeymoon in Freiberg when he composed this quartet, completing it on June 18. Even though the quartet was published as Opus 44, No. 2, it was actually the first quartet composed of the three quartets comprising Opus 44. The Opus 44 quartets were dedicated to the Crown Prince of Sweden.

The first movement contains two very similar themes. The simple, songlike melody with which the first violin begins the movement is given a sense of urgency by the accompanying syncopations in the lower instruments. Passages of running sixteenth notes connect the lyrical passages. After the second theme is introduced by the first violin, the cello continues the melody in a high register, rising above the other instruments.

A rhythmic motif consisting of four sixteenth notes followed by a stream of eighth notes dominates the second movement. The viola introduces a melody of its own in the middle of the movement which it later restates. This movement is reminiscent of the overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1826) and brings to mind Shakespeare's realm of elves and fairies. It is not surprising to learn that, at the premier of this quartet, the audience demanded an encore of the Scherzo.

The beautiful Andante movement takes the form of "a song without words". Mendelssohn guards against over-sentimentality by giving the lower voices active parts to play and by writing the instruction to all four players that they *nicht schleppend*, or "do not drag." The final Presto utilizes two themes, one primarily rhythmic and the other melodic. The two are introduced one at a time and then are superimposed. The rhythmic figure wins out with a virtuosic dash to the finish.

Mendelssohn was already a highly admired composer by this time and each of his works was eagerly awaited. He completed the other two quartets of this series in 1838.

Program note © Margaret Bragg, January, 2007

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With performances in practically every major city in North America, Europe, and Australia, the Vermeer Quartet, which has achieved an international stature as one of the world's finest chamber music ensembles, will mark its final season of touring in North America in 2006-07 season. Since its formation in 1969 at Marlboro, the Vermeer has performed at many prestigious festivals including Tanglewood, Aldeburgh, Mostly Mozart, Bath, Lucerne, Norfolk, Taos, Albuquerque, Stresa, Berlin, Schleswig-Holstein, Santa Fe, Edinburgh, Spoleto, Ravinia, and the Casals Festival.

The ensemble's recent performances include chamber music societies in Calgary, Philadelphia, Columbus, and San Antonio, as well as on the chamber music series of Notre Dame, Pennsylvania State University, University of Washington, and Ohio University, among others. The Vermeer recently performed the Beethoven cycle under the auspices of Syracuse Friends of Chamber Music, and over a six year period performed the Beethoven cycle at the Cleveland Museum of Art. The group tours Europe at least twice each season, and returned to Japan for the fourth time in six years in the spring of 2005 and will do so again for a final time in the fall of 2007. In 2003 they received their second Grammy nomination for their CD of the Shostakovich and Schnittke piano quintets with Boris Berman on the Naxos label. Their recording of the six Bartok quartets was released by Naxos in May of 2005 and received their third Grammy nomination.

Now living in Chicago, the members of the Vermeer Quartet have been on the Resident Artist Faculty of Northern Illinois University at DeKalb since 1970. They are also Fellows of the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, England, where they have presented master classes since 1978. For over two decades they have spent part of each summer on the coast of Maine as the featured ensemble for Bay Chamber Concerts.

The Vermeer Quartet offers an impressive variety of repertoire, including not only the standard classics, but many less familiar compositions as well. They have also presented many new works for string quartet, a number of which were written for them. Their recordings include the complete quartets of Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Bartok, plus works by Schubert, Dvorak, Shostakovich, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Schnittke, Verdi, and Brahms. Their Grammy-nominated CD of Haydn's *The Seven Last Words of Christ* has been broadcast to over 60 million people throughout the world, thus reaching far beyond the traditional chamber music audience.

Visit the Vermeer Quartet at www.vermeerqt.com.