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77th Season

Three Hundred Sixty-fifth Concert of the Society

Emerson String Quartet

April 12, 2015 - 3:00 p.m.

Comstock Concert Hall

The **Emerson String Quartet** has an unparalleled list of achievements over three decades: more than thirty acclaimed recordings, nine Grammys (including two for Best Classical Album), three Gramophone Awards, the Avery Fisher Prize, Musical America's "Ensemble of the Year," and collaboration with many of the greatest artists of our time.

The arrival of Paul Watkins in 2013 has had a profound effect on the Emerson Quartet. Mr. Watkins, a distinguished soloist, award-winning conductor, and devoted chamber musician, joined the ensemble in its 37th season, and his dedication and enthusiasm have infused the Quartet with a warm, rich tone and a palpable joy in the collaborative process. The reconfigured group has been greeted with impressive accolades. "One of the characteristics of the Emerson Quartet is that its players (the violinists Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer and the violist Lawrence Dutton in addition, now, to Mr. Watkins) all have the ability and the instruments to produce a sweet and glossy sound—but do so sparingly. Instead, they establish a chromatic scale of timbres that range from dry and tart over clean and zesty all the way to lustrous and singing. Listening to them pass tiny rhythmic motifs around the group, I was struck by how evenly calibrated these timbres were." *The New York Times*.

The Quartet's summer season began with engagements in Columbia, Ecuador, Peru and a pair of concerts in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Following a tour of Japan, the Quartet performed at the Ravinia, Tanglewood, Chamber Music Northwest, Aspen, Domaine Forget, Toronto, Austin, Norfolk, Cape Cod and Mostly Mozart festivals. In a season of over 80 quartet performances, mingled with the Quartet members' individual artistic commitments, Emerson highlights have featured numerous concerts on both coasts and throughout North America. In October, Paul Watkins performed with the Emerson Quartet for the first time in Carnegie Hall. The program included the Schumann Piano Quintet with acclaimed pianist and colleague Yefim Bronfman. Multiple tours of Europe have comprised dates in Austria, Ireland, Switzerland, France, Germany and the United Kingdom. The Quartet continues its series at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC for its 35th season, and, in May, is presented by colleagues David Finckel and Wu Han for the two final season concerts at Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in Alice Tully Hall. Guest artists Colin Carr and Paul Neubauer join the Emerson in a program that also includes the New York premiere of Lowell Liebermann's String Quartet No. 5, commissioned by a consortium of presenters through *Music Accord*.

As an exclusive artist for SONY Classical, the Emerson recently released *Journeys*, its second CD on that label, featuring Tchaikovsky's *Souvenir de Florence* and Schoenberg's *Verklaerte Nacht*. Future recordings are planned with Mr. Watkins.

Formed in 1976 and based in New York City, the Emerson was one of the first quartets formed with two violinists alternating in the first chair position. In 2002 the Quartet began to stand for most of its concerts, with the cellist seated on a riser. The Emerson Quartet took its name from the American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, and is Quartet-in-Residence at Stony Brook University. In January of 2015, the Quartet received the Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award, Chamber Music America's highest honor, in recognition of its significant and lasting contribution to the chamber music field.

String Quartet in G Major, K 387

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Allegro vivace assai
Minuetto. Allegro. Trio
Andante cantabile
Molto Allegro

Mozart's first dozen string quartets, composed in 1772-73, fall into two groups. The first set, the "Milanese" quartets (K 155-160) are beginning essays, but the second group, the "Viennese" quartets (K 168-172), are wonderful works in early classic style. They are melodious, full of *Sturm und Drang* and feature quite a bit of counterpoint as they apparently were intended to attract support from the Viennese music patrons. The quartet in G Major, K. 387, the first one from the next set of six quartets, was composed about ten years later in 1782, and is quite clearly a mature work.

In 1781 Mozart had his famous disagreement with the Archbishop of Salzburg and moved to Vienna with the intention of making his living as a free lance composer and pianist. He met Haydn and developed a remarkable friendship with the older composer. They played chamber music together, engaged each other in a rigorous study of species counterpoint, and in 1782, inspired by Haydn's six quartets, Op. 33, which were composed in "an entirely new and different manner," Mozart again began to compose string quartets. K 387 is, thus, the first of the group of six, known as the "Haydn Quartets." That they took three years to complete before publication in 1785, indicates the level of demands he was making on himself. As he commented in his dedication to Haydn, "they were, it is true, the fruit of a long and laborious endeavor."

