

Program Notes
Orion String Quartet with Peter Serkin, piano
September 25, 2013

Stravinsky: Concertino for String Quartet

Born in Oranienbaum [now Lomonosov], June 17, 1882; died in New York, April 6, 1971

In 1920 Alfred Pochon, first violinist of the Flonzaley Quartet, asked Stravinsky for a work to introduce into their almost exclusively Classical repertoire. Allowed free rein, Stravinsky composed a one-movement piece, which he described as “a free sonata-allegro, with a definitely concertante part for the first violin.” Its “limited dimensions,” he said, led to the title *Concertino*.

The *Concertino* presents an intriguing window toward *Pulcinella* and other works of Stravinsky’s Neoclassic period in its emphasis on structure, use of motoric rhythms, and suggestions of functional tonal harmony. But there was little that sounded Classical or linked the *Concertino* to the string quartet tradition, thus the premiere on November 3, 1920, in New York by the Classically oriented Flonzaley Quartet met with an unfavorable reception. The piece gained traction more than three decades later in the composer’s arrangement for violin, cello, and ten wind and brass instruments, made at the suggestion of his longtime assistant Robert Craft.

Stravinsky’s freedom with the form is especially apparent in the piece’s forgoing of a Classical development, including instead a contrasting central section consisting mainly of a cadenza for the first violin. While the *Concertino* anticipates his Neoclassical period, it also relies on his earlier techniques—ostinatos (repeating patterns), shifting meters, and accented offbeat chords. A little of the Russian dance style of *Petrushka* and a bit of *Histoire du soldat* also appears in some of his jaunty violin figurations.

One of the most striking gestures occurs at the outset: simultaneous ascending scales in two different keys, creating a piercing dissonance. The scales return just before the middle section and again in the “recapitulation.” Although strident or busy passages dominate, the overall impression Stravinsky wanted to leave was one of serious calm. The quiet closing *Andante*, quite unlike a Classical coda, recalls an earlier calm section, hints at the cadenza, and ends *sospirando* (sighing).

Webern: String Quartet, Op. 28

Born in Vienna, December 3, 1883; died in Mittersill, September 15, 1945

Webern, master of miniatures, became fired up in 1936 with the idea of writing a string quartet that would synthesize what his teacher Arnold Schoenberg had called “horizontal” and “vertical” construction. Horizontal, said Webern, refers to forms often found in a sonata or symphony, and vertical to polyphonic construction such as canons and fugues. On November 17 he began sketching out a twelve-tone row full of the symmetries and half steps he so adored. Many have mentioned that the first four notes are analogous to the famous B-A-C-H motive (in German, the notes B-flat, A, C, and B-natural), but it may have been unconscious since Webern frequently worked with such intervals. He also jotted down ideas for a three-movement structure, interspersed with references to his wife, children, and cherished places. These are particularly

intriguing in view of his focus on purely abstract instrumental music, but he never elaborated on them.

Two days later he began composing what would become his finale, *Sehr fließend* (Very flowing), which occupied him intermittently until August 20, 1937, when at last he completed a draft that satisfied him. After a brief holiday he launched into the variation movement, *Mässig* (Moderately), which even at the premiere was placed second, but which he ultimately preferred as the first movement.

Well into these variations, he was happily surprised by a commission from American arts patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, prompted by violinist Rudolf Kolisch. She had originally asked for a wind piece, but Kolisch persuaded her to switch to a string quartet. Elated, Webern completed the variation movement on January 21, 1938, and in February he outlined what finally became the second movement, *Gemächlich* (Leisurely). He described the finished work to Kolisch in April, adding, “I must confess that hardly ever before have I felt so good about a work of mine (after its completion) as I do this time.”

The Kolisch Quartet gave the first performance on September 22, 1938, at the Berkshire Festival of Chamber Music in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Political circumstances prevented Webern from attending, but he heard favorable reports. Erwin Stein arranged for publication with the English firm Boosey & Hawkes, since Universal Edition could no longer publish Webern’s works under the Nazi regime. Stein also promoted the work in a brief article for *Tempo* magazine. He had asked the composer for a few “pointers” and was surprised to receive Webern’s most extensive essay on any of his works.

In his essay, Webern described the first movement (*Mässig*) as a theme with six variations, shaped into ternary form *and* constructed completely canonically. He noted with pleasure an unintended similarity with the slow movement of Beethoven’s Opus 135 string quartet, which also synthesizes variations and ABA form. To Mrs. Coolidge he stressed the lyricism of the entire work, which indeed comes through in this movement despite pointillistic pizzicatos and notes of his row jumping to a higher or lower octave. The striking delineation of the central section—corresponding to variations 3 and 4—he accomplishes in part through a slower tempo and mutes.

Webern described the middle movement (*Gemächlich*) as a “scherzo in miniature,” noting that “the theme of the Scherzo is a perpetual four-part canon.” It is fascinating that this movement has the lightness of texture associated with a scherzo, and yet its “leisurely” tempo makes it slower than the other two movements—Webern’s reason for placing it between them.

The last movement (*Sehr fließend*)—which Webern also described as a scherzo but a more complex one—synthesizes the three-part form with a double fugue. As Stein pointed out, the place where the row is most clearly audible in the entire piece occurs at the entrance of the fugue (sixteenth bar), passed from cello to second violin, to viola. Webern’s most ingenious piece of construction, perhaps, occurs with the “reprise,” which is actually another configuration of the fugue based on the scherzo subject. Signaled by a long pause, this reprise sounds almost tranquil after the intense climax of the fugue.

