



SUMMER FESTIVAL IN SEATTLE

MONDAY, JULY 25, 2011

Ernst von Dohnányi

Quintet for Piano and Strings in C minor, Op. 1

Allegro

Scherzo

Adagio, quasi andante

Finale: Allegro animato

Erin Keefe, violin Aloysia Friedmann, violin Richard O'Neill, viola
Robert deMaine, cello Anton Nel, piano

Sergei Prokofiev

Sonata for Violin and Piano in F minor, Op. 80

Andante assai

Allegro brusco

Andante

Allegrissimo

James Ehnes, violin Jon Kimura Parker, piano

Dmitri Shostakovich

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano No. 2 in E minor, Op. 67

Andante

Scherzo: Allegro con brio

Largo

Allegretto

Amy Schwartz Moretti, violin Johannes Moser, cello Craig Sheppard, piano

Ernst Dohnányi (1877-1960)

Quintet for Piano and Strings in C minor, Op. 1 (1895)

In common with his childhood friend Bartók, Ernst (Ernö) Dohnányi was a superb pianist whose debut in 1897 in Berlin helped launch what promised to be a career as a virtuoso, albeit one with allegiance to core musical values rather than showmanship. As a composer his first published work, the C-minor Piano Quintet, Op. 1, drew praise from no less than Brahms, who arranged to have it performed in Vienna shortly after its premiere in Budapest in 1895. Perhaps that at least in part explains the Brahmsian cast of

much of Dohnányi's music. (Alternatively, maybe Brahms advocated the piece because it reminded him of his own music.)

Unlike Bartók, Dohnányi's compositions reflect 19th-century German Romanticism far more than does indigenous Magyar folk music. He spent much of his life in Budapest, fled to Austria in 1944, and ended up spending his final years in the United States. His immersion in American culture influenced his musical accent, imbuing it with hints of jazz and American folk music—as did such émigrés as Bohuslav Martinů and Ernest Bloch (who actually drew from Native American sources).

Dohnányi composed two piano quintets, both of which pay homage to parallel works by Brahms and Schumann. We might naturally expect more from the second such opus (1914), yet the Op. 1 Quintet stands on its own as an impressive, well-crafted work from his student years at the Academy of Music in Budapest, from which he graduated with honors in 1897.

The piano launches the opening *Allegro* with a portentous dotted theme appropriated and amplified by the strings. Affecting Romanticism and unchecked passion reflect the bountiful confidence of youth, but that is, after all, not an unpardonable sin! The music quiets down and allows another theme, both tender and expansive, to initially balance and eventually to reinforce the overriding ardor of the entire movement. Even a casual hearing will help explain why Brahms thought so highly of the piece. Beneath the emotional appeal, the music has many felicitous moments of skilled counterpoint and a feeling for rich sonority; at times it sounds positively symphonic.

Marked *Scherzo*, the following insistent and brusque dance is punctuated by little packets of thrusting energy. The spirit of Schubert hovers over the beguiling Trio, filtered no doubt through both Schumann and Brahms. Of special note, the repeat of the “A” section finds the young composer cleverly (and convincingly) uniting the oil-and-water moods of both *Scherzo* and Trio.

Highly personal, the tri-partite *Adagio, quasi andante* cannot help but remind us of Schumann's justly celebrated Quintet. Unabashedly heart-rending, the music at times totters on the brink of sentimentality yet successfully avoids the trap of excessive self-revelation (or emotional self-aggrandizement). Even in its most intimate moments, the rich sonorities suggest the power of a larger ensemble.

In the *Finale: Allegro animato*, Dohnányi draws upon Hungarian folk tradition in settling on a 5/4 meter, not normally found in “Western” music but one long known in Central- and Eastern-Europe. (Most famous example: the “waltz with a limp” from Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony) A highly energetic rondo follows, populated with expansive episodes between reiterations of the main rondo theme. Here the composer earns academic points in a fugato section that reminds us not only of Brahms, but even old man Bach—the truest source of contrapuntal wizardry. Tying up the not-really-loose threads, Dohnányi posits a coda in which the first movement's grand theme ends the work in youthful triumph.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Sonata for Violin and Piano in F minor, Op. 80 (1938–46)

Life in the Soviet Union during the 1930s was a hellish time for artists and other citizens who risked falling off the wagon of sober Socialist Realism. Stalin's paranoia and attendant need for total control—expressed in the all-consuming yet ill-defined mantra of “socialist realism”—created a palpable atmosphere of fear. The threat of ostracism and death affected everyone. Sergei Prokofiev, who had spend many years living in the West, returned to the country of his birth knowing of the potential risk such a move would entail. Nonetheless, he believed he could weather the storm. He composed much of his music from the mid-1930s until his death—the same day as Stalin's, March 5, 1953—in a tonal language that was far more accessible than what he wrote while living in the “decadent” West. Such works include his unabashedly Romantic Violin Concerto No. 2 and his brilliant film score (later recast as an oratorio), *Alexander Nevsky*.

