

Magic City Chamber Music Festival
Experience Great Music with Southern Hospitality
August 4-6, 2006

FRIDAY EVENING SALON

Friday, August 4, 2006

Program

Magic City Chamber Players

Yakov Kasman, piano
Karen Bentley Pollick, violin
Denise Gainey, clarinet
Hilarie Harp Rivas, violin
Michael Fernandez, viola
Dennis Parker, cello

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Johannes Brahms (1833 - 1897)
Quartet No. 3 in C minor, Opus 60
for violin, viola, cello, and piano

Allegro non troppo
Scherzo: Allegro
Andante
Finale: Allegro comodo

INTERMISSION

Sergei Prokofiev (1891 - 1953)
Overture on Hebrew Themes, Opus 34
for clarinet, piano, and string quartet

Un poco allegro

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 - 1975)
Piano Trio No. 2 in e minor, Opus 67

Andante
Allegro non troppo
Largo
Allegretto

Program subject to change.

Program Notes

Brahms is known as one of the late nineteenth century's most ardent champions of absolute music, a figure who utterly renounced musical representation in a self-consciously high-brow defense of art for art's sake. It may come as something of a surprise, then, to find this revered composer writing to his publisher Simrock in 1877 that he wanted the title page of his Piano Quartet in C minor to feature an image that he claims would help clarify the piece's meaning. The image was to be that of a man dressed in very specific clothing that any literate individual of the period would not only have recognized but also possibly even have imitated. The man in the illustration is also supposed to be pointing a gun to his head, and Brahms' audience would have known very well what this was all about as well. In Goethe's very popular (and, it is said, semi-autobiographical) *sturm und drang* novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* the title character commits suicide with a gun out of desperation over his love for a friend's wife. Goethe is supposed to have inspired some 2,000 Germans to kill themselves in a similar way.

It is widely assumed that Brahms had in mind his own, albeit less extreme, imitation of Goethe's novel in the C minor Piano Quartet. The first version of the third piano quartet was written around twenty years before the final version was completed. The work was first written, in fact, at a point in Brahms' life in which he was desperately in love with Robert Schumann's wife Clara and Robert himself was institutionalized with mental illness. The first movement of the quartet begins, accordingly, with a sighing motive that some have interpreted as signifying Clara. The development section of this first movement is mostly concerned with this "Clara" motive, which is transformed through a variety of different emotional states. Brahms' twenty-year delay in the completion of this work may be related to his uncertainty over its possible programmatic content. Brahms worked on this piano quartet at several points from 1856 to 1874, when he finally finished the present version. The last version is in a new key (it was originally in c-sharp minor) but most importantly it ends the quartet with a strange shift toward the major mode. As Vincent Cheung has argued, the major-key conclusion mirrors the final words of Werther in the novel, who declares an ironic victory in his quest shortly before killing himself.

At the time Prokofiev came to America in 1918 an important segment of the new-music community here strongly opposed the use of folk materials, branding this approach (later championed by Copland) provincial and inconsistent with European modernism. In general, Prokofiev was sympathetic to the modernist creed and reluctantly drew on Russian themes or indeed on any melodic material he had not written himself. But at the same time, his years here involved a frustrating period of self-examination and uncertainty over what the American audience would welcome and how "modern" a modern composer ought to be. His countryman Rachmaninoff prospered in a way that Prokofiev did not at least partly because he included on his programs older and more approachable works by Scriabin and others and restricted his more challenging new music. When Prokofiev was approached in 1919 about a commission by a group of St. Petersburg conservatory graduates who had formed a Zionist-inspired (their purpose was to raise funds for a Jewish conservatory in Jerusalem) group called Zimro he was unusually receptive to their request for a work based on Russian Jewish melodies. The result is a single-movement work based on two themes taken from a notebook Zimro supplied. The first is a fast, middle eastern-sounding dance tune and the second is slower and more sustained and reflective. The work is in a ternary (ABA) form but near the end the two disparate melodies are combined. The remarkable success of this Overture led to numerous attempts by different composers to orchestrate it and to Prokofiev's own arrangement for orchestra in 1934, done to silence his many imitators.

