



SUMMER FESTIVAL IN SEATTLE

WEDNESDAY, JULY 27, 2011

Felix Mendelssohn

Quartet No. 2 for Piano and Strings in F minor, Op. 2

Allegro molto

Adagio

Intermezzo: Allegro moderato

Allegro molto vivace

Amy Schwartz Moretti, violin Erin Keefe, viola

Robert deMaine, cello Anton Nel, piano

Ernest Chausson

Quartet for Piano and Strings in A Major, Op. 30

Animé

Très calme

Simple et sans hâte

Animé

James Ehnes, violin Richard O'Neill, viola

Johannes Moser, cello William Wolfram, piano

Robert Schumann

Quintet for Piano and Strings in E-flat Major, Op. 44

Allegro brillante

In modo d'una Marcia: un poco largamente

Scherzo: Molto vivace

Rondo: Allegro ma non troppo

Stefan Jackiw, violin Aloysia Friedmann, violin Marcus Thompson, viola

Toby Saks, cello Jon Kimura Parker, piano

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Quartet No. 2 for Piano and Strings in F minor, Op. 2 (1823)

As the bromide goes, Mendelssohn matured early, composing a sterling number of adolescent works that more than rival those of Mozart's at the same age. Beyond the well-known Octet—written at age 16—a baker's dozen of string symphonies and the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, other worthy items birthed during his teen years. An even more absurd notion suggests that he did his best composing in relative youth, treating his later music as fluent at best, uninspired at work. Hmm. What about the

deservedly beloved Violin Concerto in E minor, completed and premiered just two years before his death? Many a critic and “mere” music lover consider it not only among his greatest works, but insist that it is *the* best violin concerto by anybody.

Three Quartets for Piano and Strings came early as well, including No. 2 in F minor, Op. 2, written at age 14—one year after his initial effort in that genre. The young composer dedicated the new work to his eminent teacher, Carl Friedrich Zelter, long-time correspondent of Goethe, who valued Zelter’s setting of the poet’s verses.

The *Allegro molto* opening movement of the Quartet posits a theme that rises from a dominant below the tonic upward to a minor third above it—C to A-flat. The theme recalls similar motifs in Mozart, e.g., the C-minor slow movement of the *Sinfonia concertante*, K. 364 and the G-minor String Quintet, K. 516. After this anxious opening theme, Mendelssohn relents, serving up a flowing lyrical tune in A-flat Major with notes scurrying around the keyboard. Like Mozart (Schubert, too, as in the opening movement of his A-minor Quartet), Mendelssohn finds more life in the main theme when lifting its spirits into the major. Amazing, isn’t it, how that simple device of raising the minor third up a notch can completely redefine the emotional crux of a tune! The piano enjoys the opportunity to indulge in a bit of virtuosic hand-crossing. It is the strings, however, that direct things from the development to the recapitulation and higher-velocity coda.

Half as long as the first movement, the *Adagio* begins tenderly with a lovely extended theme from the piano—almost a song without words—before the strings have their chance to elaborate upon it. Even at 14 Mendelssohn shows us how to create a musical caress in this lyrical paragraph. Casting the movement in D-flat Major, the young and explorative composer shifts through different tonalities before ending on a hushed note.

Instead of a *Minuet* or *Scherzo*, Mendelssohn inserts a gentle *Intermezzo*. The piano opens with a nostalgic tune immediately echoed by the strings. A conversational episode ensues in a kind of question-response mode between the keyboard and strings. Here, too, shifting tonalities add to overall sweet sadness. It is as if Mendelssohn-the-child is tapping into darker aspects of his psyche that may have been hidden in his privileged life.

The insistent *Allegro molto vivace* that concludes the Quartet opens with urgent prodding from the strings, accompanied by subtle throbs on the piano; the two “groups” soon reverse roles. The rapid figurations of this theme give shape to and dominate the evolution of the movement. Though not especially dramatic, the thematic fragment is a little nugget of energy and propels the music along with undiminished vigor.

Ernest Chausson (1855-1899)

Quartet for Piano and Strings in A Major, Op. 30 (1897)

As if establishing oneself as a composer weren’t challenging enough, the risk of financial failure in such an undertaking helps explain why so many parents of gifted kids push them into presumably more lucrative (and in the past, “respectable”) careers as doctors or lawyers. Case in point: Ernest Chausson, who like Robert Schumann and many more

before him did, in fact, take up the study of law to please the *paterfamilias*. Indeed, the young man completed his legal studies and served as a lawyer for the Court of Appeals in Paris before ditching that profession for music. At 25, he enrolled at the Paris Conservatory to study with Jules Massenet but left that institution upon realizing that his musical inclinations were deemed too radical for that bastion of artistic conservatism. He found himself drawn to the music of César Franck and Richard Wagner, attending performances of the latter's music at Bayreuth. His early music reflects the above-mentioned composers, but by the mid-1890s he had latched onto his own style, a blend of residual fragrances from the above-mentioned composers with freshets of Impressionist-like color courtesy of Fauré and Debussy. By the time of his tragic death from a bicycle mishap, his canon consisted of 39 published works, including half-a-dozen chamber pieces.

