

Auditorium Chamber Music Series
University of Idaho
Moscow, ID

Tuesday, September 17, 2013

THE ARIEL QUARTET

Gershon Gerchikov and Alexandra Kazovsky, violins
Jan Grüning, viola
Amit Even-Tov, cello

with

ORION WEISS, PIANO

String Quartet No. 1

Erwin Schulhoff
(1894 - 1942)

Presto con fuoco
Allegretto con moto et con malinconia grottesca
Allegro giocoso alla Slovacca
Andante molto sostenuto

From *Goyescas*, Op. 11, for solo piano

Enrique Granados
(1867 - 1916)

El Amor Y La Muerte (Balada)
Epilogo: Serenata del espectro

INTERMISSION

Quintet in F minor for piano and strings, Op. 34

Johannes Brahms
(1833 - 1897)

Allegro non troppo
Andante, un poco Adagio
Scherzo: Allegro
Finale: Poco sostenuto

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Erwin Schulhoff (1894-1942)

String Quartet No. 1 (1924)

I am thrice homeless, as a native of Bohemia in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans, and as a Jew throughout all the world. Everywhere an intruder, never welcomed.

Gustav Mahler

I have a tremendous passion for the fashionable dances and there are times when I go dancing night after night with dance hostesses [...] purely out of rhythmic enthusiasm and subconscious sensuality; this gives my creative work a phenomenal impulse, because in my consciousness I am incredibly earthly, even bestial...

Erwin Schulhoff from a letter to Alban Berg. Feb.2, 1921

The first quote could as well be applied to Erwin Schulhoff as to Mahler himself. Schulhoff was born on June 8, 1894, to a German-speaking Jewish family in Prague, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Recognized as a child prodigy by none other than Dvorak, he was admitted to the Prague Conservatory to study piano (1902-04). He continued his studies at the Vienna Conservatory (1904-08), after which he studied with Max Reger at the Leipzig Conservatory (1908-10), followed by a course of study at the Cologne Conservatory (1910-14), as well as some lessons from Debussy. Despite all these years of conservatory study, he emerged as a composer who plunged headlong into the twentieth century, and embraced the new currents in both popular and art music. (It's hard to imagine Mahler uttering the second quote). Schulhoff quickly gained a reputation as a formidable pianist who, along with the classical repertoire, championed the avant-garde music of his time, giving performances of the works of Scriabin, Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, Hindemith, and Bartok, along with the quarter-tone piano music of Alois Haba. Schulhoff even gave free classes at the Prague Conservatory in quarter-tone music. A Prague music critic described him as "a distinguished virtuoso pianist, especially bred for new music, with a splendid technique, unequalled memory and radical interpretational will; a revolutionary composer, with both feet firmly planted on the ground." Schulhoff allied himself with the Dada art movement of the post-WWI era, dedicating a work, *Pittoresken*, to the artist George Grosz. One of his other Dada-inspired compositions, *In Futurum*, contains as its middle movement only a rest, marked "with feeling." As might be expected, Schulhoff was attracted to American popular music: ragtime and jazz. Unlike Stravinsky, Milhaud, and Ravel, whose incursions into jazz were somewhat superficial and it must be said slightly condescending, Schulhoff worked as a jazz pianist in the "Hot Jazz" clubs of Europe in the twenties. Though he composed many jazz-inspired compositions, more importantly he was also a jazz improviser. His compositions were welcomed in many of the contemporary music festivals of the time, as well as in the more traditional venues.

Another interesting aspect of Schulhoff's musical career was his work in radio. During his tenure as pianist for the Prague Radio Orchestra, he involved himself in creating works especially for live radio broadcast, as well as studio work involving the making of recordings. The Second Symphony and Concerto for String Quartet, both dating from 1932, were created especially for radio broadcast, exploiting his knowledge of microphones and sound mixing to achieve a scale and clarity suited to the new broadcast medium.

