

**Pro Musica
Miró Quartet
February 2, 2012**

In this extraordinary program, the Miró Quartet and Anton Nel take on the challenge of performing some of the world's most famously beautiful music. As we know, fame and excellence are not always synonymous, but in this case they achieve a perfect balance. The beauty of the music—from Schubert and Schumann through Samuel Barber—is of great variety but unquestionable excellence and emotional power.

**Franz Schubert (1797-1828)
Quartettsatz in C Minor, D. 703**

The string quartet absorbed Schubert throughout his lifetime, but late in 1820 his writing in the form took a sharp turn away from the “household quartets” he composed for his family quartet in which he was the violist. Although that inspiration produced at least fourteen of his some twenty string quartets, the Quartettsatz and certainly the monumental D Minor “Death and the Maiden” Quartet, which would follow two years later, demand an ensemble with talents far beyond those of amateurs.

Scholars suggest that Schubert intended to add another three movements to the Quartettsatz, yet there is a perfection about the piece that also suggests he knew when to stop. Brevity is hardly one of Schubert's distinguishing characteristics, but length is not the question here, for the Quartettsatz is a fully developed work with many themes and moods. We are reminded of musicologist Alfred Einstein's statement, “What distinguishes genius from talent is condensation, which is related to brevity but is not identical with it.”

The genius of the Quartettsatz indeed lies in its condensation rather than its brevity. The telescoping of the opening theme into the others is nothing short of brilliant, most notably so in the recapitulation where all the motives of the piece are artfully repeated except the first which Schubert saves for a brief final coda. We say “artfully repeated,” but the point remains that it is all done with the “artless” genius typical of Schubert.

**Samuel Barber (1910-1981)
Molto allegro e appassionato
Molto adagio
Molto allegro**

String Quartet, Op. 11

Samuel Barber's music can be divided between his early neo-Classical and neo-Romantic period and his Modern period after 1940. Neither period, however, was much affected by the 20th century trends in atonality, serialism, or minimalism. Because Barber had his own voice which was distinctly lyrical and most often tonal, he was criticized by modernists as old-fashioned. This criticism, however, did not detract from the adulation audiences had for his music, an adulation revisited today by audiences and critics alike and especially honored in the 100th anniversary year of his birth.

The outer movements of the Op. 11 quartet are its most modern if not its most famous. The opening statement is almost Beethovenian in its strength and rhythmic irregularity. A second theme is more lyrical but not without a sense of impending doom. The two-minute final movement comes close on the heels of the *Adagio* and returns to the fierce first statement of the Quartet.

The heart of the Quartet is its middle movement which brings the sweet shock of recognition. This movement stands alone as Barber's most famous work, the *Adagio for Strings*, arranged for Toscanini and the NBC Symphony. Of course its fame was clenched forever as the theme of Oliver Stone's film, *Platoon*. Hearing it in its original string quartet version is an emotional experience every bit as moving as the one evoked by its many popular treatments. Writer Johanna Keller once quoted violinist Ida Kavafian as saying, “You have to be a rock in the middle of nowhere not to have your gut wrenched out by this music.” So be it.

In his *Dictionary of Chamber Music*, Arthur Cohn offers the following description of the movement: “The *Molto adagio* is liturgical in sound, with chordal placements enriching a seventeen-note, monorhythmic-static theme that is ever repeated (eight times); thrice it is extended to eighteen successive sounds (some shortened), and three times to twenty-one.” While that description is informative, it does not fully explain the grief-stricken timelessness of the *Adagio* as it slowly pushes the strings to their highest ranges. More enlightening might be Barber's own words: “I have always believed that I need a circumference of silence. As to what happens when I compose, I really haven't the faintest idea.” While Barber employed traditional musical language in the *Adagio*, his ultimate impact in this movement transcends any one period of music. Like Brahms, he was no innovator in the strictest sense but had his own subtle version of innovation deeply implanted in his music and not always evident to the casual listener.

Barber wrote the Op. 11 quartet in 1936 at the age of 26 while he was on a Pulitzer Traveling Scholarship. It was premiered the same year in Rome by the Pro Arte Quartet.

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Piano Quintet in E-Flat Major, Op. 44

Allegro brillante

In modo d'una Marcia; un poco largamente; agitato

Scherzo: Molto vivace

Allegro ma non troppo

Schumann was preoccupied with chamber music between 1841 and 1843. This period, following his marriage to Clara Wieck in September of 1841, was marked by the extremes of happiness and pain that beset Schumann all his life. He was aware of being in Clara's shadow but suffered much from any separation from her as she pursued her active career. When she returned from a month-long trip to Copenhagen in April 1841, he set to work on three string quartets followed in the fall by the Piano Quartet, the Andante and Variations for two pianos, two cellos and horn, the Piano Trio in A Minor, and the wonderful Op. 44 Piano Quintet.

The direct route Schumann's music takes to our hearts is no better demonstrated than in his Piano Quintet composed in September of 1842 in just five days. It was dedicated to Clara Schumann who was pianist in the first reading of the work at the Schumann home. For a private performance the following December, no less than Felix Mendelssohn filled in for an ailing Clara.

The work seems amazingly free from the effects of the mental illness that plagued Schumann, reminding us that he wrote in spite of his illness, not because of it. The first movement bears his familiar imprint with its bold, heroic opening followed by a lovely song. The cello and viola hold sway in the second theme while the piano takes center stage with virtuosic runs in the development section. All join forces for the thrilling recapitulation.

The second movement is, as the tempo marking indicates, "in the manner of a march." In this case, we have a kind of universal funeral march not intended as a tribute to an individual but one for humanity itself and its frailties. A lyrical section intervenes and lifts the mood before a return to the solemn march. A forceful and faster section follows which, in turn, becomes lyrical before it, too, returns to the spirit of the opening march. A simple, unadorned moment concludes this movement that seems to be almost a war between the happy and the sad—a true reflection of Schumann's own personal battle between his opposing personalities, the so-called light-hearted Florestan and the pensive Eusebius.

The third movement *Scherzo* is a thorough exploration of scale patterns underscored by interesting and irregular rhythmic patterns. Two trio sections interrupt the scales, the second one a brilliant revision suggested by Mendelssohn when he played the piano part.

In the last movement, Schumann returns to the heroic vigor and song-like quality of the first movement but adds to that an astounding three-voiced fugue. It is especially interesting, in this movement, to note Schumann's honoring of Classical form despite his attempt to free music from those confines in the name of Romanticism.

Having no real precedent, the work was a pioneer for the great quintets of Brahms, Franck, and Dvořák.

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Lucy Miller Murray was Founding Director of Market Square Concerts in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania from 1982 to 2009. Her book, Adams to Zemlinsky: A Friendly Guide to Chamber Music, was published by Concert Artists Guild of New York and is available at amazon.com. (www.lucymillermurray.com)