The exposition of the first movement is a complex marvel of phrasing, rhythmic ideas and harmonic variety. The antecedent opens with two innocent-sounding, two-measure phrases. Listen closely to each one with its little chromatic touch, upward melodic sweep and very short concluding pause. Immediately a series of one-measure cadences rise through the ensemble ending in the fourth measure with a deceptive cadence and a pause, after which the whole structure is finished off with a two-measure cadence that balances the whole of the antecedent phrase and brings it to a close. In all, a striking 10 measures (2+2+4+2). The opening of the consequent is set in motion by a series of imitations—first of the opening rising interval, and then of chromatic lines—a sweep that without pause encompasses the next 14 measures and ends with a dominant cadence in the second key of D Major. Now Mozart introduces new thematic ideas that stream without any significant pause through both the episodes of the secondary key and the closing segment—that is, right up to the moment (following the series of cadential phrases), when we have an odd-sounding gentle dotted note figure and a final cadence. Pay attention to this last, short two-measure phrase as it turns up several times again. We hear it in the development and again in the recapitulation, eventually it becomes an odd sort of "familiar."

Mozart continues the sweeping motion in the development by initiating a series of dramatic sequences and modulations with the thematic material from the exposition. Now and again, the "familiar" reappears, capping off modulations, first one in E Minor, and then one in D Major that signals the move to the recapitulation. With numerous small, intriguing changes, the

recapitulation proceeds like the exposition to end with that funny little cadence now quite “familiar,” but still odd.

There are plenty of unconventional elements in the minuet; the chromatic lines that rise and fall in steady eighth notes with alternating *p* and *f* accents, the re-invention of the return of the thematic material after a contrasting middle section, the unusual length, and, the gravity of the Trio in parallel minor. All are untypical for a standard movement that previously tended to be a rather conventional dance.

Situating the Andante after the Minuet-Trio, and before the last movement, contributes to the over-all sense of seriousness not only of the latter half of the work, but in this case, to the entire composition. A lovely, rich movement in the subdominant key of C Major, with excursions into dark harmonic areas, it unfolds progressively through variations—in the second key area as well as in the reprise. The developmental character of the variations contribute to the overall feeling of a sonata form, and it is often referred to as a sonata without a development.

As if the foregoing were not enough, the last movement is more ambitious still. Here we have a sonata form in which both keys, the primary and secondary ones, are presented as fugues. Furthermore after its presentation, the fugue of the second key, a jocular, syncopated number, is combined with the fugal subject of the first key. Even more fun is that these “serious” sections alternate with contrasting passages that seem to come right out of the stage of the popular theater. No wonder Papageno is often evoked when this movement is mentioned. Watch for the “vamps” as Mozart moves from one area to the next, listen for the chromatic lines that have already been such a part of the earlier movements, and be prepared for an effective and definitive coda in which the most basic elements are succinctly restated—in case you didn’t catch them the first time.

Lyric Suite

Alban Berg (1885-1935)

- I. Allegretto gioviale
- II. Andante amaroso
- III. Allegro misterioso; Trio estatico
- IV. Adagio appassionato
- V. Presto delirando; Tenebroso
- VI. Largo desolato

Much commentary has been dedicated to explaining this work as a monument to Berg’s undying but hopeless love for Hanna Fuchs whom he met in Prague to attend the rehearsals and performance of his opera, *Wozzeck*. Impassioned letters to Hanna which were hand-delivered by confidants and kept secret for many years reveal that his love for her, an obsession that both kept him alive and nearly killed him, was the prerequisite for a number of works. Foremost among these is his *Lyric Suite*, which he completed in 1926. In October of that year he wrote to her explaining the movements one by one: I have condensed his writing a bit in the following, but anyone wishing to read it in full can find the text in Constantin Floros’ *Alban Berg and Hanna Fuchs: The Story of a Love in Letters* (2007), pp. 86-88.

