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

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PROGRAM NOTES

FRANK BRIDGE

Novelletten for String Quartet (1904)

Frank Bridge was born in Brighton, England, and studied violin and composition at the Royal College of Music and then privately under Charles Villiers Stanford, and was subsequently Benjamin Britten’s composition teacher. As a performer he established himself as a viola player in the English String Quartet, while as a composer he developed a style of some originality. His style developed radically after the First World War, when the influence of Schönberg’s pupil Alban Berg becomes apparent. Bridge, however, retains an English element in his harmony and musical language, although the new form that his music had taken somewhat isolated him from the insular traditions of many of his contemporaries.

The *Novelletten*, a title that calls to mind the music of Schumann, were written in 1904 but presage something of the path Bridge’s harmonic idiom was subsequently to take. The first shows a particular enthusiasm for its string writing and tonality shifts, with its gentle opening and close. Pizzicato notes are heard at the start of the second piece, a brisk Presto with a chromatic, tender core, while the final piece opens boldly, recalling some of the material of the other two movements, before ending as it began.

—*Philip R. Buttall*

The String Quartet no. 19 in C Major by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

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

When Haydn was in Vienna, and wanted to have a “quartet party,” as they used to call it, he, as the most famous musician of his time, had the cachet to get together not just a bunch of amateurs but a group of first-rate professionals. For his second violin he had access to a leading Viennese composer, Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf. For his cellist he called upon another fine musician, the composer Johann Vanhal. For his violist he chose Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The thought of those two giants playing quartets together, reading down their respective new charts, makes one want to go out and invent time travel. And, unlike many well-acquainted pairs of great composers, they actually valued each other’s gifts and enjoyed each other’s company. After one of these quartet sessions Haydn is 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’s opus 20 quartets prompted him to write six of his own (K numbers 168–173), which show him assimilating Haydn’s innovations in the field. And Haydn’s opus 33 quartets prompted a new set of six, which Mozart dedicated to Haydn, sending him the manuscript copy and assigning all the rights to him—a princely gesture from 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 his great C minor piano concerto [K. 491] in two months), and the number of false starts, erasures, and alterations in the score bespeak the effort and care involved. While the string quartet was always to remain 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 last of the 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 dissonance is any sound that is unstable and requires resolution. By this definition, Mozart’s music abounds in dissonances, as does almost all good music, but in this particular quartet the word really comes closer to the public definition (something that sounds wrong), resulting from the shocking sonority that occurs in the second bar, caused by 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 dissonances, sudden 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 really quite an easygoing work. Mozart’s less discerning contemporaries saw this contradiction as evidence of Mozart’s lack of taste (they never spoke to Haydn about it) and complained about his love of complicated effect for its own sake (as the Emperor Josef II is famously supposed to have said, “too many notes, my dear Mozart”). In fact these Philistines were right, in a way: he did love complexity and compositional sleight of hand for its own sake—witness the exultation in contrapuntal wizardry so compelling in the finale of the *Jupiter* Symphony. The *Dissonance* Quartet similarly revels in peppery harmonic effects...so that its joyous tone, in context, seems perfectly appropriate.

—*John Sichel*

The String Quartet no. 6 by Béla Bartók

BÉLA BARTÓK
String Quartet no. 6 (1939)

Bartók’s last completed quartet exemplifies the composer’s continuing search for new forms, even as he sought to distill and clarify his mode of expression. The form he devised for the String Quartet no. 6 is ingenious: each movement is preceded by an introductory section marked “Mesto” (“sadly”), with increasing complexity at each appearance. The “mesto” theme functions both as a motto and as the source of much of the quartet’s thematic substance. In the fourth movement, rather than giving way to a lively finale (the original plan as indicated by Bartók’s sketches), the motto continues on to become the conclusion itself.

The sad introductory theme is played first by solo viola, whose last notes are the germ for a unison statement by all four instruments in peremptory three-note phrases that will return later as a sort of subsidiary motto. The first theme is in quick triplets that are chromatically sinuous. The second theme is a folk-like melody, with a prominent “Scotch snap” rhythm. The first theme dominates the development, which is fairly strenuous and darker in mood. After a brief appearance of the second theme, the movement ends simply with a reprise of the first theme, now detached and musing.

The “mesto” introduction to the second movement is in two-part counterpoint, the cello stating the melody accompanied by upper strings in a tremolando counter-melody. The subsequent Marcia is bitter and ironic, and the “Scotch snap” rhythm is prominent. The appearance of the second theme is ingenious: the march rhythm continues as an accompaniment to the rising glissandi of the new tune. The middle section suspends the propulsive march as the cello rhapsodizes, cadenza-like, on a variation of the second theme. This is accompanied by high trills from the violins and harsh, guitar-like strumming on the viola. The return of the march is bizarre, with extremely high octave doubling from the first violin and a filling out of the implied triadic harmonies, which create an ironic, hallucinatory effect.

