

Notes on the Program
Pro Musica
November 10, 2016

MODIGLIANI QUARTET

Guillaume Sutre, Violin
Laurent Marfaing, Viola

Loïc Rio, Violin
Françoise Kieffer, Cello

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) **String Quartet in D Major, K. 575**

While the last two years of Mozart's life were fraught with financial woes and illnesses, the period also produced such works as *Così fan tutti*, *The Magic Flute*, the *Requiem*, and the three "Prussian" Quartets written for Friedrich William II, King of Prussia. Despite the so-called commission, never fully authenticated, K. 575, like its two companion pieces K. 589 and K. 590, was actually composed before the commission occurred. Three other intended works were never written.

Late statements by great composers are often surprisingly modest. Such is the case with the K. 575 Quartet composed in June of 1789 after Mozart's return to Vienna from his visit to Berlin and the court of Friedrich Wilhelm. Written in the sunny key of D Major, the Quartet belies Mozart's dire condition at the time of its composition but instead is a gentle expression of elegance, refinement, and perfect form. Absent is much of the tension of Mozart's earlier quartets with their dark underpinnings.

As the first movement indicates, this is a work in which any agony is suppressed behind the bright wall of genius. The second movement has an edge of sadness but is cast in great lyricism. Here we have, once again, the Mozart of opera. The third movement *Minuetto*, filled with contrasting dynamics and articulations, is followed by a *Trio* that serves as a showcase for the cello, Friedrich Wilhelm's own instrument. The cello also opens the final *Allegretto* which, though it is not one of Mozart's customary rousing conclusions, is highly complex in its use of counterpoint.

A word should be said about Mozart's favoring of the cello in this Quartet. Indeed, he sought to please his patron, but he did not do so at the expense of the other instruments. While the cello parts are ample, the other voices are more complex.

The K. 575 Quartet was premiered at Mozart's home in Vienna on May 22, 1790. Mozart himself was very probably the violist.

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) **String Quartet in A Major, Op. 41, No. 3**

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 his three Op. 41 string quartets followed in the fall by the Piano Quintet, the Piano Quartet, the Andante and Variations for two pianos, two cellos and horn, and the Piano Trio in A Minor. The string quartets were dedicated to his close friend and colleague, Felix Mendelssohn, and premiered on September 13, 1842 as a present for his wife, Clara, on her twenty-third birthday.

Op. 41, No. 3 reveals both Schumann's reverence for Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—and certainly Mendelssohn—and his basic contention with traditional Classical form. He admired it but wanted to reach beyond it. Thus, in 1842, we have the comment in Schumann's famous publication, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*: *...the quartet has come to a standstill. Who does not know the quartets of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, and who would wish to say anything against them? Indeed it is the most telling testimony to the immortal freshness of their works that they still, after half a century, gladden everyone's heart; but it is not a good sign that the later generation, after all this time, has not been able to produce anything comparable.* Without arrogance, Schumann undertook that challenge in the Op. 43 quartets and succeeded particularly well in the A Major Quartet.

Central to Schumann's music is the reflection of his so-called "split personality," that is, the free and happy Florestan side and the restrained and pensive Eusebius side. How much this reflects his own mental illness resulting in his attempted suicide in 1854 and his death two years later in a mental institution, we shall leave to the psychiatrists. What we need to study is the glorious result of his compositional efforts despite, probably not because of, his sufferings.

The first movement of the A Major Quartet is very much as its tempo marking indicates—*expressive*. From its opening sigh and great melodic developments, through its rhythmic eccentricities, it is expressive of Schumann's particular genius.

The second movement *Assai agitato* is, again, just as its tempo marking suggests, highly agitated, so much so that we feel here Schumann's attempt to both honor and elude form. This is no ordinary *scherzo*. In fact, the movement is a set of four variations and a concluding coda. Within those variations we easily sense the warring sides of Schumann's musical personality.

Eusebius reigns in the moving third movement *Adagio*. Here we have the essence of Romantic expression, yet a certain restlessness suggests something beyond Romanticism. While form is not absent from this beautiful movement, emotional expression is essential to it. We need here to remind ourselves that it was Schumann's musical genius, not his illness, that created this exquisite statement of emotion.

Nor is the exciting Finale a straightforward expression as it often is in Classical and Romantic tradition. Even here Florestan and Eusebius dual in dotted rhythms, syncopations, pauses, sudden returns, and a climactic finish.

About the Op. 43 quartets, Schumann commented to his wife that he had produced something "as good as Haydn."

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quartet No. 12 in F Major, Op. 96, "American"

The specific American qualities of the so-called "American" Quartet are not easily identifiable. Some like to hear Dvořák's use of the pentatonic scale (the five black notes of the piano) in many of his themes as reminiscent of Negro spirituals. Others refer to the birdcall of the third movement as that of an American bird. Better to look upon the subtitle as simply one assigned to the work because of its composition during Dvořák's American tour from 1892 to 1895. The F Major Quartet was completed in June of 1893 in Spillville, a Czech community in Iowa where Dvořák and his family spent the summer. It was premiered in Boston on January 1, 1894 by the distinguished Kneisel Quartet.

More telling than any national reference in the work is Dvořák's own comment about his ease in composing it. Indeed, the F Major Quartet has about it a certain easy genius that is most satisfying to both the players and the listeners. A full twenty-five minute work, it seems over in a breath from its shimmering opening statement.

The opening of the first movement seems like the best of Schubert and Brahms although it is attributed more to the beginning of Smetana's First Quartet. Despite all these references it remains uniquely Dvořák. In a lovely statement, the viola sings the first of the many wonderful melodies that will occur throughout the work. A fugue is artfully included between the two main themes of the movement.

The second movement *Lento* is an exception to the otherwise cheerful mood of the piece. Here the first violin and the cello carry the melodic line while the second violin and the viola sustain the flowing rhythmic line. The movement builds to a climax, then slips away.

It is in the third movement that we hear the birdcall, supposedly that of a scarlet tanager that kept interrupting Dvořák's work. Despite his annoyance with the bird, Dvořák created yet another fresh melody filled with life in this brief, *scherzo*-like movement.

Although the tempo marking of the *Finale* is actually slower than the preceding *Molto vivace*, the movement sails along with such ease and forward motion that one senses something between a lively folk dance and a race. Melody sings over a propulsive rhythmic underpinning. The motion is interrupted briefly by moments of brave unison playing before a rousing conclusion.

This is surely Dvořák at his most satisfying.