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

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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 his own. His style developed radically after the First World War, when the influence of Schoenberg’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 Novetlletten, a title that calls to mind the music of Schumann, were written in 1904, but presage some of the path Bridge’s harmonic idiom was subsequently to take. The first shows a particular enthusiasm for its structure, with a central division, 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 first piece opens boldly recalling some of the material of the other two movements, before ending as it began.

—Philip R. Butler

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

When Haydn was in Vienna, and wanted to have a “quarter party,” as they used to call it, he, as the most famous musician of his time, had the excuse 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 bass he called upon another fine musician, the composer Johann Valhal. For his viola he chose Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The three men were 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 famous composers, they actually value each other’s gifts and enjoy 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 was so moved by it that he wrote six of his own (K numbers 168–173), which show him assimilating Haydn’s innovations in the field. And Haydn’s opus 33 quartets, which are distinctively new and fresh, and of which Mozart dedicated to Haydn, sending him the manuscript copy and assigning all the rights to him—a precisely generous 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 The Hapsburg in just a few months, a total of four days in 1789), and the number of false starts, erasures, and alterations in the score bespeak the effort and care involved. While the difficulty of the score 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 dissonance is any sound that is out of step with or sounds wrong with the rest of the music. By this definition, Mozart’s music abounds in dissonances, as does almost all good music, but in the case of this “Dissonance” quartet, it truly comes closer to the public definition (something that sounds wrong), resulting from the shocking sonority that occurs in the second movement. The word 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 dissonant, startling key changes, and surprising chromatic effects.

Usual in classical music, such chromatic effects are connected with emotional extremes (such as terror, anger, sadness, etc.), but this quartet, except for the somber introduction to the first movement, is really quite an entertaining Chromatic Quartet. Most discerning contemporaries saw this contradistinction as evidence of Mozart’s lack (they never spoke to Haydn about it) and complained about his love of dissonant effects for its own sake (as the Emperor Joseph II is famously supposed to have said, “too many notes, my dear Mozart.”) In fact these Philharmones 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 pepperpot harmonic effects...so that its joyous tone, in context, seems perfectly appropriate.

—John Schel

BELA BARTOK
String Quartet no. 6 (1939)

Bartok’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 finally (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 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 an iris triplet that are chromatically snious. The second theme is a folk-like melody, with a prominent “Scotch snap” rhythm. The first theme dominates the development, which is fairly contrapuntal. Towards the end (the recapitulation, after a brief appearance of the second theme) a half-hearted protest that dwindles to a moment of the “mesto” theme; there is a moment of halfhearted protest that brings forth the reconciliation. 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 musicianship, impressive technique, and multicultural innovations. Its elegant style melds the delicacy of Eastern music with the unconventional breadth of its 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 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 guests of the Shanghai Conservatory and the Central Conservatory in Beijing.

Formed at the Shanghai Conservatory in 1983, the Shanghai Quartet has worked with 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 orchestras and in 2006 gave the premiere of Takuma Isho’s “Quartet for Quartet and Orchestra in Carnegie Hall’s Isaac Stern Auditorium.

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 Ravina, Tanglewood, and Otaa International Festivals, New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, 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 premiere at Montclair State and the University of Richmond, and further performances in Lithuania, France, and throughout the United States.

The Quartet has a long history of championing new music and juxtaposing Eastern and Western sounds. Its 25th anniversary included works from the three continents that comprise its artistic and cultural universe: 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 premiers 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 Quartet has built an extensive discography that totals over 25 recordings on multiple labels. Recent releases include Schumann’s complete piano quartets 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 has appeared in a diverse and interesting array of music projects, ranging from a cameo appearance in the Woody Allen film Melinda and Melinda playing the Montagu Cholmley Suite (and the film’s soundtrack recording) to PBS’s Great Performances series for television. Other film credits include an appearance by violoncellist Yo-Yo Ma 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
Peak Performances @ Montclair presents:

Quartet-in-Residence

Shanghai Quartet

featuring

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

PROGRAM

Novelettten for String Quartet
Andante moderato
Prando 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–Burletta
Mesto–Piatto 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.

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

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John J. Cali School of Music
Ruth Rendleman (interim)
Theatre and Dance Eric Diamond
Academics Services and Outreach Marie Sparks

DuMont Television Center Jeffrey Friedman
University Art Galleries Teresa Rodrigues
College Administrator Zarah S. Battle
Executive Assistant to the Dean Alyson Thelin

Production Run Crew
William Growney (Lighting Supervisor), Christopher Santilli (Stage Crew)

Department of Theatre and Dance presents:

DANCEWORKS 2011
April 6–10, 2011

BRAINSTORM
A Symposium on Creative Thinking
April 12, 2011 • 1:00pm
Alexander Kasser Theater

The 2010/11 season is made possible in part by funds from:
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