

SUMMER FESTIVAL

JULY 10, 2013

8:00 PM

SEATTLE
CHAMBER
MUSIC
SOCIETY

PROGRAM

FANNY MENDELSSOHN-HENSEL

String Quartet in E-flat Major

Adagio ma non troppo

Allegretto

Romanze

Allegro molto vivace

Augustin Hadelich *violin* / **Nurit Bar-Josef** *violin* / **Cynthia Phelps** *viola* / **Bion Tsang** *cello*

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Sonata for Cello and Piano in D Major, Op. 102 No. 2

Allegro con brio

Adagio con molto sentimento d'affetto

Allegro—Allegro fugato

Ronald Thomas *cello* / **Anton Nel** *piano*

INTERMISSION

PIOTR TCHAIKOVSKY

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in A minor, Op. 50

Elegiaco

Theme and Variations

Andrew Wan *violin* / **Julie Albers** *cello* / **Adam Neiman** *piano*

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FANNY MENDELSSOHN-HENSEL

(1805–1847)

String Quartet in E-flat Major (1834)

Older sister of her infinitely better-known brother Felix, Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel was an extraordinarily gifted musician. She not only was Felix' perceptive confidant on all things musical, she had a personality considered by their friends and family as the more passionate of the two siblings, a trait that is readily apparent in her String Quartet in E-flat Major, her sole work in that genre. As a child her family encouraged her involvement in music, not just as a performer but as a composer. As she matured into womanhood her family led by her father let her know unequivocally that while undeniably able in music she would do best to accommodate herself to the profession of wife and mother. Felix had ambivalent feelings: on the one hand he had several of her songs published under his name, not to take credit for himself, but simply to get them into print. In a private audience with Queen Victoria the year before they both died within months of each other, the English Queen asked him to sing a favorite song, "Italian," after which Felix admitted that it was Fanny who actually composed the piece. But Felix, too, thought it unbecoming for Fanny to take on the career of composer. On the other hand, Fanny's husband, painter Wilhelm Hensel supported her compositional efforts.

Somewhat unusually, Fanny's Quartet opens with an *Adagio ma non troppo*. The implicitly serious, even dark tone of the initial phrases immediately establishes a mood of quiet anguish, reinforcing her intimates' characterization of her passionate nature. As the music progresses sudden emphatic chords further darken the ambient mood, accentuated by single plucked notes from the cello. Throughout the movement the key of C minor remains the guiding harmonic force until near the closing section when she relocates into the official home key of E-flat Major (which shares with C minor the same three-flat key signature). (Given the Mendelssohns' familiarity with and love for Mozart one may ask whether Fanny knew the earlier composer's *Sinfonia concertante* for Violin, Viola and Orchestra, K. 364, also nominally in E-flat yet firmly entrenched in C minor for much of the time.)

The ensuing *Allegretto* in 6/8 time serves as a scherzo and resonates to the famed "elfin" scherzos of her brother, except her fairy-like creatures betray a darker aspect as reflected in the C-minor tonal center. A dynamic central section abounds in very clever and impassioned counterpoint before the obligatory return to the "A" beginning section.

A *Romanze* comes next, sad and lamenting, and cast in G minor; not to force a point: this was Mozart's chosen key for exploring deeply personal conflicts. This is the longest movement of the Quartet, though it by no means overstays its presence. Frequent forays into distant keys and a free "interpretation" of what constitutes "correct" form puzzled and bemused her brother. In Fanny's defense she merely pointed out that her model was late Beethoven, as it often was for Felix.

The concluding *Allegro molto vivace* is in sonata form, its opening whirling dervish-like theme alternating with secondary material of a more lyrical, though still energetic, nature. Skittish violin figuration buzzes around an assertive leaping theme that alternates with a dreamy rocking figure that receives ample prodding from tremolo-like gestures from the lower strings. The piece ends briskly and emphatically.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

(1770–1827)

Sonata for Cello and Piano in D Major, Op. 102 No. 2 (1815)

The year 1815 saw few works written by Beethoven, but among them were his final pair of cello sonatas in C major and D major respectively. Here, and in his final piano sonatas and string quartets, Beethoven seemed less interested in proclaiming his greatness through big, bold and "public" works. Instead, we find an inner search for expression and meaning that many commentators have noted as conveying a spiritual aspect of the composer, a communion not with a human audience, but with God.

