

atlanta chamber players

Shakespeare Tavern Playhouse
September 27, 2016

Notes on the Program

Albert Roussel

Tourcoing, April 5, 1869–Royan, August 23, 1937

Trio for Flute, Viola, & Cello, Op. 40

Albert Roussel began his career in the navy and officially left his post when he was twenty-five years old, because he wanted to be a musician. His compositional studies began in 1898 at the Schola Cantorum in Paris with one of its founders, Vincent d'Indy (1851–1931). The Schola Cantorum encouraged study of early music, particularly that of the late Baroque and early Classical periods, in addition to Gregorian chant and Renaissance polyphony. Roussel's use of a traditional contrasting fast-slow-fast tempo organization of the three movements in the Trio for Flute, Viola, and Cello, op. 40 (1929), for example, is a feature one might expect in the Classical period. At the same time, the work's commission came from American patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, who wanted to contribute to America's understanding of music through previously unknown—and modern—works. Her involvement reveals not only the vital importance of many women who contributed to the arts (and particularly to modernism) in the first part of the twentieth century but also Roussel's incorporation of more innovative compositional techniques in the Trio, such as the occasional presence of simultaneous tonalities. Upon receiving Coolidge's commission, Roussel finished his Trio in just two weeks, signing it "Vasterival," one of his favorite homesteads on the banks of the English Channel.

Roussel's Trio was first performed in Prague on 22 October 1929 featuring French flutist Georges Barrère (1876–1944), the dedicatee of Coolidge's commission. The lively rhythmic interplay among the instrumentalists in the outer movements frames a slower middle-movement *Andante* that suggests more than one tonality. For all of its polytonality and harmonic wanderings, though, the *Andante* ends in the same key in which it began. Critics appreciated Roussel's blend of tradition and innovation in the Trio. As one writer noted in a prominent French journal, "Roussel remains in touch with the youth. He adapts himself extraordinarily to the new generation and stays young with the young."

— Note by Kathryn White

Mark Buller

Motion Studies

Motion Studies is a three-movement work for clarinet, violin, and piano, commissioned for five chamber ensembles around the country after the final movement, "Regressive Variations," won the Rapido! Composition Contest. As the title implies, the work is an examination of movement and gesture, brought to life musically.

Formally, each movement presents a different take on common Classical forms. The first movement, "Treatise on Friction," is loosely based on sonata-allegro form. We hear two contrasting ideas: first, a series of cascading figures that are tossed around the ensemble; and second, a number of lithe suspensions which give way to a rich, Brahmsian swell. The idea of musical "friction" is presented both on a small-scale level (suspensions and other dissonances, building and releasing tension) and over the course of the whole movement, as the themes are traded among the ensemble.

The second movement, "Jeux," is structured as a minuet and trio and is intended to call to mind the graceful movements of classical ballet. Musically, however, the minuet is broken, leading the movement to wander almost aimlessly (within the strict formal parameters) as its inner mechanisms struggle to find resolution.

The third movement, "Regressive Variations," was written in Summer 2015 as an entry in the Rapido! Composition Contest. The contest rules specified that composers must write a theme and variations. In order to present my own take on the form, I chose a nontraditional route: rather than first composing an original theme, then developing it in subsequent variations, I instead wrote a complex, highly twisted 'variation' based on overlapping scales — a variation with no real subject. While this opening has no strong tonal center, it is structured in the familiar rounded binary form, as a throwback to Themes and Variations of years past. As with its 18th- and 19th-century cousins, the first half is relatively stable from a harmonic standpoint, while the second half wanders more.

In the subsequent variations, I gradually began to extract a recognizable theme using materials derived from that first variation. Simply put, the Classical form develops in reverse: at the beginning of the piece, the eventual theme is hidden within the texture, and only gradually does it coalesce.

Finally, toward the end of the work, we hear the long-awaited theme, presented in all three instruments. After we hear it in its entirety, the energy begins to grow again, and we hear material from the preceding variations, but out of order: now, momentum is increasing, propelling us to the hard-driving finale.

— Note by Mark Buller

Ludwig van Beethoven

Bonn, December 16, 1770—Vienna, March 26, 1827

Piano Trio No. 7 in B-Flat Major, Opus 97 ("Archduke")

Beethoven lived through a long period of international ferment which saw both the American and French Revolutions and the wars of Napoleon Bonaparte, all of which shared (in Napoleon's case, at least at first) the noble goal of freeing people from tyranny. Beethoven the deeply egalitarian man sympathized with these goals

and despised the aristocracy purely as a matter of principle. But for practical reasons, Beethoven the composer was not above accepting noble commissions when the fee involved was sufficiently handsome. Unfortunately, Beethoven's sharpness in money matters is one of the great man's less endearing traits. But it is to this moral and fiscal flexibility that we owe the existence of a large number of his masterpieces.

Beethoven's Piano Trio No. 7 was composed for Archduke Rudolph of the royal house of Hapsburg, younger brother of the Emperor of Austria. The archduke is recorded as having been a "portly and unattractive" youth whose undoubted amateur talent earned Beethoven's attention. (All the Hapsburgs were musically inclined, which perhaps accounts for the reputation Vienna enjoyed as the musical capital of Europe.) Beethoven taught the archduke from 1803-1806, and the young nobleman evidently progressed to the point that he could tackle with proficiency some of Beethoven's own sonatas. Rudolph was capable of a high degree of discernment and was known to be annoyed when some of Beethoven's better works were dedicated to someone else. In 1809, he organized an annuity to keep Beethoven from want, and perhaps in gratitude, Beethoven produced this piano trio for his patron and former pupil in just three weeks in 1811. The premiere took place several years later, on April 11, 1814, with Beethoven himself at the piano. Composer Louis Spohr later wrote that "in the forte the poor deaf man pounded so hard that the strings jangled, and in piano he played so softly that entire groups of notes were left out, so that one lost the thread if one could not see the piano part at the same time." This occasion was Beethoven's last public appearance as a performer.

— Note by Edmund Trafford

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