

EMERSON STRING QUARTET

EUGENE DRUCKER, VIOLIN

PHILIP SETZER, VIOLIN

LAWRENCE DUTTON, VIOLA

DAVID FINCKEL, CELLO

Tuesday, April 21, 2009

~ PROGRAM ~

String Quartet in B-flat Major, K. 589

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Allegro

(1756 - 1791)

Larghetto

Menuetto: Moderato

Allegro assai

String Quartet No. 1 in b minor, Op. 50

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Allegro

(1891 - 1953)

Andante molto

Andante

~ INTERMISSION ~

Six Bagatelles, Op. 9

ANTON WEBERN

(1883 - 1945)

String Quartet No. 13 in G Major, Op. 106

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Allegro moderato

(1841 - 1904)

Adagio ma non troppo

Molto vivace

Finale: Andante sostenuto; Allegro con fuoco

The Emerson String Quartet appears by arrangement with IMG Artists.

On the World Wide Web: imgartists.com

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756 - 1791)
String Quartet in B-flat Major, K. 589 (1790)

From the Köchel numbers, which stop at 616, one can gather that this quartet was written late in Mozart's short life. It was composed in 1790, the second of three which Mozart completed, of an original commission for six string quartets for the King of Prussia, who was 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 moments 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 King have been amused by this Haydnesque joke? (We want to point out that the brunt of the joke falls on the first violinist).

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 interweave tightly among the four voices in sometimes unexpected ways, 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 in fragments, or in surprising keys, subjecting the theme to a scholarly variety of manipulations harking back to the Baroque - yet done in such a facile manner as to be hardly noticed. The

blend of sound is perfect; the phrases mesh seamlessly; 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 this work, crowning it with a fitting ending of melodic beauty, harmonic sophistication and a learned display of counterpoint - fitting, that is, for a king.

Program note © by Nora Avins Klein, January 2006

SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891 - 1953)

String Quartet No. 1 in b minor, Op. 50 (1930)

Prokofiev left Russia at the approach of the Russian Revolution and, though he visited Russia frequently, he considered himself to be in self-imposed exile from his homeland from 1918 until 1936. Already a concertizing pianist and accomplished composer, he first tried his luck in America, but neither his music nor his playing was well liked here. His sharp percussive playing and similar style of composition was a sign of a new age while the country was still happy with the Romantic meanderings of Chopin and Liszt. An irascible man with unbending standards, he seemed to many people to go against the grain. Following the cool reception of his opera, *The Love for Three Oranges*, which was produced in Chicago in 1921, Prokofiev felt no affinity for the United States.

"I wandered through the enormous park in the middle of New York and, looking up at the skyscrapers bordering it, I thought with fury of the wonderful American orchestras that cared nothing for my music; of the critics who were repeating for the hundredth time, 'Beethoven is a great composer,' while balking violently at new works; of the managers who arranged long tours for artists playing the same hackneyed programs fifty times over."

Prokofiev then toured Russia in the hopes of returning home, but the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians which was formed in 1925 to promote music that suited the Soviet government worried him and he chose to settle in France, taking periodic trips around Europe.

By the year 1930 when Prokofiev made yet another tour of America, his style of composition was better understood and appreciated. In a musical climate that did not yet understand Schoenberg's advanced theory, Prokofiev's music was appreciated. Its dash, speed and outspoken athleticism, while often dissonant, was fairly tonal and followed traditional musical structure.

It was during this tour that the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., commissioned him to write a string quartet for their chamber music series. Prokofiev was not well-versed in the chamber music literature and this was his first such work. He composed mostly for full orchestra and/or piano. Of his total 130 compositions, there are only two string quartets and two chamber compositions for various combinations of strings and woodwinds.

At the time of this composition Prokofiev was contemplating a return to his homeland and the quartet is full of Russian-style melodies. To this listener, there are places in the quartet which bear an uncanny resemblance to the music for his future ballet, *Romeo and Juliet* (1935), particularly in the first movement and at the start of the final movement. The exposition of the *Allegro* is lengthy and is divided into several sections, quick passages alternating with lyrical sections. The short development is introduced by a series of repeated notes in the first violin and the recapitulation is quite short.

