

Thirty-seventh Season — Skatb Concert

YING QUARTET

Twenty Ying Quartet

James Ying, viola

Philip Ying, violin

David Ying, violin

Markus Ying, violin



Houston Friends of Music
The Shepherd School of Music

Chamber



Music

Series

1996
1997



Thirty-seventh Season — Sixth Concert

YING QUARTET

Timothy Ying, violin

Janet Ying, violin

Philip Ying, viola

David Ying, cello

with guest artists

Martha Katz, viola

Paul Katz, cello

Stude Concert Hall

Alice Pratt Brown Hall

Rice University

February 11, 1997

8:00 p.m.

PROGRAM

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 18, No. 6

Allegro con brio

Adagio; ma non troppo

Scherzo: Allegro

La Malinconia: Adagio; Allegretto quasi
allegro

Dimitri Shostakovich
(1906-1975)

Quartet No. 7, Op. 108

Allegretto

Lento

Allegro

INTERMISSION

Johannes Brahms
(1833-1897)

String Sextet in G Major, Op. 36, "Agathe"

Allegro non troppo

Scherzo: Allegro non troppo

Poco Adagio

Poco Allegro

The Ying Quartet is represented by Melvin Kaplan, Inc., 115 College Street, Burlington, VT 05401

PROGRAM NOTES

Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 18, No. 6 Ludwig Van Beethoven

From written records left by visitors to Vienna at the end of the 19th Century, one learns that no city in Europe was more focused on its pleasures—from the sublime to the frivolous or worse—than this adopted home of Beethoven's. Stendahl, who lived there as an eye-witness to the times, explains it in terms of the political system then in force; the arts, and particularly instrumental music above all, were a safe outlet for expression and a safe setting for social gatherings in what was in fact a time of political repression, with a system of spies and surveillance foreshadowing the police state later to be put in place by Metemich. Here is the description from his *Letters on Haydn* written to a friend: "In this Vienna, the winter residence of the Esterhazys . . . and of so many other noble families, surrounded by an almost regal pomp, there is not that brilliant display of mind which was to be found in the salons of Paris before our stupid revolution; nor has Reason raised her altars there as at London. A certain restraint, which forms a part of the prudent policy of the house of Austria, has inclined the people to pleasures of a more sensual kind, which are less troublesome to a government. . . . In a word, at Vienna, politics and abstract reasoning on possible improvements being prohibited, pleasure has taken possession of every heart." All this worked for the benefit of music making, of which chamber music was the most esteemed by the aristocracy which generously supported it. It is in this setting that Beethoven presented his Opus 18 set of six string quartets, premiered by the Schuppanzigh Quartet at the home of Prince Lichnowsky, in 1801.

The last to be published, Op. 18, No. 6, starts out on an exceptionally light-hearted note, reminiscent of opera buffa. It is notable for its economy of thematic material and harmonic progressions, as well as for its light texture in a classic sonata form. The second movement is an elegant, melodic, even rhapsodic *da capo* aria of great simplicity, in marked contrast to the rollicking *Scherzo-Trio* which follows. In this movement, Beethoven seems to defy the listener to keep time, as dupe and triple meter compete for attention. The absence of strong beats and the infrequency with which all four voices come together produces a musical roller coaster which ends only towards the very end, and even then, in the last measure, the three lower instruments slip away. It is the final movement for which this quartet is most famous, the *Finale, La Malinconia*, with its soul-searching opening *Adagio*, alternating with a contemplative, good-natured *Allegretto quasi Allegro*. Not only are the mood-swings unprecedented and dramatic, but Beethoven employs several technical elements of interest—repeated use of the inverted turn, beginning on the lower note, in contradistinction to the standard eighteenth-century format which starts on the upper note, as well as a modulation to a very distant key which is most unexpected in an otherwise rather harmonically traditional work. The movement ends with a madcap *Prestissimo* as if to assure the listener that he need not pay too much attention to all that serious stuff.

Program notes by Nora Avins Klein.

This is the fourth performance of this work on a Friends of Music program; it was last played by the Fitzwilliam Quartet in April 1986.