The extent to which Shostakovich's music may offer concealed "messages" is a matter of considerable controversy. The second piano trio is one case in point. The last movement, the longest in the work at around 12 minutes, is a totentanz based on a Jewish melody that Shostakovich also quotes to great effect in the String Quartet No. 8. It is sometimes asserted that this last movement is an ironic commentary on Soviet anti-Semitism prompted by news that had reached Shostakovich of the liberated Nazi death camps. It is always dangerous to try to read content into absolute music, but whether or not this assertion is true, it seems almost certain that the Piano Trio should also be heard as a lament on the death of Shostakovich's close friend Ivan Ivanovich Sollertinsky, who died at the age of 41 only four days before the trio was begun in 1944. Sollertinsky was a musicologist to whom Shostakovich credited his development as a composer. As he said twenty years later in an interview, "When I work on new compositions, I always think, And what would Ivan Ivanovich have said about this?" Sollertinsky's sister is said to have recognized in the scherzo-like second movement 'an amazingly exact portrait of Ivan Ivanovich, whom Shostakovich understood like no one else. That is his temper, his polemics, his manner of speech, his habit of returning to one and the same thought, developing it.' The third movement is most clearly an elegy to Sollertinsky. It is set in the form of a modernized chaconne with five variations on a series of eight solemn chords.

Howard Irving, UAB Department of Music

Alys Stephens Center Chamber Players



Yakov Kasman, piano

Since his American debut as silver medalist at the Tenth Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in 1997, Yakov Kasman has set the music world abuzz. He has 15 recordings to his credit, including an acclaimed recording of Shostakovich's Quintet for Piano and Strings with the Talich String Quartet. Mr. Kasman is Assistant Professor of Piano and Artist-in-Residence at UAB.



Denise Gainey, clarinet

Denise Gainey is Associate Professor of Clarinet and Instrumental Music Education at UAB and performs regularly with the Alabama Symphony Orchestra. She comes to UAB from a nine-year tenure at Mars Hills College in North Carolina where she was a member of the Asheville, Kingsport, and Hendersonville Symphonies.



Karen Bentley Pollick, violin

Karen Bentley Pollick pursues a unique career as a violinist, violist, conductor, and pianist. She has toured with the New York Philharmonic, Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project, Bolshoi Ballet, and Barbra Streisand.



Michael Fernandez, viola

Michael Fernandez has performed across the U.S. as a soloist and as a member of both the Fonteyne Duo and Dubinsky String Quartet. He is principal violist with the Alabama Symphony Orchestra and a regular guest artist at the Rostislav Dubinsky Chamber Music Festival.



Hilarie Harp Rivas, violin

Hilarie Harp Rivas has performed chamber music in Japan, Argentina, and Peru. She was concertmaster of the Huntsville Symphony from 1994-96. Her piano trio, the Sakura Trio received 1st place in the National MTNA Chamber Music Competition.



Dennis Parker, cello

Dennis Parker received his early training at the Juilliard School and later earned degrees from Indiana University and Yale University where he worked with Janos Starker and Aldo Parisot, respectively. He has served as Professor of Cello and String Chamber Music at LSU since 1988.



SATURDAY EVENING SALON

Saturday, August 5, 2006

Program

Borealis String Quartet

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Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet in G Major, Opus 18, no. 2

Allegro

Adagio Cantabile - Allegro - Tempo I

Scherzo: Allegro

Allegro molto, quasi Presto

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 - 1975)

String Quartet No. 4 in D Major, Opus 83

Allegretto

Andantino

Allegretto

Allegretto

INTERMISSION

Maurice Ravel (1875 - 1937)

String Quartet in F Major

Allegro Moderato

Assez vif - très rythmé

Très lent

Vif et agité

Program subject to change.

Program Notes

Beethoven moved from a fairly close adherence to the classical style he inherited from Haydn and Mozart to something more progressive and visionary during the period from 1795 to 1800. There is no clear line of demarcation that would define exactly when this change took place, however. The six string quartets op. 18 (published as a group, as is more typical of eighteenth-century than nineteenth-century practice), for example, include some that have strange and new elements (such as Op. 18 No. 6), but also works like Op. 18 no. 2. The latter is not only the most attached to eighteenth-century practices of any in the set but also is filled with typically elegant eighteenth-century melodic flourishes. In German-speaking countries the work is called the *Komplimentier* (i.e., “compliments”) quartet because it is supposed to have a kind of bow-and-curtsy sensibility that is reminiscent of courtly life.