From the beginning of my coming to Prague in May 1925: in the first movement, an Allegro gioviale, with its genial but almost noncommittal introductory character. . . . is full of secret references to our numbers 10 and 23 and our initials

H F A B [that is in German notation, the pitches Bb F A B] which, intertwined, are also the first and last notes of the Tristan theme.

But already the 2nd movement speaks a different language . . . (the most beautiful music, I believe, I ever wrote) shows you and your sweet children in the three themes that recur rondo-like. When, toward the end, your theme—the most beautiful, warm and tender of the three, above the Slavically tinged Munzo and the ostinato [here Berg writes out the pitch, C-natural, or do do, which was the pet-name for Hanna’s little girl, Dorothy]—blazes for the last time, even an unsuspecting listener must, I think, sense something of the loveliness that I have in mind, whenever I think of you, the loveliest of women.

The 3rd movement . . . depicts the initially unsuspecting, mysterious, whispering nature of our being together; embedded into it, as a Trio estatico, is the first brief eruption of love, which then also becomes the basis for the 4th movement . . . Only now the lightening bolt-like consciousness of love unfolds into a great and limitless love passion. The words, “You are my own, my own!” spoken at first effusively by me (and quoted note for note from Zemlinsky’s Lyric Symphony) are repeated by you in the sweetest, dreamiest piano.

From this all to brief happiness we are torn abruptly by the Presto delirando of the following movement (the 5th) with its hectic pulse, its nights of stale sullenness disrupted time and again by delirium, until the final (6th) movement, Largo desolato attains the utmost wretchedness and despair. Yes, by God:

*No monster by delirious fancy spun
Can match the horror of that icy sun
And that vast night, like ancient Chaos’ reign!*

Will anyone besides you guess what these sounds, casually played by four simple instruments, want to say? And when, at the end, they break off, one after the other, and die out altogether, will one sense the unending wretchedness that followed on this brief happiness, the “— So torpidly time’s spindle winds its skein”? If only you, my Hanna, can feel it! Then it will not have been written in vain.

All of the above and more was woven into the notes of this wonderful work. While many of the references are audible, many more are not actually audible, and as such they neither hinder nor hamper the auditory splendor of the work; however, some aspect of the intensity of Berg’s feelings as he was composing the work is inevitably communicated to a sensitive listener.

String Quartet in E \flat Major, Op. 74

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Poco Adagio. Allegro

Adagio ma non troppo

Presto. Più presto quasi prestissimo

Allegretto con Variazioni. Un poco più vivace. Allegro.

In 1809, the year that Beethoven composed his tenth string quartet, op. 74, the French invaded and occupied Vienna for five months. Life was difficult: Beethoven experienced challenges in his daily existence, not the least, was isolation and loneliness, which he felt very strongly. And yet the “Harp,” as it is known, is the most serene of the five quartets he composed in a three-year period, beginning in 1808 with the three Razumovsky Quartets, op. 59, and ending in 1810 with the “Serioso,” op. 95. Each of the other four quartets has very interesting challenges—idiosyncracies and innovations—but the “Harp” is, on the whole, less problematic. For some commentators, it is a “consolidation,” and for others, it is a “retrenchment.” Its perfection creates a special challenge for a discussion.

The slow introduction begins with a motto-like phrase in the first violin, a descending interval that falls a sixth from the tonic, $e\flat$, to the third degree, g , and rises a fifth to the flattened seventh degree, $d\flat$. This pitch, $d\flat$, purposefully underlies the objective of the next twenty-plus measures as Beethoven returns to it several times in a seeming attempt to regain that tonic $e\flat$. But each time that he approaches it with a sudden upward leap onto a suddenly loud chord, he finds it unyielding—it leads nowhere. Only when the approach does not involve an impetuous leap—but a slow, stealthy chromatic step-wise rise up an entire octave, deliberately advancing during an extended seven measures, does it move past that $d\flat$ to achieve the desired note, the leading tone, $d\flat$, and reach the goal, the tonic $e\flat$. Once there, elated at the top of a full chord, we have the first notes of the Allegro movement. This description, a short-hand version of the introduction, leaves out many charged moments that nurture this wayward progression, ending (that is, in a manner of speaking) where it started. It would seem that Beethoven’s objective for the introduction might have been to state his belief in a stubborn search that eventually reaches its goal.

