

"Wister and More!" presents the Wister Quartet - Sunday, September 30, 2012

Dear Members and Friends,

We are delighted to remind you that the first concert in our 2012/13 "Wister and More!" Series will be this Sunday, September 30 at 3:00 p.m.

The Wister Quartet

Nancy Bean, violin Pamela Fay, viola
Davyd Booth, violin Lloyd Smith, cello

The Program

CHARLES TOMLINSON GRIFFES
JOSEPH HAYDN
CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Two Sketches Based on Indian Themes
String Quartet in B \flat Major, Op. 76, No. 4 ("The Sunrise")
String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 10

A Brief Overview of our Concert

America's only true impressionist was Charles Tomlinson Griffes. His interest in preserving Native American culture, in conjunction with other creative artists of his time, led him to base several chamber works on traditional Indian melodies from tribes in New York state.

When Joseph Haydn was finally able to relax and write whatever he wanted at his own pace, thanks to a reputation firmly established throughout Europe, he most often chose the string quartet. His six quartets of Op. 76 are nearly his last, and are some of the greatest of the entire genre. "The Sunrise" quartet, so named by his publisher because of the opening of the first movement, certainly is one of the high points of the Classical era.

"To create the bizarre, the incomprehensible, and the unplayable" was just one example of the vitriol critics heaped upon Claude Debussy's String Quartet when it was premiered. Well, perhaps we can play it better nowadays, and certainly listeners' ears are now better able to appreciate the sensuous splendor of this great creation. Debussy's only string quartet has taken its place as one of the great monuments of Romantic chamber music writing.

Notes on Our Program

Charles T. Griffes (1884-1920)
Two Sketches Based on Indian Themes

Trained originally as a pianist, the interests of this tragically short-lived American turned more and more to composition. This sensitive, modest, shy talent had been championed by his second piano teacher, Mary Selena Broughton, who influenced profoundly his personal and musical development. It was she who financed his piano studies at the Stern Conservatory in Berlin. Against her advice, Griffes left the conservatory and began working with Engelbert Humperdinck. His four years in Berlin were mostly spent composing, though he did occasionally appear as a piano soloist and accompanist.

Upon returning home, Griffes became director of music at the Hackley School for Boys in Tarrytown, New York. He spent his spare time composing. While in Europe he had been drawn to Impressionism, moving away from the German Romanticism he had been educated in. He experimented all through his life, trying to find a musical language of his own. What he accomplished, particularly in the last three years of his life (when the Two Sketches were written), was to usher in a more progressive era in American music. His life was cut short by pneumonia, his remarkable promise brutally curtailed.

The first sketch is based on a Chippewa song of farewell, the setting poignantly nostalgic and imparting an eerily fantastic atmosphere. The second sketch is a vigorous, extroverted dance piece featuring the more conventional tom-tom rhythms. Its middle section, however, is lyrical and haunting. Griffes did not specify any sources for this movement.

The Two Sketches were premiered in 1918 by the Flonzaley Quartet, and Adolfo Betti (their first violinist) edited the music for publication by Schirmer.

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) **String Quartet in B \flat Major, Op. 76, No. 4 (“The Sunrise”)**

The six quartets comprising Op. 76 were Haydn’s next to last quartets. He was considered by no less a person than Mozart to be the father of the string quartet and history favors this claim. It must be noted, however, that the Italian composer (and Haydn’s friend) Luigi Boccherini also had a great deal to do with its development. The majority of Haydn’s quartets were written for his own use while employed at the Esterházy court in Austria. Many first performances took place there with Haydn playing the viola part.

By the time Haydn returned to Austria after his significant successes in London, he had become a “grand old man” of Vienna. An honorary citizen and a landowner (rare in those days, especially among musicians), he returned to accept his duties as Kapellmeister in the Court of Esterházy, now located — conveniently for Haydn — in Eisenstadt and Vienna. He had much more time to himself and lavished great attention to his later string quartets and his two major oratorios, “The Creation” and “The Seasons.”

Certainly after his harrowing earlier years in Esterházy, where his prodigious output of symphonies attested as strongly to the nearly inhumane working conditions he was bound to as to the richness of his inspiration, (which rarely failed him), he could long with genuine sincerity for a simpler life. It is likely that the troubled state of what we now call Europe in the 1790’s fed some of his religious writing. The first tremors of democracy were being felt as the French Revolution swept away its aristocracy and led the way to a movement more gradual but as profound as the American Revolution had been nearly a generation earlier. But Haydn’s genius was more inner-directed than that. His quartet writing had taken on new depths after many, many years of careful and sometimes painful development, and he wasn’t ready to abandon the string quartet until 1803, when he stopped halfway through his first Op. 103 quartet, abandoning hope of ever completing it.