Quartet No. 7, Op. 108 Dimitri Shostakovich

At the end of 1954, Shostakovich received the news that Nina, his wife of 22 years and the mother of his two children, had suddenly fallen

terminally ill while working with radioactive materials at a high-security physics institute in Armenia. He flew to her side immediately, arriving at the hospital shortly before she died. During the next six years he experienced a period of social withdrawal, the start and end of a failed second marriage, and another of the periodic years of political repression and cultural isolation which Soviet intellectuals suffered throughout their existence—this one in response to the publication abroad of Boris Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago*, which did not end until 1961. In 1960 he wrote a memorial to his first wife in the form of a small masterpiece, the *String Quartet No. 7 in f sharp minor, Op. 108*. It is his shortest work in this medium, lasting barely thirteen minutes, personal and intense and entirely free of the politically correct bombast which, in this writer's opinion, mars some of his larger orchestral works. The three movements are linked together, played without interruption. Because of its explicit dedication to his wife, and Shostakovich's acknowledged use of music composition as an alternative to verbal communication, historians have sought to uncover the "program" in this work. The opening movement, light, crisp, and busy, but not without reflective moments and containing one of Shostakovich's signature rhythms—two sixteenths followed by an eighth note—may be viewed as a portrait of the dedicatee; the second movement, somber, nocturnal, perhaps funereal, representing the tragic conditions of their life, their separation, the sadness to come; and finally the last movement, starting out with a frenetic fugue—his flight to her side?—fading into a gentler mood and incorporating brief remnants of the other movements, as if summing up.

Structurally, the first movement, marked *Allegretto*, is in two parts, each of which returns in modified form. The *Lento* which follows is in straightforward ABA form, played on muted strings. The final *Allegro* continues with muted strings in the opening bars, which are then uncovered as the *fortissimo* fugal material appears. Later on in this movement one hears the opening rhythm of the first movement, then a dotted rhythm from the middle movement, and a previously-heard pattern of underlying sixteenth notes as well as a return to muted strings, thus consolidating the thematic motifs and mood of the composition into a unified whole.

Program notes by Nora Avins Klein.

This is the third performance of this work in a Friends of Music concert; it was last played in April 1992 by the Emerson Quartet.

Sextet in G Major, Op. 36 Johannes Brahms

"How are things in all those houses one liked so much to visit? . . . that particular house and garden near the city gate—" Obliquely, as was his way, Johannes Brahms was asking an old friend for news of Agathe von Siebold, the 23-year-old professor's daughter he had fallen in love with one summer in Göttingen, six years past. Apparently still not entirely free of the entanglements of his romance, he set to work on his second string sextet soon after writing the letter quoted above, weaving Agathe's name firmly into the first movement.

Brahms already had one string sextet to his credit (Op. 18 in B flat), the composition which first spread his name beyond a very small circle of admirers. It remains one of his most popular works to this day. But now,

as frequently happened when Brahms wrote a pair of works in the same genre, his second sextet would have a very different character, more complex on the whole, less immediately accessible to some, but perhaps ultimately even more rewarding.

The work begins with an unusual sound effect, the first viola playing a continuous two-note warble one half-step apart. This viola drone is the core of the music for the first 32 measures, around which the rest of the music swirls. "I could do without that first theme," Clara Schumann wrote to Brahms when he sent the work to her, "but what wonders you do with it!" It is easy to share her enthusiasm; you will hear Brahms using his two-note motive in various ingenious ways throughout the sonata-form movement, but a theme it is not. The actual first theme is a long, broadly contoured, sweeping yet serene melody played first by the violin and then by the cello. And in this expansive first movement there are several other themes that flow by in the resonant keys of G and D major, keys which allow string instruments to use open strings and vibrate at their best. Along with delicate, translucent scoring, that is what gives this movement its particular glow.

It is at the end of the second theme that Agathe makes her appearance, in a phrase with the notes A G A B E repeated urgently in the first violin and viola (the note B is called H in German practice). Brahms then expands this phrase into the entire closing section, and even in the recapitulation much later into the movement, he manages to work in the same notes in a canonic cascade of Agathes.

