University of Florida Performing Arts

presents

Pacifica Quartet

Simin Ganatra, Violin
Sibbi Bernhardsson, Violin
Masumi Per Rostad, Viola
Brandon Vamos, Cello

Sunday, February 10, 2008, 5 p.m.

The PACIFICA QUARTET is represented by Melvin Kaplan, Inc.,
115 College Street, Burlington, Vermont 05401
www.melkap.com
www.pacificaquartet.com
Recordings: Cedille Records
PROGRAM

Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 18, No. 6 (La Maliconia)          Ludwig van Beethoven
  Allegro con brio
  Adagio, ma non troppo
  Scherzo: Allegro
  La Malinconia: Adagio; Allegretto quasi allegro

Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 74, (Harp)                      Beethoven
  Poco Adagio; Allegro
  Adagio, ma non troppo
  Presto
  Allegretto con variazioni

Quartet No. 15 in A Minor, Op. 132          Beethoven
  Assai sostenuto; Allegro
  Allegro ma non tanto
  Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gotheit,
  in der lydischen Tonart: Molto adagio; Neue Kraftfühlend: Andante
  Alla marcia, assai vivace
  Allegro appassionato

PROGRAM NOTES

Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 18, No. 6 (La Maliconia)
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Although written fifth, Beethoven probably placed the B-flat quartet last because of the lengthy, slow introduction to the last movement, La Malinconia (“melancholy”), which gave the work its subtitle. From the viewpoint of musical development, this introduction is decades ahead of the rest of Op. 18. In some ways it presages the late quartets of the 1820s, with its moving evocation of grief and despair; it provides, as well, an insight into the depths of Beethoven’s emotional state.

The first movement opens with a vigorous, upward-leaping theme in the first violin that eventually becomes a duet with the cello. The far less agile subsidiary theme stays rooted on one note and then another, all within a rather narrow range. The development section ends with a held note, anticipating the return of the melodies, little changed from their original appearance.

A refined, dignified melody is the main theme of the Adagio, which is organized into three-part, ternary form. The theme is introduced by the first violin over a bare-bones type of accompaniment. For the second violin repeat, the importance of the accompanying voices is considerably higher. The entire quartet joins for a brief episode together before the violin states the theme for the third time, now in a highly ornamental style. The contrasting section arrives with a thin, tenuous line played in octaves by the first violin and cello. A short bridge passage and rising chromatic scale in the first violin lead to the return of the opening theme, this time even more highly decorated than in its first hearing.

The Adagio’s stately mood is unceremoniously shattered by the eccentric and very original
Scherzo that follows. Full of rhythmic verve, it is constantly being tripped up and sabotaged by misplaced accents and cross rhythms. One can only marvel at Beethoven’s ability to squeeze such intricate and complex rhythmic patterns into straightforward triple meter. The slight trio, a flowing violin solo with a short transition, leads back to a literal repeat of the Scherzo.

The finale, the climax of the entire composition, begins with the astounding La Malinconia, which Beethoven directs “must be played with the greatest delicacy.” The introduction falls into two parts, the first characterized by repeated tones and the second by a fugal, imitative texture. Woven throughout is a three-note turn, or gruppetto, which is inserted as a decoration before a longer note. Several times, loud and soft chords alternate, each one preceded by a gruppetto, which adds even more gloom to the phrase. The main body of the movement is fast, in the style of a danze alla tedesca, or German dance, which was very popular at the time. Although the tedesca never succeeds in raising the somber pall cast by La Malinconia, as if to underscore the point, Beethoven twice interrupts the gay dance with short reminders of the slow introduction, before letting the tedesca dash furiously to the powerful last chords

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Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 74 (Harp)
Beethoven

Several important events occurred during 1809, when Beethoven was composing the Op. 74 quartet. Early in the year, three noblemen had granted him an annual stipend. Anticipating financial security, Beethoven proposed to Therese Malfatti, his teenage pupil, and was devastated by her family’s rejection of his suit. In May, the French army bombarded Vienna — there are accounts of the composer cowering in a cellar with his hands over his ears, attempting to protect what little ability to hear still remained to him.

Shortly after the French occupied Vienna, a friend who visited Beethoven was shocked by the composer’s living conditions: “Picture to yourself the dirtiest, most disorderly place imaginable...”

No one can say exactly how the personal and political turmoil in his life — in addition to his squalid surroundings — affected the composition of Op. 74, but, as his letters reveal, Beethoven found it difficult to write under wartime conditions. Perhaps this is one reason why this particular opus does not push forward into new and unexplored regions, but rather demonstrates a consolidation of previous growth, with some backward glances over well-traveled Classical territory.

The subtitle, Harp, was not devised by Beethoven, but was added later. It may be thought of as an unfortunate choice, since it draws attention to some pizzicato accompanying figures in the first movement that are of minor musical importance (though they probably surprised listeners in the early 1800s).

The slow introduction to the first movement centers around a four-note motif heard immediately from the first violin and repeated a number of times. Beethoven interrupts the languid flow with a powerful chord two times before returning to an unruffled tranquility. The top notes of the three sharp chords that open the main body of the movement follow the same general contour as the introductory motif. Two other melodic fragments, introduced by the first and second violin, fill out the first theme. The transition to the second theme employs a pizzicato figure that gives the piece its name, along with forceful chords reminiscent of the first introduction. The viola introduces the second theme, a long note followed by a flurry of ascending and descending notes, and is soon joined by the three other instruments. The exposition is brought to a close by a theme driven by jarring accents, followed by brief sections of development and recapitulation. The striking coda is lit through with brilliant passages by the first violin, and elaboration by the other instruments of the melodic fragments heard earlier.
The Adagio, a movement of profound spirituality, foreshadows Beethoven’s sublime late quartets in its rich emotional content. The movement revolves around the tender main theme, initially stated by the first violin, which is heard three times in varied repetitions separated by contrasting episodes — the first repeat in minor key, conveying despondency, the second with a loftier and more spiritual tone.