The rise of Nazism in Germany in the early thirties changed his fortune and put him in jeopardy. As a Jew, his career in Germany, which had been quite successful in Berlin, Leipzig, and Dresden was finished. He had always believed that there should be reconciliation between the Germanic and Czech cultures - not surprisingly, since by birth he belonged to both worlds. However, the Czech authorities of the time were suspicious of him for what they felt were his "pro-German views," despite the fact that German artists who he was associated with were being persecuted by the Nazis. As if he didn't have enough trouble, Schulhoff had become a communist. His commitment to communist ideals was such that he even set the Communist Manifesto to music, as a cantata for four soloists, three choirs and a brass band. He became a Soviet citizen in 1939. When the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia he sought to emigrate to the Soviet Union. He was awaiting his Soviet visa when, with the collapse of the non-aggression pact between Hitler and Stalin, he was arrested - as a Jew, a "Degenerate" (*Entartige*) artist, and a Soviet citizen. He was arrested in Prague and deported to the Bavarian concentration camp Wülzburg along with his son, where he died of tuberculosis according to one source, typhus according to another, and torture according to a third. Had he escaped to the Soviet Union, one doubts that he would have fared better under Stalin.

What was it that caused him to seek refuge in the East rather than the West, America in particular, as did so many other musicians? Schulhoff's story is all the more poignant, given the current events unfolding in Central Europe; the latest incarnation of evil made to sound innocuous: "ethnic cleansing." After the war his late Socialist works were somewhat revived in communist occupied Czechoslovakia. In 1962, manuscripts which he had left in Moscow during a visit in 1940, were discovered, further enabling a resurrection of his works. Today there is a sizable number of his works available on recording; symphonies, concerti, piano music, chamber music, ballet music and his opera, *Flammen* (the Flames).

The String Quartet No. 1 was composed after the successful premier of his Five Pieces for String Quartet (*Fünf Stücke für Streichquartett*) at the I.G.N.M. (International Society for New Music) chamber music festival in Salzburg on August 8, 1924. The String Quartet was completed in Prague on Sept. 20, 1924. Dedicated to the Zika Quartet; the work received its premier performance on Sept. 3, 1925, at the I.G.N.M. chamber music festival, held this time in Venice.

The Philharmonia Pocket Score of this work contains a short essay which quotes the contemporary Prague critic Erich Steinhard as follows. "The string quartet, a fiery outburst of temperament, is made all of a piece, and one has the feeling that the

composer's pen could hardly keep pace with his inspiration, though this is in no way to decry the quality of the invention and its intellectual elaboration. But I defy anyone, (with the possible exception of Hindemith) to equal him [Schulhoff] in the tempestuous pace of the first movement, and its natural musicality, its clarity and its homophony ... A catchy melody with simple accompaniment, which often flows along in stereotyped figures, characterizes the next movement, while the third arouses rhythmic interest with a playful Slovak theme and presents the appearance of folk music. All three movements are fast moving. Not until the last section does an Andante-like passage, where the accompaniment mimics the earlier Allegretto melody, introduce a sensitive and contemplative mood, at the close of an otherwise boisterous and cheeky piece of writing." (*Die Musik*, March 1927, p. 438)

--note by Joseph Way, used with permission

Granados: from Goyescas, Op. 11 (1911)

El Amor Y La Muerte (Balada)

Epilogo: Serenata del espectro

The six movement virtuoso piano cycle, "Goyescas", was Granados' crowning achievement, and is one of the monumental masterpieces of romantic piano music. It exists on a grand operatic scale, telling a clear musical story of love and tragedy. In *El Amor Y La Muerte (Balada)*, the penultimate movement of the set, the emotional content of "Goyescas" reaches its climax. Themes that appeared earlier in the work reappear turned upside down, stretched, and heightened. There can be heard the tolling of bells, the sounds of a musical struggle, as well as the most jagged and modernistic writing of the whole set. The music gives the impression of passionate improvisation all the while being bound within a tight structure. Granados said about this piece "Three great emotions appear in the work: intense pain, nostalgic love, and the final tragedy--death."

