

Chamber Music Tulsa
presents
The Calidore Quartet
Friday, September 8, 2017

Instrumental music is the most abstract of the arts. Without visual representation or verbal narrative, the descriptive and expressive powers of music are by nature approximate, suggestive and even mysterious.

Composers have long explored the colors and emotional sweep of instrumental music to tell stories, especially in the Romantic period when the “tone poem” was a popular genre used to evoke scenes and characters from literature and mythology. And the interplay of voices in chamber music, particularly the string quartet, is frequently likened to a conversation. But by the late Romantic and early modernist period, composers were turning to the tones and rhythms of spoken language itself for inspiration.

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928): String Quartet No. 1, “The Kreutzer Sonata” (1923)

Leoš Janáček was one of the most avant garde of the Czech late romantics and early modernists. Before World War 1 the Czech lands were still part of the German-speaking Austro-Hungarian Empire and many Czech and Moravian artists considered their own language to be one of the most powerful and symbolic forces in the movement for national independence. While earlier musical nationalists such as Dvořák and Smetana took their inspiration from the melodies of folk songs and the rhythms of traditional dance, Janáček used the sound of the spoken language. Czech is a distinctive tongue, with idiosyncratic patterns of syllabic emphasis and a peculiar cadence that borders on the singsong. Janáček traveled around the countryside listening to peasants and townsfolk and transcribing their everyday speech into musical notation – fragments of what he called “speech-melody” that he then developed into the building blocks of his unique sound world.

The “Kreutzer Sonata” also hearkens back to earlier Romantic traditions of narrative programmatic music, and is based on a tragic short story by Leo Tolstoy, in which a husband’s jealousy leads him to commit murder – after which, all too late, he is driven mad by guilt and compassion. Listen for the vocal cadences of the instrumental lines – at various points in the story the instruments recall shouts of anger or stammers of hesitation, protestations of innocence and declarations of love. The last movement depicts a train gathering speed as the antihero flees the scene of the crime.

The quartet is in four movements:

1. *Adagio – Con moto (Slowly – with motion)*
2. *Con moto*
3. *Con moto – Vivo – Andante (With motion – alive – easygoing)*

4. *Con moto* – (*Adagio*) – *Più mosso* (*With motion* – (*slowly*) – *moving more*)

Caroline Shaw (1982-): First Essay: Nimrod (2016)

New York-based Caroline Shaw, a multifaceted performer and composer, is the youngest ever winner of the Pulitzer Prize for music, which she received in 2013 at age 30 for her *Partita for Eight Voices*. Among her recent collaborators is rap artist Kanye West, and Shaw's work frequently displays a fascination with the spoken word. "*When I hear people speaking,*" she says, "*it sounds like a hundred instruments coming out of their mouths.*"

This work, written for the Calidore Quartet, makes the connection explicit. She explains that the piece "*began as a simple exercise in translating the lilt and rhythm of one of my favorite authors, Marilynne Robinson, into music. Usually my music is inspired by visual art, or food, or some odd physics quirk, but this time I wanted to lunge into language, with all its complex splintering and welding of units and patterns!*"

The title of the quartet, *Nimrod*, is a reference to the Biblical king who ordered the construction of the Tower of Babel – and bore witness to the scattering and confounding of a common tongue into many unintelligible languages.

Again from the composer: "*This image of chaos and fragmentation, but also of extraordinary creative energy, may serve as a framework for listening to this musical essay.*"

The quartet is in one movement.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893): String Quartet No. 1, Op. 11 (1871)

When Janáček constructed his deliberately Czech musical language, he was building on the musical philosophy of earlier Romantic nationalist composers who looked to the folk traditions of their country's peasantry instead of the international art-music style developed primarily in France and Germany and dominant throughout Europe. The Russian Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky belongs to this earlier generation.

Tchaikovsky was less overtly nationalistic and more formally trained than other Russian composers of the era, particularly the so-called "Mighty Five." The Five were defiantly amateurish composers who shunned all Western formalities, developed new structures of symphonic music primarily based on theme and variation, and often ignored standard rules of harmony and counterpoint to alternately revelatory and disastrous results. Despite their differences, Tchaikovsky shared their commitment to drawing inspiration from Russian folk music and traditional church chorales. This in itself leads to a distinctive sound world influenced by the characteristics of the Russian language.

The first String Quartet shows both the refined Western and nationalist Russian side of Tchaikovsky's style. The form is classical, with themes developed according to traditional sonata-allegro structures, but the thematic material itself is deeply indebted to the sound-world of Russian folk music. Listen for irregular and asymmetrical dance-like rhythms in the fast movements, and the expressive slow melodies that evoke traditional ballads and peasant songs.

The quartet is in four movements:

1. *Moderato e semplice (Moderate tempo, simply)*
2. *Andante cantabile (Easygoing and singing)*
3. *Scherzo. Allegro non tanto e con fuoco – Trio (Playful – not too fast, but fiery.)*
4. *Finale. Allegro giusto – Allegro vivace (Finale: Fast and rhythmic, lively.)*

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