CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF FORT WORTH PRESENTS
CMSFW Ensemble: "Unexplored Journeys"
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Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2024

Terzetto in C major for two violins and viola, Op. 74
Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

John Clapham has written that whenever Dvořák started on a new composition, he invariably did so to fulfill a personal need. The background to the Terzetto supports his statement. Scored for two violins and viola, this work dates from early 1887, but its history is linked to that of the second series of Slavonic Dances, Op. 72. The composer completed the new Slavonic Dances in their original version for one piano, four hands, in July 1886. His German publisher Fritz Simrock pressed him for the orchestration, rightfully sensing that there would be an immediate market for another set of the popular dances. Dvořák detested orchestrating, and in any case had a strained relationship with Simrock. He procrastinated the task, citing as his excuse a trip to England in October and November, during which he conducted the premiere and several additional performances of his oratorio *St. Ludmila.*

Upon his return to Prague, he tackled the laborious chore of orchestrating the Slavonic Dances. After completion of that task in January 1887, he turned with relief to the Terzetto, composing all four movements in a scant two weeks. A highly personal work, the Terzetto was written for pleasure, intended for performance by Dvořák himself (as violist) and two friends. One of the violinists was to be Josef Kruis, a young chemistry student who resided in the same lodging house as the composer; Kruis's teacher, one Jan Pelikán, a member of the National Theatre orchestra, was the other. Ironically, the Terzetto proved to be too difficult for Kruis, prompting Dvořák to compose some easier Bagatelles for the same instruments. Eventually he rewrote them for violin and piano; they were published by Simrock as the Romantic Pieces, Op. 75. But the Terzetto has carved its own unique niche in the chamber repertoire.

Though the Terzetto has four movements, its first two are played without pause, which contributes to the sense of smaller scale one perceives in this composition. Intimacy and sweetness result from the thinner texture. In the last two movements, the viola reaches frequently into its lowest range, at times valiantly trying to cover for the absent cello part. By and large, however, Dvořák succeeded well in meeting the challenges of balance presented by his unusual ensemble. He was particularly successful in the scherzo (a characteristic Bohemian *furiant*), and the fine set of ten variations with which the work ends.

Quintet for Strings in C Minor, K.406/K.416b

Wolfgang Amadè Mozart (1756-1791)

Mozart occasionally re-cast an existing work for different instruments, knowing that he had more chances for additional performance that way. Woodwind serenades were at particular risk of being otherwise forgotten, because patrons generally commissioned such works for a specific occasion. Once that event took place, the piece of music was shelved.

During the winter of 1787-1788, Mozart was working on a set of string quintets he planned to offer by subscription in spring. Two of them – the C Major, K. 515 and the G Minor, K. 516 – were newly composed works. It was customary to issue such sets in groups of three or six. Needing a third piece to round out the group, he turned to a wind serenade from the early 1780s. We know it as the Serenade in C Minor, K. 388 for two oboes, two clarinets, two horns, and two bassoons.

When he ascended to the Austrian throne in 1780, the Hapsburg Emperor Joseph II was

intent on increasing musical activity. One of his acts was to expand the imperial wind band (called a *Harmonie*), whose members were drawn from his official court orchestra. Such ensembles had gained in popularity among the Austrian nobility since the mid-1750s.

Initially he sought wind arrangements of tunes from popular operas. With the Emperor's imprimatur, the *Harmonie* became more fashionable. As other ensembles like it sprang up in Austrian culture, the Emperor's court composers and other Viennese musicians began to write background music for banquets and imperial occasions.

Mozart benefitted enormously from his experimentation with the limitations of scoring for winds alone. The expertise he developed in orchestration bore its richest fruit in the great piano concerti of the 1780s. That command was already in full evidence in the C Minor Serenade, K. 388, which he completed in 1782.

Its origins are uncertain. Mozart tended to write solely on commission, and imprecise references in his letters to his father Leopold suggest that the original version may have been written for a Prince Liechtenstein. There is no record of its performance in Mozart's lifetime.

In its original woodwind scoring, K. 388 is one of Mozart's masterpieces from the early 1780s. His 1787 arrangement for string quintet is no less accomplished, making the transition seamlessly from eight winds to five strings. The four-movement structure relates it more to the emotional and psychological depth of Mozart's symphonies and other large chamber works than it does to the entertainment music generally associated with serenades. As biographer Ivor Keys

has written:

> It is hard to imagine a function of a social nature at which this kind of unprecedented and disturbing serenade would have been acceptable.

Several modern critics – and at least one psychiatrist-- have pinpointed this work as a pivotal example of Mozart's manic-depressive tendency. Mozart scholar H.C. Robbins Landon espoused that theory:

> There could have been *no question* in his mind of writing 'popular' works when these black moods were upon him: if anything could bring relief, it was the therapy of composing these baleful pieces.

Yet in his own remarkable way, Mozart succeeds in mitigating the agonized outcries of his Quintet with passages of exquisite tranquillity. Listeners familiar with his opera *Così fan tutte* will recognize strains of its Act II serenade in the slow movement.