The second movement is a scherzo-like *Vivace*, preceded by a slow introduction, and is full of fast scales, accompanying spiccato arpeggios (used extensively in *Romeo and Juliet*), and lots of percussive offbeats. The forceful second theme is played first by the cello and then reiterated by other instruments. The final movement is full of haunting melodies that are Russian in manner and one hears hints of a keyboard style, not only in the ostinato figures, but also in the pairing of instruments, as if for right and left hands. The work ends with a lone accompaniment figure which fades away.

This quartet was premiered at the Library of Congress in April 25, 1931, by the Brosa Quartet, a well-known quartet at that time, led by the Spanish violinist Antonio Brosa.

Program note © Margaret Bragg, January 2009

ANTON WEBERN (1883 - 1945)

Six Bagatelles for String Quartet, Op. 9 (1911 - 1913)

Fin-de-Siecle Vienna was abuzz with intellectuals from all over Europe promoting radical ideas in the sciences, politics, and in the arts when Webern was a student at the University of Vienna. He wrote a PhD in musicology, specializing in the polyphony of the Renaissance. But after graduation in 1906, he went to Arnold Schoenberg to study composition (along with co-student Alban Berg). Together they worked out a system of music in which tonality, which in their view had been taken as far as it could go by Wagner, Strauss and Mahler, was replaced by a predetermined use of the 12 notes of

the scale in an order fixed by the composer without regard to the suggestions of the overtone series, from which Western tonality developed, and in which each of the 12 notes was given equal weight (twelve-tone music). None was to be repeated until each of the others had been sounded (serialism). Mathematical games could be played with this concept – all the notes could be played at once (clusters), or upside-down, or backwards and in various combinations. It should be noted that structural games like these were not new, but could be found in music of Bach and before. In fact, Webern viewed his music as an extension of the Western tradition, not a break from it.

It would not be an understatement to say that this music did not attract a large following. So Webern supported himself by conducting at a variety of German provincial theaters, in Prague, and in schools in Austria, London, and Barcelona. He lived a quiet life. His shooting death in a mountain resort town in 1945 post-war Austria was the result of a tragic blunder by an Allied soldier.

These six Bagatelles are intensely minimalistic. Each note can be viewed as representing an entire phrase; each has its own dynamic marking. The entire work, all 57 measures, occupies a mere three minutes. Webern said of this piece:

“While working on them I had the feeling that once the 12 notes had run out [referring to the 12 tones of the musical scale, which had to be played in the specified order] “the piece was finished...It sounds grotesque, incomprehensible, and it was immensely difficult.”

As for the listener, we note that the work is without recognizable meter; the sound quality changes from one bar to the next; phrases are evanescent; the dynamics change constantly. Each moment is fraught with meaning and meant to be sufficient unto itself. Harmonically, there is no central organizing pitch but rather clusters of notes one dissonant half step apart. The sonorities are varied to the maximum by a variety of devices – muting of the strings, harmonics, playing on the bridge, *pizzicato*. The intent of this music is different: its emphasis is not on melody or rhythm but on minuteness of detail, on variability of sound. The musicologist Paul Griffith observes that the instruments rarely play distinguishable lines; they are all in very much the same register, clustered in a constrained little aural space.

Webern remained convinced that audiences would be able to hear the structural logic of his music, identify the tone rows in their various guises and appreciate the art – and passion – in his constructs. Perhaps he was right and time will yet tell.

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841 - 1904)
String Quartet No. 13 in G Major, Op. 106 (1895)

By the time Dvořák was fifty years old, his music was quite popular in England and on the European continent, as well as in Russia, thanks to the friendship of Tchaikovsky. In 1892, Mrs. Jeannette Thurber invited Dvořák to come to America to direct the National Conservatory of Music in New York City. Before leaving for America, Dvořák spent a year making a farewell tour of Bohemia and Moravia with violinist Ferdinand Lachner and cellist Hanus Wihan, performing his "Dumky" Piano Trio in e minor in forty different concerts. The Dumky Trio captures, in its six movements, the rhythmic verve and the fresh melodies of Dvořák's native Czech folk music, portrayed in his own style of writing. Mrs. Thurber not only prized the idea of Dvořák's position as director of the conservatory, but also hoped that he would help to develop an American school of composition as he had done for his Czech homeland. Dvořák's efforts in this direction are best known through his Symphony No. 9, subtitled "From the New World", and his quartet in f minor known as "The American Quartet", both composed in 1893.