The Op. 76 set of six quartets stands as one of the great creative outpourings of Classical music. His “Sunrise” quartet (No. 4) is certainly one of the great string quartets of all time. Haydn dedicated the quartets of Op. 76 to the Count Joseph Erdödy, who had commissioned them. He wrote them the year Schubert was born, 1797, and they were published two years later by Artaria in Vienna.

In the opening of the first movement of the “Sunrise” quartet you can hear the wonderful phrase, played by the first violin, which suggests the quartet’s nickname. The exuberance of the writing in this movement also gives the impression of early morning vigor and freshness. The slow movement doesn’t completely shake off the feeling of energy and vitality but gives lavish — and tasteful — trills and ornamental embroidery to the otherwise serene atmosphere of this lovely movement.

The minuet is unusually playful. Remember that over time the minuet movement became the Scherzo movement in Classical writing, and they were distinctly playful, quirky or even grotesque. Especially entertaining is the ease with which Haydn moves through his Minuet and its Trio, so that the budding quirkiness seems to fit in naturally with the traditional dance form.

The last movement starts out mildly, almost a colloquially friendly movement, full of little ornaments which give hints of its increasingly gleeful tone as the tempo increases twice before the end. His often hilarious sequences of instrument chasing instrument and the first violin getting “hung up” on a transitional passage, spinning its wheels until a good moment for rescue comes along, are tributes to a true master of contrapuntal writing who is enjoying his mastery very much indeed.

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) **String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 10**

When the String Quartet (1893) of Claude Debussy first appeared, the critics had a field day. Kufferath called it “an example of the shapelessness of everything today.” Parisian critics chastised Debussy for being “tormented with the desire to create the bizarre, the incomprehensible and the unplayable.”

These kinds of charges may sound familiar; they have been used against whatever has been daring and unfamiliar since the *Ars Nova* (New Art) of Medieval times, through Beethoven’s experiments, right up to the present day.

Debussy had a difficult time at the Paris Conservatoire with his teachers as well. He seemed to make a point of breaking as many of the traditional rules of harmony and thematic development as possible. What may set Debussy apart from similar unfortunates in history is that no composer seems to have made such advancing leaps while simultaneously creating an overwhelmingly gorgeous tableau of sound that influenced so many.

The composer was no youngster when he composed the quartet at age 31. Yet it is considered an early work, as his string of mature successes were to follow, including the *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faune* (1894), *Pelléas and Mélisande* (1902), *La Mer* (1905), *Jeux* (1913) and the *Préludes* for piano of 1910 and 1913.

It is with his quartet that Debussy first fully revealed the new directions for which the composer is now famous. He stated, “I should like to attain a music which is truly released from motives or made from one continuous motive that is not interrupted and that never comes back on itself.” With the realization of these intentions, Debussy had reinvented the notion of form in music.

In his quartet one, in fact, discovers that the opening theme provides ongoing material for all but the slow movement. Debussy achieves a kind of endless variation and gives priority to the rhythmic character of the music over exacting melodic detail. This kind of cyclic treatment owes much to César Franck, although the piece was initially dedicated to Ernest Chausson.

Despite its novelty and advancement, the String Quartet really belongs to the conclusion of Debussy’s early period and it is with the *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faune* that his next, all-important phase began. Nevertheless, the quartet provides the earliest model for some of the most important of 20th century quartet writers including Ravel, Webern and Bartók. One measure of a composer’s achievement is the level of influence on subsequent composers. Claude Debussy had this kind of influence in abundance.

The first movement, Animé et très décidé, is a rather free interpretation of the tradition sonata-allegro form. The opening motive, again pervasive throughout the work, first appears in the key of G Minor. The second movement, Assez vif et bien rythmé, further emphasizing the rhythmic element, demonstrates Spanish influence, which was a passionate interest of the composer. Manuel de Falla once said of it, "Most of it could pass for one of the finest Andalusian dances ever written." The third movement has a hushed spiritual beauty to it. A dreamy atmosphere permeates, and a certain Russian melancholy is hinted at. A plaintive middle section starring the viola and cello gives a more restless undercurrent to the dream sequence, but tranquility returns and the ending is the merest peaceful sigh. The finale begins with an introspective introduction marked Très Modéré and then launches into the fast main section, marked Très mouvementé. It is full of energetic vitality and reworks many of the musical elements already heard as it makes its way to a brilliant G Major conclusion.

Tickets are \$20 and may be purchased online at <http://german-society-of-pennsylvania.ticketleap.com/wister2012-13/>, by calling 215-627-2332, or at the door.



With kind regards,

Beate Brockmann

Office Manager

The German Society of Pennsylvania

611 Spring Garden Street

Philadelphia, PA 19123

(p) 215-627-2332

(f) 215-627-5297

email: info@germansociety.org

www.germansociety.org

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