Schoenberg/Webern: Chamber Symphony No. 1, Op. 9

Born in Vienna, September 13, 1874; died in Los Angeles, July 13, 1951/Born in Vienna, December 3, 1883; died in Mittersill, September 15, 1945

Schoenberg composed his Chamber Symphony No. 1 in 1906, at what he considered the end of his first stylistic period. He noted its similarity to his First String Quartet, which unites the traditional four movements into one, and to *Verklärte Nacht* and *Pelleas und Melisande*, which retain the contrast of independent movements, but he also remarked on the significant difference in length. He viewed the work as a turning point not only for its conciseness but as his first attempt “to create a chamber orchestra.” The fifteen solo instruments represent a dramatic shift from the mammoth orchestras of his own *Gurre-Lieder* and *Pelleas*, and a new kind of soloistic writing featuring unusual instrumental combinations

Further, he was developing a new harmonic vocabulary based on a system of fourths. “Inspired by the desire to express riotous rejoicing,” he wrote, “the fourths here form themselves into a resolute horn theme; they spread architectonically over the entire work, and leave their imprint on all that occurs”—melody, chordal effects, and “the entire harmonic construction.”

Many have analyzed the work, most notably the composer himself and his student Alban Berg. Both teacher and pupil saw the work in five sections: Sonata-Allegro, Scherzo, Development, Adagio, and Recapitulation/Finale. Berg proposed two interpretations of these divisions—as a multi-movement symphony or one sonata movement with interpolations—and commentators since agree that it combines the two. More recently Walter Frisch has suggested a double exposition *and* a double recapitulation.

The Rosé Quartet together with members of the Vienna Philharmonic premiered the Chamber Symphony on February 8, 1907. There were staunch supporters and those who were shocked, but the work stands as a pivotal point in music history—it modernized the concept of chamber orchestra instrumentation and stretched traditional chromatic tonality to its limits.

Schoenberg’s student Webern was one of the Chamber Symphony’s greatest admirers. In November 1922 he seized on Schoenberg’s suggestion of the previous summer—reduce the Chamber Symphony for a smaller ensemble so that it could be performed on the same program as *Pierrot lunaire*. Webern finished his draft for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano the following January, at the same time adapting the parts for string quartet and piano, in which version we hear it tonight. Webern fervently hoped for his teacher’s approval, which must have been given, for Schoenberg conducted the first performance in Barcelona on April 25, 1925. Though Webern’s version was not published until 1968, it stands in both its “*Pierrot*” and piano quintet guises as a great testament to his skill as an arranger.

Dvořák: Piano Quintet No. 2 in A major, B. 155, Op. 81

Born in Nelahozeves, near Kralupy, September 8, 1841; died in Prague, May 1, 1904

In the spring of 1887 Dvořák had been trying to revise his early piano quintet—also in A

major—and found it a hopeless task. But the process may have lit a spark, for on August 18 he began writing his famous A major piano quintet, Op. 81, completing it on October 3. This was a period of contentment in Dvořák's life, and, although one must be wary about drawing parallels between life circumstances and particular works of art, the Opus 81 quintet is essentially a happy work. He wrote most of it at his house on the edge of the forest land of Vysoká, his favorite place.

The quintet received its first performance on January 6, 1888 at an Umělecká Beseda (Artistic Society) concert. The work ranks with the great pieces of chamber music even without attempting great innovation—it was instantly, and still is, beloved by performers and audiences.

The quintet represents a particularly successful fusion of Dvořák's Czech nationalism and the Austro-German tradition. Alternating slow and fast sections and contrasting moods play prominent roles not only in the Dumka (second movement), but also in the first movement. Although there are no specific folk-dance or folk-song quotations here, Dvořák's original melodies often transmit that quality. The lovely opening cello melody soon turns toward the minor mode; this is only the beginning of many effortless changes back and forth between major and minor of which Dvořák was so fond.

Dvořák explained in the preface to his *Dumky* Trio, that the untranslatable word *dumka* was of Ukrainian origin and had its roots in melancholy poetry. But what he might have added was that a *dumka* was a kind of lament that had to be followed by a dance or else its true nature could not be felt. His music shows this understanding to perfection in the alternation of contrasting slow and fast sections, a combination to be found in the folk music of his native Czechoslovakia. In this *dumka*, the F-sharp minor opening melody suggests a lament, but with the typical Slavic rapid mood change it soon gives way to a cheerful D major melody. The main contrast to the lament “refrain,” however, arrives with the outbreak of the *vivace* section whose theme Dvořák derived from the Dumka's opening.

Subtitled *furiant*, the scherzo takes on the spirit of this lively Slavic folk dance, though not its customary displaced accents. Dvořák's biographer Otakar Šourek suggests a connection with the Czech folk song “Když jsi ty, sedláčku, pán” (When you are, farmer, a gentleman). The central section takes a calm, slightly wistful look at the opening material before the scherzo proper returns in its spirited guise.

Dvořák's sense of fun permeates the merry finale, in which he contrasts folk-like melodies with elegant contrapuntal devices in his development section. The slow chorale passages in the coda serve to emphasize the exuberance of the main theme, which happily rounds off the piece.

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