Shanghai Quartet, Mozart Quartet K. 465 Dissonance, Bartok Quartet no. 6

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FRANK BRIDGE
Novelletten for String Quartet (1904)

When Haydn was in Vienna, and wanted to have a “party quartet,” as they used to call it, he, as the most famous musician of his time, had the easiest to get together, but not a bunch of amateurs but a group of first-rate professionals. For his second violin he had access to a leading/Venice composer, Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf. For his cellists he called upon two fine musicians, the composer Johann Vanhal. For his viola he chose Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The first two quartet sessions Haydn supposed to have said to Mozart’s father, “Before God and as an honest man I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me either personally or by reputation—he has taste and, moreover, the greatest possible knowledge of the science of composition.” Mozart, who assimilated everything he heard into his own style, in his turn was constantly showing his admiration for Haydn by modeling his instrumental works after those of the older master. Haydn wrote to Mozart telling him to write six of his own (K numbers 168–173), which show him admiring Haydn’s innovations in the field. And Haydn’s opus 33 quartets (still numbers 20 in the new numbering with Mozart dedicated to Haydn, sending him the manuscript copy and assigning all the rights to him—a princely gesture for a composer who had little tolerance for most of his colleagues.

In the letter accompanying the music, Mozart called the quartets the result of “long and arduous labor,” and so they were, especially for this phenomenon of nature from whom music usually flowed like water from an open fire hydrant. He wrote the six Haydn quartets over the course of three years (by comparison, he wrote The Marriage of Figaro and Don Giovanni in just over 14 months; see page 491 in two months), and the number of false starts, erasures, and alterations in the score bespeak the effort and care involved. While the first movement was always a difficult genre for him, these six quartets mark the arrival on the scene of one of the giants of the field, and none of them is as fascinating a work as the Chinese set, his Quartet in C, K. 465, which we hear tonight.

This quartet bears an interesting nickname, “Dissonance.” One often hears listeners bandying that word about, without knowing its specific meaning. A dissension is any sort of argument and is clearly a form of contendsion. By this definition, Mozart’s music abounds in dissensions, as does almost all good music, but in the first movement of a String Quartet rarely comes closer to the public definition (something that sounds wrong), resulting from the shocking sonority that occurs in the second theme. That is what is called a false relation—A-natural in the first violin succeeding A-flat in the viola. This startling effect sets the stage for a quartet that abounds in key changes, key changes, and surprising chromatic effects.

Usually in classical music, such chromatic effects are connected with emotional extremes (such as terror, anger, madness, etc.), but this quartet, except for the somber introduction to the first movement, is quite another story. Mozart’s contemporaries and all succeeding composers saw this contradiction as evidence of Mozart’s lack (they never spoke to Haydn about it) and claimed about his love of complicated effects for its own sake (as the Emperor Josef II is famously supposed to have said, “too many notes, my dear Mozart.”) In fact these Philharmonies were right, in a way he did love complexity and compositional sleight of hand for its own sake—witness the exaltation in contrapuntal wizardry so compelling in the finale of the Jupiter Symphony. The Dissonance Quartet similarly revels in peppy harmonic effects—so that its joyous tone, in context, seems perfectly appropriate.

—John Schel

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
Quartet no. 19 in C Major (Dissossance), K. 465 (1785)

The Quartet has a long history of championing new music and juxtaposing Eastern and Western sounds. Its 25th anniversary included repertoire from the three continents that comprise its artistic and cultural worlds: Penderecki’s String Quartet no. 3, Chen Yi’s From the Path of Beauty, jazz pianist Dick Hyman’s String Quartet, and String Quartet no. 2 by Vivan Fung. Among its other major commissions and premieres are works by Lowell Lieberman, Bright Sheng, and Zhou Long. In addition to the world premiere of Liang’s Five Seasons at Montclair State University, the tradition continues with forthcoming works from Marc Neikrug and Stewart-Wallace in the coming seasons.

The Quartet has built an extensive discography that totals over 25 recordings on multiple labels. Recent releases include Schumann’s Piano Quintet with Rudolf Buchbinder and Zhou Long’s “Poems from Tang” for Quartet and Orchestra with the Singapore Symphony (BIS). In 2003, the Quartet released its most popular disc, a 24-track collection of Chinese folk songs titled Chinasong (Delos) featuring music arranged by Yi-Wen Jiang reflecting his childhood memories of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Current recording projects include the complete Beethoven string quartets (Cantata), a seven-disc project that was completed in November 2009.

The Shanghai Quartet has appeared in a diverse and interesting array of media projects, ranging from a cameo appearance in the Woody Allen film Melinda and Melinda played by an ensemble of the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, and the Singapore Symphony (BIS) to PBS’s Great Performances series for television. Other film credits include an appearance by violist William61 Eriksen in the film Clockwork Orange. Maa to Mozart: Isaac Stern in China, and the family of cellist Nicholas Tzavaras as the subject of the 1999 film Music of the Heart starring Meryl Streep.
Quartet-in-Residence
Shanghai Quartet

featuring

Weigang Li, violin
Yi-Wen Jiang, violin
Honggang Li, viola
Nicholas Tzavaras, cello

PROGRAM

Novelloletten for String Quartet
Andante moderato
Pronto. Allegretto
Allegro vivo

String Quartet no. 19 in C Major (Dissonance), K. 465
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)
Adagio–Allegro
Adagio cantabile
Menuetto
Allegro molto

~~Intermission~~

String Quartet no. 6
Béla Bartók (1881–1945)
Molto–Vivace
Mesto–Marcia
Mesto–Burletta
Molto–Molto tranquillo

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