

TIDBITS

05/10/2008

1. Mozart Quartet in G arr. F.A.Hoffmeister

This quartet was originally written for oboe, not flute. I wonder if Mozart would have approved of this arrangement? I can't help but remember Wolfgang's comments about the flute in a letter to his father:

“The reason I've not yet finished all the flute pieces for Herr de Jean is easily explained. I never have a quiet hour in this house. I cannot compose except at night, and then one isn't always in the mood to write. Of course, I could scribble all day long, and scribble as fast as I can, but I don't want to have to feel ashamed when my name appears on the page of a new work. Besides my mind gets easily dulled, as you know, Papa, when I'm supposed to write a lot for an instrument that I can't stand!”

But then Mozart wrote some wonderful music for the flute, so perhaps this was just a passing mood!

The arranger was Franz Anton Hoffmeister who, in 1785, established one of Vienna's first music publishing businesses, where he published music by the most prominent Viennese composers, including Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven. Hoffmeister also composed a lot of music himself, including at least 25 flute concertos as well as chamber works with the flute in a leading role. Many of these were composed with Vienna's growing number of amateur musicians in mind for whom the flute was one of the most favoured instruments.

And it was for that growing amateur band that many musical arrangements were made. How were you supposed to get people to play and hear you music - in those days before iPods, CDs, LPs or even 78s? Well you wrote a symphony for performance in the great concert hall, but also arranged it for piano which people could play at home. You take an oboe quartet and arrange it as a flute quartet and you've got a whole new market of people who might buy it. Sometimes composers arranged their own pieces in this way, sometimes (as here) others did it for them. In this case the composers of course didn't mind at all – it was all good publicity for their art.

2. Beethoven Songs pt 1

Bonny Laddie, Highland Laddie (F)
O Cruel was my Father (F)

In Scotland during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries songs had been written down and passed on in collections. But this was not a process of trying to create a “folksong museum” by writing down orally transmitted songs so as to preserve them intact (as was the fashion in Germany). This was rather a living and collaborative tradition where new words were written to old melodies, and new melodies to old words, even new melodies to new words! The best became popular and survived (or did they survive just because they were popular?), others fell by the wayside.

Into this tradition came Beethoven who, between 1803 and 1820, was commissioned by George Thomson in Edinburgh to make arrangements of Scottish national songs. This certainly wasn't a one-off thing for Beethoven, whose complete output of song arrangements includes roughly 65 Irish songs, 48 Scottish, and 26 Welsh, besides a host from other European countries. Mind you, this is minor league stuff compared to Haydn who arranged nearly 400 Scottish songs alone ...

Anyhow, the collection of 25 songs that Beethoven arranged, including the 4 we are performing tonight, was a financial disaster for Thomson.

Why didn't they sell? Were they too technically difficult? They were, after all, intended by Thomson for the mainly amateur musicians' market. Or perhaps it was the fact that Beethoven's arrangements were considered too prescriptive. He wrote out introductions and endings to many of the songs (sometimes quite lengthy) and left no room for the spontaneity and improvisation usually associated with pieces of this kind. In addition, the fashion of new reworkings of songs as I described previously was coming to an end, and changing to a desire for simple, bare, and old melodies.

Certainly one problem for Beethoven was that Thomson repeatedly refused to give him any words for the songs, so Beethoven made the arrangements purely from the melodies supplied.

Despite all of this, these are delightful arrangements of delightful songs, all too infrequently heard in the concert hall (or in the sitting room!).

3. Mozart K 594 (Adagio & Allegro)

INTERVAL

THE INSTRUMENTS

At the time this music was written these instruments were somewhat different from what we are used to today. The flute, for example, was a wooden instrument, with a fingering system mainly based on that of the recorder (covering holes with your fingers) rather than the complex system of keys, rods and pads developed a couple of generations later by Theobald Boehm. The principal differences for the violin family were the different shape and weight distribution of the bow, and the use of gut strings (which continued however well into the 20th century). The instruments are not as loud as their modern counterparts, not always as capable of producing a long smooth sound, and are often not so reliable, yet their tone and articulative abilities are, I believe, quite special.

4. Mozart K616 (Andante)

5. Beethoven Quartet Op.18 No.1 in F

Beethoven wrote his first string quartets in 1799-1800, at a time when he was suffering for the first time from deteriorating hearing. In a letter from 1800 he wrote:

“My hearing has become steadily weaker these last three years. This disability is supposed to have been originally caused by the condition of my stomach, which, as you know, has always been wretched but has become worse here. I suffer continually from diarrhoea and consequently am extraordinarily debilitated. A medical ass advised cold baths for my condition. A more intelligent doctor ordered the customary lukewarm bath in the Danube. That worked miracles – my stomach improved, although my hearing problem remained, or worsened. This last winter I was truly miserable. I had really dreadful attacks of colic and deteriorated again to my previous state. And thus remained until about four weeks ago, when I went to see Dr.Vering. Now I feel stronger and better, except my ears which buzz and ring day and night. I spend my life miserably, I must confess; for almost two years I have avoided all company, because I cannot say to people: I am deaf. In my profession this is a dreadful position. In the theatre I have to get very close to the orchestra to understand the performers, and from a distance I do not hear the high notes of the instruments and the

singers' voices. It is surprising that there are people who have never noticed this when speaking to me. Since I have usually been absent-minded, they take it for that. What will become of me Heaven alone knows. I have so often cursed my existence. Resignation! What a miserable refuge, and yet for me it is all that remains."

Now to the music! There are four movements. In the first Beethoven had considerable trouble getting the main idea as he wanted it (although this was not unusual for him). He went through 9 variations before settling on the final form. An idea which is really just 2 notes: F – C, and which is used in about one third of the bars in this movement! Beethoven is the absolute master in getting maximum effect from minimal material (think of the opening movement of his 5th Symphony). Tunes were not his forte, reusing short musical ideas was one of his fortissimos.

Beethoven's friend Amenda wrote that the tomb scene from Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet was in Beethoven's mind when composing the second movement. Romeo comes to Juliet's tomb, thinks she is dead, and poisons himself. Juliet then wakes up, sees Romeo dead and kills herself. In sketches for this movement, at various points, Beethoven had written the words 'He comes to the tomb', 'He kills himself', 'Despair', and 'The Last Sighs'.

The third movement contains some interesting and extreme contrasts: of loud and soft (the unusual ppp), and, in the middle section, of fast moving melodic notes with slow moving harmonies.

Then, after all the searching and pain of the earlier movements, the final movement brings us back to earth with a wonderful, happy conclusion.