In 1895, partly due to the fact that Mrs. Thurber was in arrears for part of his salary, and partly because Dvořák was nostalgic for his homeland, he returned once again to take up duties as professor of composition at the Prague Conservatory. The final years of his life saw the birth of such symphonic poems as *The Water Goblin*, *The Noon Witch*, and *The Golden Spinning Wheel*, as well as the successful opera *Rusalka*. He also composed two last string quartets, Opus 105 and Opus 106, bringing his total number of chamber works to forty. Opus 106 was completed before Opus 105 but the opus number reflects the fact that Dvořák had written the first movement of his Quartet in A-flat Major and then set it aside, returning to it upon completion of the Quartet in G Major.

It is evident throughout the G Major Quartet that Dvořák has returned, for the most part, to themes from his Czech homeland. Only once in awhile is there a melody reminiscent of his American interests; the predominant mood of his last two quartets is one of fervent thanksgiving for his safe return to his native soil. The quartet is a gigantic work, heavier and thicker than one expects to hear in Dvořák's chamber works.

In the *Allegro moderato*, the lyrical second theme seems to be more important and more memorable than the more rhythmic first subject. The development is lengthy and elaborate. The *Adagio* is a lyrical movement so typical of Dvorak, with the single theme stated first in major, then in minor, and the form basically an alternating of these major and minor versions. Atypical,

however, is the fact that as the movement builds, the voicing becomes almost too full for a mere four instruments to handle. Each musician must play two, three, or four notes simultaneously, almost as if Dvořák needed to evoke a full string orchestra to realize his ideas. An improvisatory coda concludes the movement.

The third movement is a scherzo containing two trios and taking the form A-B-A-C-A. The two trios seem to have a gentle yodeling quality to them. The final movement begins with an augmentation of its main theme before the theme is heard in its entirety in tempo. The movement is full of Czech folk melodies which take on an increasingly meditative, faraway, reminiscent style. One also hears ideas that were first stated in the opening movement of the quartet, while the syncopated rhythm at the beginning and the closing of the finale remind one of the *Furiant*, a fiery Bohemian dance with constantly shifting accents.

Dvořák's G Major Quartet was first performed in Prague on October 9, 1896, by the Bohemian String Quartet.

Program note © Margaret Bragg, January 2009

Emerson String Quartet

The Emerson String Quartet stands alone in the history of string quartets with an unparalleled list of achievements over three decades: thirty acclaimed recordings produced with Deutsche Grammophon since 1987, eight Grammy Awards (including two for Best Classical Album, an unprecedented honor for a chamber music group), three Gramophone Awards, the coveted Avery Fisher Prize and cycles of the complete Beethoven, Bartók, and Shostakovich string quartets in the world's musical capitals, from New York to London to Vienna. The Quartet has collaborated in concerts and on recordings with some of the greatest artists of our time. After more than 31 years of extensive touring and recording, the Emerson Quartet continues to perform with the same benchmark intensity, integrity, energy and commitment that it has demonstrated since it was formed in 1976.

The 2008-2009 season comprises over 80 worldwide engagements, with a two-concert series at the Kennedy Center, a three-concert series at London's Wigmore Hall and a pair of concerts at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in the South Bank Centre, as well as three performances in Israel, where the quartet has not appeared since 1996. European tours include multiple stops in Spain, Germany, Italy, Denmark, Switzerland and France. In the early summer of 2009, the Quartet embarks on a debut tour of South

America, visiting Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Chile. North American engagements feature a performance in Carnegie Hall's Stern Auditorium as well as concerts in San Francisco, Stanford, Philadelphia, San Diego, Seattle, Boston, Montreal, Vancouver, Louisville and Houston. The Quartet continues its residency at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, now in its 29th sold-out season. The group is also proud to participate in the grand re-opening of Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall on February 22, 2009.

The Emerson is Quartet-in-Residence at Stony Brook University, where, in addition to chamber music coaching throughout the academic year, it has conducted intensive string quartet workshops in 2004, 2006 and 2008. The Quartet has also overseen three Professional Training Workshops at Carnegie's Weill Music Institute. In March 2004 the Emerson was named the 18th recipient of the 2004 Avery Fisher Prize – another first for a chamber ensemble.

Formed in 1976, the Emerson String Quartet took its name from the American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. Violinists Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer alternate in the first chair position and are joined by violist Lawrence Dutton and cellist David Finckel. The Quartet is based in New York City.

*Visit the Emerson String Quartet on the World Wide Web at
emersonquartet.com.*