For its third appearance, the “mesto” ritornello is in three-part harmony; it leads to a rude “Burletta” (burlesque), with vulgar stamping rhythms and a melody reminiscent of the “teasing songs” prevalent in Eastern European folk music. The second theme moves within a narrow intervallic range, evoking the Arabic melodies Bartók collected in North Africa. In the central part, the “Scotch snap” theme from the first movement is mused upon before the burlesque returns, this time entirely in pizzicato. At the conclusion, an attempt to sound the “Scotch snap” theme is shouted down by angry chords.

In the slow finale, the “mesto” melody, now in four parts, continues on to become the entire movement, and the second theme recalls the unison motto of the first movement. The triplet theme is also recalled, now in a setting of profound desolation, and the “Scotch snap” tune makes a wistful appearance. Ghostly tremolandi accompany the return of the “mesto” theme; there is a moment of halfhearted protest that dwindles to resignation. The cello ends it all with a question mark, plucked chords based on the “mesto” motto.

—*All Music Guide*

ABOUT THE SHANGHAI QUARTET

The Shanghai Quartet is renowned for its passionate musicality, impressive technique, and multicultural innovations. Its elegant style melds the delicacy of Eastern music with the emotional breadth of Western repertoire, allowing it to traverse musical genres from traditional Chinese folk music and masterpieces of Western music to cutting-edge contemporary works.

The Shanghai Quartet performing at the Carnegie Hall in New York City

The Shanghai Quartet has served as Quartet-in-Residence at the John J. Cali School of Music at Montclair State University since 2002 and currently serves as Ensemble-in-Residence with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra. They are also currently visiting guest professors of the Shanghai Conservatory and the Central Conservatory in Beijing.

The Shanghai Quartet performing at the Carnegie Hall in New York City

Formed at the Shanghai Conservatory in 1983, the Shanghai Quartet has worked with the world’s most distinguished artists and regularly tours the major music centers of Europe, North America, and Asia. Recent seasons have included concert tours of Europe, Japan, China, Australia, and New Zealand. The Quartet has appeared at Carnegie Hall in chamber performances and with orchestra and in 2006 gave the premiere of Takuma Itoh’s Concerto for Quartet and Orchestra in Carnegie Hall’s Isaac Stern Auditorium.

The Shanghai Quartet performing at the Carnegie Hall in New York City

Performances at many of the most distinguished festivals and concert halls highlighted the Shanghai Quartet’s 25th anniversary season in 2008–09, including appearances at the Ravinia, Tanglewood, and Ottawa International Festivals, New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, and residencies at the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival and the Oregon Bach Festival. November 2008 brought the world premiere of Penderecki’s String Quartet no. 3, *Leaves From an Unwritten Diary*, at a special concert in Poland honoring the composer’s 75th birthday, with the US premieres at Montclair State and the University of Richmond, and further performances in Lithuania, France,

and throughout the United States. The Quartet gave the premiere of Chen Yi’s *From the Path of Beauty* with Chanticleer in San Francisco, with the Asian premiere in China in May 2009.

The Quartet has a long history of championing new music and juxtaposing Eastern and Western sounds. Its 25th anniversary included world premieres 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 Vivian 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 Lei Liang’s *Five Seasons* at Montclair State, the tradition continues with forthcoming works from Marc Neikrug and Stewart Wallace in the coming seasons.

The Shanghai Quartet performing at the Carnegie Hall in New York City

The Quartet has built an extensive discography that totals over 25 recordings on multiple labels. Recent releases include Schumann and Dvořák piano quintets 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 (Camerata), a seven-disc project that was completed in November 2009.

The Shanghai Quartet performing at the Carnegie Hall in New York City

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* playing Bartók’s String Quartet no. 4 (and the film’s soundtrack recording) to PBS’s *Great Performances* series for television. Other film credits include an appearance by violinist Weigang Li in the documentary *From Mao 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.

Music

Music

Music

Dr. Susan A. Cole, President
 Dr. Geoffrey W. Newman, Dean, College of the Arts
 Jedediah Wheeler, Executive Director, Arts & Cultural Programming

Peak Performances @ Montclair presents:

Quartet-in-Residence
Shanghai Quartet

featuring

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

PROGRAM

Novelletten for String Quartet Frank Bridge (1879–1941)
 Andante moderato
 Presto: Allegretto
 Allegro vivo

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

~~Intermission~~

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

Duration: 1 hour 30 minutes, including one 15-minute intermission.

In consideration of both audience and performers, please turn off all electronic devices. The taking of photographs or videos and the use of recording equipment are not permitted. No food or drink is permitted inside the theater.

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Credit: Wu-Jun Ji

Shanghai Quartet

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