The second movement, in textbook ABA form, is wonderful not only to listen to, but to watch. The two violins, two violas, and two cellos are paired in every imaginable way, producing a kaleidoscope of timbres in an otherwise straightforward piece of music. Watch especially the beginning, as the cellos hand the pizzicato bass line back and forth, in ensemble playing that must be perfectly timed to sound as one instrument. You'll discover other groupings of two, three, and even four instruments, but what you will not hear are all six instruments playing either notes or rhythms in unison. With the B section we've stumbled on a countryside um-pa-pa band, in a startling change of pace. Here too, though, you can clearly hear and see pairs of instruments interspersed throughout the general gaiety.

The third movement is a Nocturne Fantasy disguised as a set of variations, or vice versa—a rhapsodic movement of great rhythmic complexity. The very theme, an unusual one in that the first part takes four measures and the second part eight, is rhythmically complex, not the kind of theme most composers would choose for a set of variations. As the piece progresses, cross rhythms, syncopations, and a sometimes dense polyphony abound. Each individual part is exciting to play; only long training in communal self-denial enables the members of a good chamber ensemble to subdue their own parts in favor of the main voice of the moment, and so avoid producing a continuous dull roar in the ear of the listener. But by the end of the movement rhythmic calm is restored, and the music ends in a shimmer of gorgeous sound.

The last movement brings us back to bright daylight. This boisterous sonata-allegro movement is full of Brahmsian tricks: an introduction that turns out also to be the bridge to the second theme and the basic ingredient of the development section; a recap that appears so unassumingly and unannounced that it is hard to catch; a double coda, the second of which is a recap of the development section; and measures of modernistic pointillism worthy of Anton Webern.

This refreshing opus has a strange publication history. Brahms sent it, along with his first cello sonata, to the famous publisher Breitkopf & Härtel in 1865, at a time when he was intensely in need of money. With the success of Op. 18 in mind, Breitkopf enthusiastically accepted the sex-

tet in a manner which legally bound them to publish it. After conferring with "advisors," however, they changed their mind and asked Brahms to withdraw his sextet. Brahms replied with the angriest letter of his life. By then another publisher had asked him for both works, but Brahms wanted Breitkopf, Germany's most prestigious publisher, to keep their word. They wiggled out of the obligation nevertheless; in response, Brahms never again sent them a note of his music, although they approached him often enough in later years.

Brahms once commented that the public (and therefore publishers) expect a composer to continue to produce music of the sort he has already composed. For him this was unthinkable. One hundred and fifty years later, therefore, we are the beneficiaries of his independence, the fortunate possessors of two masterful string sextets, each with an entirely distinct personality.

Program note © 1997 by Styra Avins. You can read Brahms's furious letter to Breitkopf & Härtel in Johannes Brahms, Life and Letters, by Styra Avins, Oxford University Press (1997), which will be the first and only comprehensive collection of the letters of Brahms in English. Ms. Avins is a cellist with an interest in music history in general, and Brahms in particular. She teaches courses about Brahms and the Late Romantic Viennese School at the Graduate Division of Drew University in New Jersey, and freelances in New York City.

This is the third performance of this work on a Friends of Music Program; it was last played in March 1993 by the Chamber Players of St. Martin in the Fields.

Ying Quartet

Praised by *The New York Times* for its "exceptional unity" and "blazing commitment," the Ying Quartet has become one of the best known and most highly regarded young ensembles on the American music scene. The four siblings from Winnetka, Illinois formed the Ying Quartet in 1988 while studying at the Eastman School of Music. The quartet won the International Cleveland Quartet Competition in 1989, made its New York debut at Lincoln Center in 1991, and won the prestigious Naumburg Chamber Music Award in 1993. The Ying Quartet has performed in major cities across North America and Europe, as well as in Japan and Taiwan, and has participated in a number of music festivals. They gained national attention for their two-year residency in Jesup, Iowa (pop. 2000) under the auspices of the National Endowment for the Arts Rural Residency Initiative, where they succeeded in becoming members of the community and sharing their music with everyone from students to senior citizens and from farmers to businessmen. In the fall of 1996, the quartet joined the faculty of the Eastman School, where, in addition to coaching and performing, they will help Eastman students learn to build integrated community music programs.

Paul Katz and Martha Strongin Katz, founding members of the renowned Cleveland String Quartet, are Professors of Cello and Viola, respectively, at Rice's Shepherd School of Music.