At the same time, one hears an extension of rhythmic and harmonic daring that tended to confound his contemporaries—and even such later figures as Tchaikovsky—and feed the notion that Beethoven was

a great composer who had gone mad. One also notes such devices as writing in the extreme registers of the evolving piano and an obsessive expansion of his masterly counterpoint.

Beethoven dedicated the Op. 102 sonatas to his patron Countess Marie von Erdödy, who had provided lodging to the composer. Most likely the pieces received their first performances in that venue with cellist Joseph Linke, a friend of the composer and teacher of the countess's children.

The Sonata No. 2 in D Major opens with an *Allegro con brio* that leaps into being with eruptive energy. Great variety comes through bold contrasts in melodic material and brilliant explorations of tone color.

It is in the following movement, a sparsely written yet deeply moving *Adagio con molto sentimento d'affetto*, that we encounter that distinctly other-worldly transcendence that characterizes many slow movements among Beethoven's late-period string quartets and piano sonatas. Cast in D minor, the rich cello sonorities add to the music's inherent depth of utterance.

How does one follow up so deep a movement? For Beethoven the answer was to create a dazzling contrapuntal structure, *Allegro fugato*, evolving from a single theme. If chamber music has been described as a conversation among friends, in this movement the friends are not only cordial, but brilliant in complementary repartee. In retrospect, this rich polyphonic tapestry points to the obsessive fugues of the "Hammerklavier" Sonata and *Grosse Fuge*, only a few years in the future.

PIOTR TCHAIKOVSKY

(1840–1893)

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in A minor, Op. 50 (1882)

After Nikolai Rubinstein's notoriously ferocious and antagonistic reaction to Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto, the director of the Moscow Conservatory and the composer eventually resumed their friendship. When Rubinstein died in 1881 while on tour in Paris, Tchaikovsky—in Nice at the time—was devastated.

In direct response to this personal tragedy, he wrote his Trio in A minor, dedicated "to the memory of a great artist." The elegiac mood of the Trio no doubt contributed to its use in concerts in Moscow and St. Petersburg following Tchaikovsky's death in 1893, more than a decade after the Trio's premiere in October 1882.

Tchaikovsky cast his Trio in two extended movements. The first, marked *Elegiaco*, conveys orchestral weight and timbre; it sounds like a movement from a piano concerto, with contrasting sections establishing a dual mood of grief and fond remembrance. The piano part is quite demanding, no doubt written as a tribute to Rubinstein's considerable virtuosity. (Tchaikovsky insisted that his mentor was a far better pianist than he.) Four distinct themes weave through the music, ranging from quiet melancholy to ardent passion.

The lengthy second movement is a set of variations on a folk-like theme Tchaikovsky created in tribute to another of his late friend's musical interests, Rubinstein's love for folk music. In 1873, both men had been picnicking in the countryside when a group of peasants sang and danced for them. It has been suggested that theme for this movement, though written by Tchaikovsky, evoked the mood and overall melodic shape of that forgotten day eight years earlier.

Tchaikovsky treats the theme to 11 variations, each one possibly reflective of some aspect of Rubinstein's character or the composer's memory of his one-time teacher. When critics began to assign specific events to each variation, Tchaikovsky responded: "How amusing! To compose music without the slightest desire to represent something, and suddenly to discover that it represents this or that, it is what Molière's *Bourgeois gentilhomme* must have felt when he learned that he had been speaking in prose all of his life."

Among the most noteworthy of the variations are the scherzo-like No. 3, the music box sonorities of No. 5 and the Polish *Mazurka* of No. 9. The concluding section, based on a twelfth variation of the original theme, is topped off by a stunning reprise of the opening motive from the first movement, tying the piece together in cyclical fashion.

Program Notes by Steven Lowe

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