The minuet is a contrapuntal *tour de force*, with elaborate canonic techniques more academic than one would expect in a work that originated as a serenade. Mozart seems to have been paying tribute not only to Bach and Handel – whose music he had begun to study and imitate – but also to Haydn. The trio section of the Minuet is marked *al rovescio*, which means in retrograde or inversion. Mozart chooses inversion: one instrument ascends, while a corresponding voice descends in matching intervals. Haydn used the same technique in the Minuet of his Symphony No. 44 in E Minor, *Trauersymphonie* [Mourning Symphony].

Mozart concludes the Quintet with a set of variations that seem to look forward to those of the great Piano Concerto No. 24 in C Minor, K. 491. His closing measures switch to C Major, but they do not succeed in eradicating the overriding tragedy of this splendid work.

String Quintet in C major, Op.29 “Storm”

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Beethoven was a notoriously crafty and shrewd businessman – and not always entirely ethical in his methods of promoting his music. In all fairness, he lived in a world where copyright laws did not yet exist, and he sometimes went to great lengths to protect his work. Nevertheless, there are some eyebrow-raising stories associated with the distribution and publication of his compositions. The String Quintet in C major is a prime example.

Count Moritz von Fries commissioned the quintet in 1800. A banker whose family had interests in textiles and extensive land holdings, the Count was one of the richest men in Austria. He was also a distinguished patron of the arts and a great music lover. He was almost certainly the commissioner of Beethoven’s Violin Sonatas in A minor, Op.23 and F major, Op.24 (“Spring”). Beethoven dedicated both sonatas to him and would later dedicate the Seventh Symphony to von Fries as well.

As was customary in the case of a commission for private use, Beethoven presented a copy of the String Quintet to the Count upon its completion in 1802. Beethoven then sold the piece to the Leipzig firm of Breitkopf & Härtel for publication; it was the first of his works that

the German house engraved. Beethoven's brother Carl handled the negotiations and secured the impressive fee of 38 ducats. (To place this sum in perspective, both the Octet, Op.20 and the First Symphony, Op.21, had commanded 20 ducats each.)

Unbeknownst to Beethoven, Count von Fries had simultaneously passed on his copy of the score to Artaria & Co. in Vienna. Beethoven learned of this on 9 November and went into a tizzy. After three days of sparring with Artaria, he secured a pledge that they would not publish the String Quintet in Vienna until two weeks after the Breitkopf & Härtel edition appeared in Leipzig.

Both Beethoven and his student Ferdinand Ries corrected proofs of Artaria's edition, and there is some evidence that Beethoven instructed Ries to mismark the Austrian proofs intentionally. Several weeks after the both editions appeared, Beethoven took out an ad in a Viennese newspaper accusing Artaria of piracy and criticizing its Quintet publication as "flawed, filled with errors, and useless to players." In mid-February, Artaria filed a lawsuit, demanding a retraction. The Viennese court eventually ruled in Artaria's favor, though Beethoven appears to have neither recanted his accusations nor apologized.

And what of the music?

The String Quintet followed on the heels of Beethoven's first quartets, the set of six published as Opus 18 in 1800. It is a transitional work, bridging what we now regard as Beethoven's early and middle periods. The first two movements seem entrenched in the high classicism of Mozart and Haydn, while the last two herald the Beethoven of the so-called 'heroic decade.'

The most unusual aspect of the first movement is its gentle demeanor and smooth flow, so far removed from Beethoven in his feisty mode. Here we have a Mozartean balance and a Schubertian sweetness of mode. Also Schubertian is the surprising choice of A major for the second theme. In a C major work, one would expect a second theme in the dominant key of G major and a cadence in G at the end of the exposition. Instead, Beethoven seesaws between A major and A minor for the balance of the exposition. He would use this key relationship – the technical term is submediant – frequently in later works; Schubert adopted it frequently as well.

Mozart comes to mind again in the florid *Adagio molto espressivo.* A dignified pace, balanced phrases, occasional harmonic shadows and an elegant use of counterpoint all attest to Beethoven's Austrian role model.

The scherzo is more forward-looking, with a brisk one-beat-to-the-bar pace that has clearly left behind the courtly minuet. Beethoven's wit and sparkle are in abundant supply. The

finale points even more decisively toward his middle period. It boasts drama and brilliant flourishes that keep the players on their toes. The quintet takes its nickname – 'Storm' – from the violins' *tremolandi* and rapid descending flourishes in this movement. The form is unusual: a sonata structure whose syncopated, contrapuntal development introduces a new theme. (Beethoven would let this concept flower even more brilliantly in the *Eroica* Symphony.) Even more striking is an unexpected interruption: a minuet in A major. The return to Presto tempo is mysterious and magical – but Beethoven is not done. He navigates at dazzling speed through a half dozen key centers before a reappearance of the minuet, now back in the home key of C major, and a splendid coda. The string writing is cohesive, brilliant, and thoroughly polished.