

Houston
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the
Shepherd
School
of Music

PRESENT

THE VERMEER QUARTET

Shmuel Ashkenasi, *violin*

Pierre Menard, *violin*

Richard Young, *viola*

Marc Johnson, *cello*

Thursday, May 2, 1991

8:00 P.M.

Hamman Hall

Rice University

31st Season

TENTH CONCERT

Houston Friends of Music



the Shepherd School of Music

PRESENT

THE VERMEER QUARTET

PROGRAM

FRANK BRIDGE

(1879-1941)

Quartet #1 in e (1906)

Adagio; Allegro appassionato

Adagio molto

Allegretto grazioso

Allegro agitato

DIMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

(1906-1973)

Quartet #8 in c, Op. 110 (1960)

"In memory of the victims of Fascism and war"

Largo

Allegro molto

Allegretto

Largo

Largo

INTERMISSION

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

(1770-1827)

Quartet in B-flat, Op. 130/133 (1825)

Adagio, ma non troppo; Allegro

Presto

Andante con moto, ma non troppo

Allegro assai: Alla danza Tedesca

Cavatine: Adagio molto espressivo

Grosse Fugue: Allegro

The Vermeer Quartet records for Orfeo and Teldec Records.

The Vermeer Quartet is in residence at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb.

The Vermeer Quartet is managed exclusively by ICM Artists, Ltd.

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PROGRAM NOTES

FRANK BRIDGE (1879-1941) *QUARTET #1 IN E-MINOR (1906)*

He was a very highly regarded performing artist--his chosen instruments the violin and viola which he employed playing as a member of England's foremost quartets at the beginning of this century; a conductor noted best for his ability to learn difficult programs quickly and conduct them masterfully; the teacher most responsible for inspiring England's greatest composer after Purcell; and a prolific composer in almost every genre whose published works take up almost two columns in the *Groves Dictionary*--two quartets of which are widely regarded as the greatest in 20th century English chamber music. Yet for forty years after his death in 1941, Frank Bridge was virtually unknown even in his homeland except for a tune which his disciple Benjamin Britten used for a set of orchestral variations.

Frank Bridge, who began his musical career much in the vein of his contemporaries Arnold Bax, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and John Ireland, turned his back on the safety of an essentially conservative idiom to find his own voice. As one critic described his odyssey:

No other British composer travelled as far stylistically, for it was Bridge's lonely achievement to have effected a *rapprochement* between the Englishness he shared with Bax and Ireland and the wider world of, broadly speaking, Scriabin and Berg.

Even during the early part of his career--the line of demarcation for him as for so many others of his generation was the First World War--his musical voice was singular.

Turn-of-the-century English music, driven by the Edwardian Elgar to shrug off the doldrums of half-hearted emulation of Continental music and find its own identity, was still typically late-Romantic in its size, shapes, and traditional vocabulary.

At the same time there was a movement afoot to find new voices. The wealthy musical amateur and encyclopedist W. W. Cobbett offered an annual prize for the chamber work which translated into modern terms the Elizabethan Fancy, a one-movement work with linked sections. Bridge composed three "Phantasies" (Cobbett's preferred spelling) between 1905 and 1910, the first, a quartet predating the more orthodox piece on our program by one year.

The combination of the two vocabularies gave Bridge a music which was polyphonically cleaner and harmonically less-dense than his contemporaries. Bridge's early music perhaps comes closest to the lush, poetic ecstasies of the expatriate Frederick Delius, but, significantly, leaner and more controlled.

The sense of control characterizes all of Bridge's activities. Whether composing in the pre-war National idiom or exploring the new tonalities (splintered, bi- and a-) and flexible rhythms of the post-war experiments, Bridge's music is typified by a fierce structural and logical integrity

that even in his orchestral tone pictures made the programs, that is, the literary connections, superfluous.

Benjamin Britten, who was Bridge's only composition student (in 1926) later eulogized his teacher:

His loathing of all sloppiness and amateurishness set me standards to aim at which I've never forgotten. He taught me to think and feel through the instruments I was writing...In everything he did for me there was perhaps above all two cardinal principles. One was that you should try to find yourself and be true to what you found. The other...was his scrupulous attention to good technique, the business of saying clearly what's in one's mind. He gave me a sense of technical ambition...I'm enormously aware that I haven't yet come up to the technical standards Bridge set for me.

DIMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1973) *QUARTET #8 IN C-MINOR, OP. 110* *"IN MEMORY OF THE VICTIMS OF FASCISM AND WAR"*

The quartet, like the symphony, was a life-long preoccupation of Shostakovich--he wrote fifteen of each.

The Quartet #8 is his most popular and regarded by many as his most important. Like the 7th, also written in 1960, it marks a departure in the genre for the composer from a more formalistic style to the intensely private ruminations which characterize his best works.

In 1960, Shostakovich visited the German city of Dresden, devastated by Allied fire-bombing at the end of the Second World War. The ruins and desolation brought back visions of the siege of Leningrad which the composer had endured, specifically as a member of the Conservatory contingent sent to dig defensive trenches.

For this most humanistic artist, the quartet is less a description of events or even personal recollections of events than a musical photograph album of all the anonymous sufferers, as if to save their memories from oblivion. We sense the turning of each new page from the work's opening lament to its last dying fall, punctuated by the unbridled terror and brutality of the second movement and the almost compulsively giddy waltz-like third. Shostakovich reinforces the congruity of the images and the composition's pervading mood of profound sadness by having the five movements played without pause.

Specifically autobiographical are quotations from earlier works--the First, Fifth and Tenth Symphonies; the Jewish theme from the Second Piano Trio; the contemporaneous First Cello Concerto; and an aria from the outlawed opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, given to the cello to cap the fourth movement along with a quote from the Soviet song "Languishing in Prison."