More serious in tone than either of the above works is the Op. 80 Violin Sonata, written for and dedicated to David Oistrakh, one of the past century's pre-eminent violinists and a close friend of the composer. Prokofiev composed the first movement quickly in 1938, soon after a trip to sunny California. With the Stalinist purges rendering life all but unbearable in the Soviet Union, and with threats of war scudding across the continent from Hitler's Third Reich, the grimly dark demeanor of the first movement in particular should not surprise us. Prokofiev essentially ran out of steam at that point, and did not complete the work until 1946, by which time his Op. 94 Sonata (originally for flute and piano but shortly appearing in alternate guise for violin and piano) was a *fait accompli*. Compared to the attractive and amiable second sonata, the composer said of the F-minor work that it should sound “like wind in a graveyard.” Ironically, the Sonata eventually won a Stalin Prize.

The work opens with an *Andante assai* that bubbles up from the depth of the piano's low register, shifting between bars of three- and four-quarter notes. Much of the thematic material remains in these nether regions, answered by the violin. Prokofiev wrote that this movement “is of grim character and serves as an extended introduction to the *Allegro [brusco]*, which is in sonata form.”

The *Allegro brusco* is of two minds, conveying a comparative sense of exuberance whose joy, however, is offset by swirling half halftones, brusque discords, and atonal episodes. Surely this ruminating quality reflects the composer's inner conflict over the decision to return to his homeland.

At times eerily suggestive of the night, the ensuing *Andante* offers a nocturne-like calm between the fervor of the second movement and the finale. The writing is transparent and wonderfully sensitive to nuanced color *à la Française* (he had, spent ample time in the West, of course).

Aptly marked *Allegro*, Prokofiev described the finale as “impetuous and written in complex time.” This relentlessly energetic music bristles with anxiety wrought by constant changes in meter, yet ends in unexpected serenity.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in E minor, Op. 67 (1944)

A first hand witness to the horrors of World War II, Dmitri Shostakovich found himself deeply saddened by the death in 1944 of his long-time friend and colleague Ivan Sollertinsky. A distinguished and insightful critic, musicologist and director of the Leningrad Philharmonic, Sollertinsky in 1927 had ignited Shostakovich’s passion for the music of Gustav Mahler, a spectral presence in many of Shostakovich’s works (especially in the spooky scherzo of the Fifth Symphony, with passages strongly redolent of Mahler’s Second Symphony).

“I owe all my education to him,” Shostakovich wrote Sollertinsky’s widow. “It will be unbelievably hard for me to live without him...His passing is a bitter blow for me.” To pay tribute and exorcise his grief, Shostakovich decided to memorialize his friend in a Piano Trio—the same form Tchaikovsky had adopted in his elegiac tribute to his departed friend and mentor Nicholas Rubinstein half a century earlier.

The Trio formed quickly in Shostakovich’s heart and mind. At the work’s premiere in November 1944 the audience had trouble integrating what they perceived as inconsistencies in the music. The sad and melancholy nature of much of the piece is countered by sections that bear a superficially cheerful, dance-like character—not unlike how Mahler so often opposed moments of deep grief with manic parodies on popular ditties. A slow and lugubrious fugal introduction initiates the opening *Andante*, positing a theme eerily whistled in high harmonics on the cello before assumption by the piano and muted violin. Other melodies of folkloric persuasion are added to the mix, and the music builds to a powerful climax before finally closing in introspective quietude.

Marked *Allegro con brio*, a *Scherzo* follows, showing Shostakovich at his most wickedly sardonic and energetic. The dark irony of Mahler’s *scherzos* paces nervously on the sidelines.

In startling contrast with the *Scherzo*, the emotional heart of the Trio throbs in the *Largo*. As Maurice Ravel had done in his Trio, Shostakovich cast this movement in the form of a *passacaglia*, a theme and variation form from the 17th-century in which a theme is presented in the bass and is repeated without change while the composer weaves variants above it. Shostakovich maintains a deeply mournful tone through five wrenching variations based on eight heavily weighted chords on the piano.

The concluding *Rondo*, marked *Allegretto*, incorporates material extracted from the themes from the preceding movements, as well as tunes redolent of Jewish dance music, most likely a pointed and painful tribute to the great suffering brought by the Nazis as well as his own country’s long and shameful history of anti-Semitism. The Second Piano

Trio fulfills its intended role as a memorial to a close friend while serving as a powerful commentary on the incalculable and unconscionable loss of life brought about by the darkest side of our human nature.

Program Notes by Steven Lowe