The opening thematic element in the allegro is just close enough, melodically and rhythmically, to the opening motto of the introduction to suggest a connection. We have an arpeggio of four notes—barely a measure—for the “head” of a two-part theme that is followed by a melodic phrase of four measures, an antecedent that is answered immediately by a consequent of four measures. This is all very efficient: the viola answers the violin. The following transition to the second key area (dominant $B\flat$ Major) has the first of several passages with rising thirds played *pizzicati* that give the quartet its moniker, the “harp quartet.” Pay attention though, because this odd—and then-novel—sound provokes an extraordinary passage later in the work. In the second key area, Beethoven brings in a new element with swirling scale patterns, and he consolidates the outer reaches of the ranges, both high and low. With the closing section comes a moment of calm, all the better preparation for the surprise of a sudden shift to the third-related key of G major, and a restatement of the opening motive that sets off the development where every single element from the exposition will come into play.

Beethoven exercises all manner of contrapuntal complication and for a period of sustained intensity, the first violin and cello engage in a full-fledged canon, with the inner parts taking on fast-moving 16th notes. But when the high point is reached, the forward motion loses steam, and bits and pieces begin to drop out, “liquidating” the texture into nothing more than trading trills that fade out, leaving only the first violin sustaining long notes which then become the background for waves of rising arpeggios: first plucked quarter notes, then bowed ones, moving progressively faster (quarters, triplet quarters, eighths, triplet eighths) and higher. At the peak comes the full chord that precipitates the recapitulation.

We have had a full review of the material from the exposition, which, however, turns out to be greater than the sum of its parts, for as it draws to a close there is a note of reluctance, a hesitation. Then, tentatively, a series of little wake-up calls slowly build expectation and a small explosion of sixteenths suddenly pour out of the first violin, actively inciting energetic trading of those *pizzicati* back and forth among the other instruments. As the violin continues its wild course, bits of the tune from the opening well up out of the flurry, and bring the whole to a climax on a triumphant chord. The return to the final cadence that was interrupted just moments ago (a short stretch of time that somehow feels much longer) carries on to a satisfying close.

The second movement—in A \flat Major, the key of the subdominant—is a sustained meditation based on one principal tune that dominates the whole with several contrasting episodes that become successively more expressive, poignant and elegant. Calm and collected, the elevated discourse threads its way through some remote key areas, each bringing a return more elaborate than the last. One thinks, perhaps, of Schubert.

The Scherzo is fast and furious, an intense and somewhat raucous release from the calm of the Adagio. Leaping octaves, flashing arpeggios, skittering scales and interlocking patterns give this exercise in the third-related key of C minor a kind of gleeful, even demonic, quality. The real fun comes with the Trio and here Beethoven hauls out his “take” on conventional contrapuntal studies—which (with him) often has an intentional buffoon-like character. This one features clumsy double counterpoint with a comic duo—first, the cello plays a very fast, mindless line that runs everywhere and nowhere together with the viola, which plays a very slow-moving mindless three-note “tune.” Beethoven cannot resist further elaboration, and eventually he turns this into a mocking text-book demonstration of species counterpoint. If you missed it the first time, you will have a second chance to catch it on the repeat. A coda gradually tones things down, leaving only the forward motion of repeated eighths to carry the scherzo, *sempre pp*, without pause into the last movement, a calming set of six variations in a binary form of a character that suits the quartet as a whole.

Perhaps Beethoven’s achievement in the “Harp” Quartet was that he was able to compose a work at all, what with the disruption of his life in that year. Inspired by Nottebom’s description of the sketches from that period, Kerman suggests that op. 74 is the best he could do given the circumstances—a more innovative approach similar to the Razumovsky or the “Serioso” quartets would have required a great deal more concentration. That this piece does not “problematize” the genre is, however, no reason for dismissing its achievements. With all the acknowledged qualities of his mature style—logic, originality, invention, surprise—in place, he overcame dire existential circumstances to create a work without apparent difficulties—perhaps the only challenge that craves explanation is that extraordinary outburst at the end of the first movement.

Today’s pre-concert presentation at 2 PM in room 130, will be led by Professor Caroline Ehman of the Music History Department. Dr. Ehman completed her dissertation, “Reimagining Faust in Postmodern Opera,” at the Eastman School of Music and specializes in music since 1900.