The *Epilogo: Serenata del espectro*, the final piece, picks up after death, in an almost Dia de Muertos vision of a grinning skull. There is a gentle humor to the music, and the themes of earlier dances and remembered love all return, but now cast in a cold and slightly distant light. There are visions of hell (a carefully camouflaged Dies Irae, rendered as a gentle waltz) and visions of heaven (a haunting and ethereal melody that appears to stop time). The last page---the end of the grand story- contains a final anguished outburst followed by the return of the bells from *El Amor Y La Muerte*. Over the last 2 bars in the score, Granados writes "The specter disappears, plucking the strings of his guitar".

Johannes Brahms (1897-1833)

Quintet in F minor for piano and strings, Op. 34

Allegro non troppo ~ Andante, un poco Adagio ~ Scherzo: Allegro ~ Finale: Poco sostenuto

One evening Brahms was asked how he had spent the day. “I was working on my symphony,” the composer replied. “In the morning I added an eighth note. In the afternoon I took it out.”

Spurious as this anecdote may be, it does furnish some insight into the slow, careful way Brahms fashioned his music and the difficulty he had in bringing certain works up to his incredibly high standards. The piano quintet is a particularly good illustration of a composition that underwent several major revisions before publication.

The original version was a string quintet for two violins, viola, and two cellos, which Brahms composed in 1862. Joseph Joachim, the composer’s close friend and trusted musical advisor, liked the piece at first, but after rehearsing it, told Brahms that he thought it lacked charm and that the composer should, “mitigate the harshness of some passages.” A slightly altered work was played at another rehearsal, but it too proved unsatisfactory.

The following year, Brahms entirely transformed the piece into a sonata for two pianos, which he performed with Karl Tausig in Vienna early in 1864. (Although Brahms burned the original cello quintet version, he preserved the two-piano realization, which is published as Op. 34b.) Critics gave it a generally poor reception saying it lacked the necessary warmth and beauty that only string instruments could provide.

Finally, during the summer of 1864, Brahms reworked the same musical material once more, this time shaping it into its final piano quintet form. Brahms, at long last, was satisfied. He allowed it to be published in 1865. It is now considered the composer’s most epic piece of chamber music.

The massive and complex first movement is replete with a superabundance of melodic strains and rhythms. Yet, despite this rich diversity, Brahms achieves a musical synthesis through the use of various unifying techniques that are skillfully woven into the music. To take but one example, the movement open with piano, first violin, and cello singing the noble, sonorous first theme. After a pause, the piano begins a passage of running notes that seems unrelated to the opening statement. Careful listening, through, reveals that the passage is nothing more than a free, speeded-up transposition of the melody we have just heard! Brahms’s delight in counterpoising twos against threes is evident in the subdued second subject, with its ostinato triplets underpinning the equal pairs of notes in the melody. A closing theme that contrasts sustained, legato measures with staccato, rhythmic measures leads to a comparatively brief development, a recapitulation, and a coda that starts slowly and quietly but builds to a brilliant climax.

The slow movement is serene, tender, and simple – especially in comparison with the majestic sweep of what has come before. The opening subject, a warm, gently swaying melody, is played by the piano to a restrained, rhythmical string accompaniment. The intensity increases as the second violin and viola, in unison, introduce the subsidiary subject. Calm returns as the main theme returns to close the movement.

The Scherzo has great rhythmic verve and a plenitude of melodic material. There are three basic musical ideas: an eerie, slightly offbeat melody over an insistent cello pizzicato; a crisply rhythmic figure in the strings; and an exultant, full-voiced exclamatory statement from all five players. After expanding and developing these themes, the music builds powerfully to a sudden cut-off, which is followed by the contrasting cantabile melody of the Trio. Brahms then directs the players to repeat the Scherzo section.

The Finale opens with a slow introduction that casts a mood of dark foreboding. In a while the shadows disperse as the cello saunters forth with a fast, jolly tune. After a dramatic outburst, a second melody appears, slightly faster in tempo, but drooping with feigned sorrow. A vigorous, syncopated theme brings the exposition to an end. The freely realized development and recapitulation lead to the coda, a summing up of the entire movement in an unrestrained whirlwind of orchestral sonority.

The first public performance of the quintet was given in Paris on March 24, 1868, by pianist Louise Langhans-Japha and four unidentified string players.

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