The Quartet for Piano and Strings, Op. 30, demonstrates a refined sense of clarity and concision wedded to a vibrant Romantic sensibility. The piano launches the opening movement, *Animé*, with a forceful theme whose rhythmic outline sounds strangely Native American. It is followed by an elastic and flowing theme entrusted mainly to the strings. The clear textures and harmonies pay homage to both Fauré and Debussy, yet are entirely free of merely slavish imitation. The prevailing mood is quietly rhapsodic and positive. The strong rhythm of the initial theme imparts sufficient energy to keep the lengthy movement on track, providing an anchor that allows extended moments of lyrical reflection. The movement ends quietly.

The cello intones the lovely melody that opens the ensuing *Très calme* movement. Ardent in sentiment, the music epitomizes Chausson's late Romantic impulse. Although the textures are consistently clear and well-defined, Franck-inspired passion smolders beneath the crystalline musical lines. As with the opening movement, this one also ends in quietude.

The cello initiates the brief *Scherzo*, marked *Simple et sans hâte*. This theme is soon appropriated respectively by the other strings and piano. With unhurried simplicity it charms in a manner that anticipates Erik Satie but without the latter's twinkling irony. The central Trio brings increased ardor and animation before returning to the "A" section.

The finale adopts the same tempo indication as the first movement, *Animé*. A highly rhythmic and anxious figure in the piano lends an air of urgency and relative darkness. As the music progresses, however, the faintly ominous implications of the opening theme yield to lyrical outbursts and forceful episodes of a more optimistic nature. Echoes of Debussy (String Quartet of 1893) tickle the memory and are none the worse for acknowledging an important stylistic connection.

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Quintet for Piano and Strings in E-flat Major, Op. 44 (1842)

Having injured his right hand in the early 1830s, Robert Schumann's burgeoning career as a piano virtuoso evaporated. Luckily for him (and us), his musical gifts found another,

more lasting course: composition. During that same decade he wrote much of his solo piano music, setting in motion a tendency to concentrate on one genre at a time. In 1842, he narrowed his sights on chamber music. After intense study of string quartets by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, the newly married composer quickly penned his three Op. 41 quartets over roughly six weeks in the early summer. More chamber works soon followed, including his much-loved Quintet for Piano and Strings in E-flat Major, Op. 44.

The composer dedicated the new work to his wife, Clara, a superb pianist deemed by some advocates as superior even to Franz Liszt. Clara intended to perform in the premiere, but illness prompted the composer to enlist the service of Felix Mendelssohn, who played the challenging piano part at sight. (He was not exactly a slouch in this domain!) Mendelssohn was not satisfied with the first version of the second of two trios in the *Scherzo*, so Schumann provided a livelier one. Clara—who outlived her husband by four decades—recovered quickly and participated in a public performance of the Quintet in January 1843.

The Quintet's youthful vigor, abounding in spontaneous-sounding full-throated Romanticism, reflects the happy circumstances of that productive year. Robert felt great satisfaction with the new composition, citing its “fresh effect” and “animated impression.” The public apparently agreed: the Quintet was an immediate “hit” and has remained a much-loved staple in the chamber repertoire. It also established Schumann's reputation as a major composer rather than that of an insightful musical commentator who also happened to write music.

All five instruments join forces in the bold and assertive first theme of the opening *Allegro brillante*. Almost immediately Schumann sublimely transforms the theme into a rhapsodic, cantabile melody—the *yin* to the *yang* of the motive's initial appearance. The energetic development section pits long strands of virtuosic piano runs against sustained chords from the strings. The recapitulation reprises the opening material but in a somewhat modified manner, and the movement closes without a coda.

Some commentators hear the slow movement, *In modo d'una Marcia: un poco largamente*, as a funeral march because of a prevailing rhythmic figure; however, others have argued that although slow, the music herein is simply tender and achingly expressive. The dark minor-key opening is assuaged by a lyrical episode in C Major, though the sighing figure incorporated in this section does not suggest wholesale good cheer. Another episode in F minor marked *Agitato* is quite tempestuous and is led by the keyboard with numerous “asides” from the strings. The movement ends with a return to the quiet ambience of the opening, in a mood of unforced calm.

Some have wondered if the *Scherzo: Molto vivace* is a tongue-in-cheek nod to Czerny, whose interminable exercises are the bane of every aspiring piano student, but these boundless and bounding scales provide the very subject matter of this energetic foray. There are two Trios, the first lyrical and legato with the first violin and viola in canon, and the second a swirling and high-powered perpetual motion maelstrom of

Hungarian/gypsy zeal. After a return to the “A” section of the *Scherzo* Schumann appends a coda that summarizes the movement.

In the closing *Rondo: Allegro ma non troppo* the music darts through an assortment of “wrong” keys, starting in G minor, detouring into B minor after the initial episode, then into G-sharp minor at one point in the development. This movement matches the bracing vigor of the *Allegro brillante*, beginning with a muscular primary theme flung out by the piano and seconded by the strings in their obsessive repeated-note accompaniment. Before he allows his players (and the audience) to run out of breath, Schumann serves up a quiet singing theme as a perfect foil to the boundless energy of the opening moments. The short development focuses on the second theme, and ultimately builds up to a celebratory return of the first tune. The coda boasts a rigorous and exciting three-voiced double fugue utilizing the movement’s main theme as well as that from the opening *Allegro brillante*.

Program Notes by Steven Lowe