It is well known that Shostakovich had a complex and difficult relationship with the Soviet government, though exactly what effect this had on his music is still a matter of debate. Aside from periodic episodes in which various works were effectively silenced in some way, there were two instances--once in 1936 and the other in 1948--in which his music was officially denounced for the crime of “decadent formalism” only to be restored later to favor. The second episode was connected with what is sometimes called the Zhdanov decree because the denunciation was delivered by Communist Party Central Committee secretary Andrei Zhdanov. Shostakovich and other prominent composers were forced to repent publicly at a special meeting of the Composer’s Congress and Shostakovich’s family lost privileges in addition to a considerable loss in his income. For the next four years Shostakovich wrote mostly film music and works designed to salvage his career. His oratorio *The Song of the Forests*, for example, praises Stalin as “the great gardener” for the Soviet government’s reforestation plan after the war. This minor work (as we now see it) won the Stalin Prize the year after his denunciation. But Shostakovich also wrote pieces for himself during the darkest parts of his career. He called these pieces “for the desk drawer” because they were not expected to achieve public performance anytime soon if ever. One was a song cycle that could have been very dangerous for his career if it had been published, called *From Jewish Folk Poetry*. Another work from around the same time was the String Quartet No. 4, which uses similar Jewish melodies as the song cycle and might also be heard as a commentary on virulent Soviet anti-Semitism. The String Quartet No. 4 is not the kind of openly Jewish work that the String Quartet No. 8 or the second Piano Trio No. 2 are, but like the Piano Trio, its longest and most overtly Jewish movement is the fourth and last one. If Solomon Volkov’s controversial memoir *Testimony* is accurate, Shostakovich said about Jewish music that it is, “multifaceted and can appear to be happy while it is tragic. It’s almost always laughter through tears. This quality of Jewish music is close to my ideas of what music should be. There also should be two layers in music. Jews were tormented for so long that they learned to hide their despair. They express despair in dance music.”

Ravel’s difficulties with the Paris Conservatoire are legendary. He entered for the first time in 1889 at the age of 14 and was dismissed from his classes six years later after failing to win a prize in piano. After two years of self-study, he re-entered the Conservatoire in 1887 intending to specialize in composition but was dismissed from the composition class in 1900 and left the Conservatoire itself in 1903. In time, Ravel was vindicated when the Conservatoire’s Director Théodore Dubois was forced to resign in the wake of a scandal surrounding Ravel’s failure to win the famous Prix de Rome. Before that, however, Ravel wrote what is considered his first masterpiece at the age of 28 in 1903, the String Quartet (he wrote only one). Ravel’s later work is often cited for its technical perfection, but Ravel himself said at the end of his career that he would gladly sacrifice some of his later perfection for the enthusiasm of his early works. The String Quartet is one of his most often performed pieces today because it has the rare combination of both virtues.

Aside from the melodic interest of this quartet, the work is valued for its many rhythmic eccentricities. The second movement features the historically common French opposition between 3/4 time in which eighth notes are divided into three groups of two (in the first violin and cello parts) and 6/8 time in the second violin and viola, in which eighth notes are divided into two groups of three with a different pattern of accents (think “America” from Leonard Bernstein’s *West Side Story*). In the same vein, the brilliant last movement features the strange asymmetric meter of 5/8 time. Otherwise, the quartet follows a common classical pattern in which the first movement is in a conventional sonata form with two contrasting themes. Like other well known French works of the period, the String Quartet uses cyclical form, restating melodic material in the third movement that was originally heard in the first.

Howard Irving, UAB Department of Music

SUNDAY MUSICAL BRUNCH

Sunday, August 6, 2006

Program

Borealis String Quartet

with guest artists

Denise Gainey, clarinet

Yakov Kasman, piano

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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 - 1791)

Clarinet Quintet in A Major, K. 581

Allegro

Larghetto

Menuetto

Allegretto con Variazioni

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 - 1975)

Piano Quintet in G minor, Opus 57

Prelude (Lento)

Fugue (Adagio)

Scherzo (Allegretto)

Intermezzo (Lento)

Finale (Allegretto)

Program subject to change.