Over all is a four-note motif built on the initials of the composer's name, in German notation, D-SCH (D, B-flat, C, B

(continued)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827) QUARTET IN B-FLAT MAJOR, OP. 130/133

In 1810, Carl Maria von Weber wrote of Ludwig van Beethoven:

The fiery, nay, almost incredible, inventive faculty that inspires him is attended by so many complications in the arrangement of his ideas that it is only his earlier compositions that interest me; later ones, on the contrary, appear to me only a confused chaos, an unintelligible struggle after novelty from which occasional heavenly flashes of genius dart forth, showing how great he might be if he chose to control his luxuriant fancy.

Weber was not alone among Beethoven's contemporaries--and many later Romantics--who questioned, even agonized over--what "the master" was up to. Nowhere is his unfettered fancy shown to greater effect than in his last quartets.

Like Haydn, Beethoven wrote string quartets throughout his entire life, revisiting the genre with new insights. After almost fifteen years away from quartet writing (the last of the so-called "Middle Quartets," the *Opus 92*, was composed in 1810), Beethoven turned back to the form, by intention at least, in 1823. In that year, the Russian nobleman and amateur cellist Prince Nikolai Golitsin invited the composer to create a set of quartets for him. Beethoven readily accepted the commission but took two years to complete the first of the resulting three.

Not as facile a composer as Mozart, Beethoven struggled over each note and in 1823 he was struggling with the completion of two monumental works - the *Missa Solemnis* and the *Symphony #9* ("Choral"). Not until they had their premieres did he turn his attention to the quartets. With the echoes of those dramatically powerful works in his mind's ears, he devoted all his final energies to that most intimate genre. In his final two years, he composed just five major works--the three promised quartets for the prince (of which

the *Opus 130* is the last), followed by two more and the new finale to the *Opus 130* which was virtually his last composition.

Beethoven's last quartets (and, to some extent, even the middle set) are not the "sociable" works Haydn's are. If Haydn created conversations for four basically likeminded voices for the decoration of a drawing room full of sympathetic auditors, Beethoven has created elaborate, often agonized interior dialogues for himself, only allowing us to eavesdrop on them.

The *Opus 130*, in its original form, poses its own specific problem--the "Great Fugue" with which Beethoven ended the work and which is half again as long as the preceding five movements together. This awesome finale proved technically intimidating to the Schuppanzigh Quartet (and its audience) at the premiere in March 1826 and the composer readily agreed to his publisher's request for a less-challenging final movement. The fugue has since maintained an independent existence in a variety of guises. As history too often proves, impossibility is more a transient state of mind than a transcendent reality. More recently, the fugue has been restored to its original place at the conclusion of the quartet--as it is on this concert--and to good effect.

The rest of the quartet is, as critic Basil Lam suggests, not unlike nor more daunting than a Classical string divertimento.

Having noted that others of Beethoven's contemporaries than just Weber had difficulties deciphering his mature works, we should close with an opposing view--that significantly from the noted Romantic fantasist E. T. A. Hoffmann:

But what if it were only *your* weak sight which misses the profound unity of the inner relation in each composition? If it were only *your* fault that the language of the master, understood by the consecrated, is incomprehensible, if the door to the holy of holies remains closed to you? In truth, the master, who is the peer of Haydn and Mozart in self-possession, carves his essential being from the inner kingdom of tones, and reigns over it as its absolute ruler.

Program notes by Ira J. Black

THE VERMEER QUARTET

SHMUEL ASHKENASI, violin
PIERRE MENARD, violin

RICHARD YOUNG, viola
MARC JOHNSON, cello

The Vermeer Quartet, formed at the Marlboro festival in 1970, is considered one of the world's finest chamber ensembles. They have performed in virtually every major city in North America, Europe, Israel, and Australia, as well as most of the important international festivals, including Tanglewood, Aspen, Spoleto, Mostly Mozart, Aldeburgh, South Bank, Bath, Santa Fe, Edinburgh, Berlin, Chamber Music West, and the Casals Festival. They are members of the Resident Artist Faculty of Northern Illinois University at DeKalb, and are the resident quartet for Chamber Music Chicago. In addition, they give annual master classes at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, England, and are the featured quartet every summer for Bay Chamber Concerts in Rockport, Maine. The Vermeer Quartet records for Teldec Records, and among their releases are the complete late-Beethoven quartets, Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" and "Quartettsatz," Mendelssohn's Op. 13, the Verdi quartet, and the Op. 96 ("American") and Op. 51 quartets by Dvorak. In addition they have recorded the Brahms clarinet quintet for Orfeo.

The Vermeer Quartet is a unique blend of various musical and

cultural backgrounds. Now living in Chicago, its members are originally from Israel, French-Canada, New York, and Nebraska. From this inherent diversity is forged a musical personality that reflects "an extraordinary unanimity of feeling," according to the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. Geneva's *Suisse* writes, "Out of this alchemy is born a thing of beauty which one can define, without hesitation, as perfection." The *New York Times* lists them "among the top quartets active today. They manage to sound both matched and individual. There are a number of quartets that have a luscious tone and hairline precision to spare. The Vermeer has that, and soul as well." Similarly, Germany's *Die Welt* writes, "The Vermeer Quartet is a chamber ensemble of the first magnitude. The musicians have developed ensemble playing of such high calibre that they can be compared with only the best string quartets around the world." The *Chicago Tribune* sums up, "Here was music-making of the most passionate kind, in which eloquent playing was brightened by brilliant technique and tempered by a heightened sense of taste. Performances as vibrant as these appear infrequently, but they will likely linger in the minds of the many listeners who crowded the Civic Theatre to hear them."