Program Notes

Anton Stadler might have been the kind of musician who gave the profession a bad name in late eighteenth-century Vienna. Stadler was many things: he was a friend and fellow Masonic lodge brother to Mozart, he was a gifted clarinetist who played second clarinet in the Imperial court orchestra and was noted both for the richness of his tone and the ease with which he changed registers, and he was the inventor of a new kind of clarinet that was capable of playing four notes lower than usual. At the same time, he is often depicted less than charitably in the literature as an irresponsible individual who freeloaded in the Mozart home, pawned music that Mozart wrote for him and borrowed money that the composer could not afford to lose without paying it back. Some of Stadler's reputation is based on legend that can't be verified. It must, however, be admitted that Mozart's sister-in-law, Sophie Haibel, once called Stadler one of the "secret bloodsuckers and worthless people who served only to amuse Wolfgang at the table and relationship with whom damaged his reputation." Mozart probably met Stadler in 1781, soon after both men arrived in Vienna. The two became the best of friends, even at one point (according to Mozart's wife Constanza) planning a secret fraternal society that was to be called the "Grotto." Stadler is of interest here because Mozart wrote both the Clarinet Quintet K. 581 and the famous Clarinet Concerto K. 622 for him.

These two great works might not exist except for Mozart's (possibly misplaced) enthusiasm for Stadler, but the latter's role in connection with both works presents some problems. First, the Quintet and the Concerto were both originally written for Stadler's new basset clarinet with the extended low range. As so often happens, this new instrument did not catch on and soon disappeared, leaving Mozart's music unplayable in its original state. When the Quintet was finally published in 1802, long after Mozart's death, it had to be adapted for a standard clarinet. Unfortunately, by then the original clarinet part was lost, possibly because Mozart gave it to Stadler who either pawned or sold it.

Although the Clarinet Quintet is a very late work it is not typical of late Mozart. After Mozart discovered the Baroque contrapuntal style of Handel and Bach his music became more motivic, more economical in its use of thematic material, and some would also say more austere and emotionally restrained. The Clarinet Quintet, however, shows Mozart's ability to link together a variety of diverse thematic ideas in a way that is more like the piano concertos of the 1780s. It is not, however, concerto-like in at least one other respect. The clarinet, while still the featured instrument, is not always the focus of attention to the exclusion of all others. Instead, it acts as a team player in an ensemble in which it also accompanies and plays duets, as in its beautiful slow-movement duet with the first violin.

In any program featuring the works of Shostakovich there is always considerable interest in the many works written in defiance of the Soviet regime. Sometimes it is implied that the music that satisfied Stalin and the Communist party should be viewed as lesser music undertaken to rehabilitate Shostakovich's career after one of the Party's denunciations. In some cases this may even be true. The Piano Quintet, however, is universally accepted as a great work in which Shostakovich satisfied both the Party and the demands of art. Shostakovich won the first ever Stalin prize for this work in 1941 (and with it the substantial sum of 100,000 rubles, which he gave to charity). But more importantly the Piano Quintet resonated with the public at large in a way that it is difficult to imagine for any art music in the west, much less a modern work. According to famous violinist Rostislav Dubinsky, with whom Shostakovich himself performed the Quintet many times, "for a time the Quintet overshadowed even such events as the football matches between the main teams. The Quintet was discussed in trams, people tried to sing in the streets the second defiant theme of the finale. War that soon started completely changed the life of the country as well as the consciousness of the people. If previously there was the faint hope of a better life, and the hope that the 'sacrifices' of the revolution were not in vain, this hope was never to return. The Quintet remained in the consciousness of the people as the last ray of light before the future sank into a dark gloom."

The influence of the Baroque is very noticeable in the Quintet, both in the Prelude and Fugue that make up the first two movements and in the work's conspicuously polyphonic texture. At the same time, it is a work that aspires to a kind of later eighteenth-century clarity, with very simple textures that often involve the piano playing in octaves. In general it is an optimistic work of great wit and humor, especially in the fifth and last movement. This last movement follows a somber "Intermezzo" built on a Baroque-style "walking" bass that is played mostly by the cello. The calm sadness of the fourth movement is perfectly offset by the last movement's tone of ironic buoyancy, which Dubinsky was inclined to interpret as defiance. This last movement captures perfectly the mood of a tranquil if not entirely prosperous country poised on the brink of a great catastrophe.

Howard Irving, UAB Department of Music