The concentrated energy and drive of the third movement — really a scherzo — make this the high point of the quartet. Apparently still haunted by the dramatic “fate knocks on the door” opening of the Fifth Symphony (composed one year earlier), Beethoven gives the movement a power and a force that is rare in chamber music. The second section, led by the cello, is marked “even faster.” Both themes are repeated before a third hearing of the opening, hushed in tone, acts as a transition to the final movement, which follows without pause.

The disarming finale, a theme and six variations, has a simple, easygoing melody, and seems almost anticlimactic after the furious pace of the third movement. Of the six variations, numbers one, three and five are strong and vigorous, while two, four and six are gentle and lyrical. The coda accelerates in tempo, leading to a high-speed, brilliant conclusion based on the melodic line of the third variation.

Quartet No. 15 in A Minor, Op. 132

Beethoven

While working on his Op. 132 quartet during the winter of 1824-25, Beethoven fell gravely ill with liver disease, bowel inflammation, and other painful and debilitating abdominal maladies. The condition left him seriously weakened, but he was still able to finish the work by July 1825. Although it has the highest opus number of the three quartets that he composed at the behest of Russian nobleman and amateur cellist, Prince Galitzin, it was actually second in order of composition. Study of his sketchbooks shows that he originally planned the quartet in the traditional four movements, but on recovering from his sickness decided to replace the two middle sections with three movements, including the central Heiliger Dankgesang.

The quartet starts with a short, slow introductory motif that bears a similarity to the ones heard at the opening of the quartet Op. 131 and the Grosse Fuge, Op. 133. Some think Beethoven used this motif — a slow, rising half-step followed by a large leap — as a way of unifying these three works; others believe that the motifs resemble each other because they were all composed around the same time, and the inadvertent repetition of certain favorite melodic turns is almost inevitable. Emerging from the introductory measures is a brilliant violin flourish that leads to the main theme, played high in its register by the cello. Following some expansion, a new idea, starting with the three repeated notes, is heard and quickly passes through the quartet, leading to still another distinctive idea — a flowing melody in the second violin over a nervous, agitated triplet accompaniment. Although one can conceive these themes as the subjects of traditional sonata form, such analysis violates the free spirit in which Beethoven created this amazing movement.

Wistful and nostalgic in tone, the second movement has two motifs that run throughout the entire opening section. The first is a pair of rising three-note figures; the other, and more important, is a long note that drops down with a little flurry of faster notes. After many repetitions of the two melodic cells, Beethoven moves on to the middle section, a sort of musette, with the first violin sustaining a bagpipe-like drone under its high-pitched melody. The movement ends with a literal repeat of the opening section.

Over the third movement Beethoven inscribed the words, Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart (“Holy Song of Thanksgiving to the Divinity by a Convalescent, in the Lydian mode”). The sublime hymn expresses his gratitude for the return of good health; use of the Lydian mode, an ancient ecclesiastical
scale (corresponding to the modern F scale, but without a B flat) gives the music a spiritual tone. The music consists of five lines of a slow, solemn chordal hymn, with each line preceded by a faster moving contrapuntal prelude. The vital and vigorous contrasting second section, Neue Kraft führend (“Feeling of new strength”), evokes a sense of strength through alternating loud and soft measures that surge with a powerful, propulsive force. After varied returns of both sections, the movement ends with a free reinstatement of the Heiliger Dankgesang, marked on the score by Beethoven to be played Mit innigster Empfindung (“with the most intimate emotions”).

The raucous Alla marcia provides the sudden change in mood, from heavenly to earthy, which Beethoven seems to need, following moments of deeply emotional expression. After a brief aggressive march, the music completely changes character and takes on the style of a recitative, a rhythmically free section, in which the first violin plays an improvisatory speechlike melodic line over a minimal accompaniment in the other parts.

The finale follows the recitative without pause. Structurally, it combines rondo and sonata form. The basic songful and lyrical character is modified by an underlying turbulent rocking motion that throws an uneasy cast over the proceedings.

The first private performance of the A Minor Quartet was before an audience of 14 persons at the Tavern Zum Wilden Mann in Vienna by the Schuppanzigh Quartet on September 9, 1825. The same players gave the public premiere two months later, on November 6, 1825.

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Recognized for its virtuosity, exuberant performance style, and often daring repertory choices, the Pacifica Quartet has carved out a compelling musical niche. Recent career highlights include complete Beethoven quartet cycles in Chicago, New York City, California, and Wisconsin; performances in Europe and Japan; and the release of Declarations: Music Between the Wars on the Cedille label. The release of the first CD in a two-disc set of the complete quartets of Elliott Carter on the Naxos label coincided with a performance of Carter’s complete quartets at Lincoln Center in January 2008. In May 2006, the Pacifica Quartet became only the second chamber music ensemble to be awarded a prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant. Winner of three of chamber music’s most important international awards — Grand Prize at the 1996 Coleman Chamber Music Competition, top prize at the 1997 Concert Artists Guild Competition, and the 1998 Naumburg Chamber Music Award — the Quartet was subsequently honored in 2002 with Chamber Music America’s prestigious Cleveland Quartet Award as well as being appointed a member of The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center’s CMS Two program for gifted young musicians. An ardent advocate of contemporary music, the Pacifica has commissioned and premiered as many as eight new works a year, and has performed Elliott Carter’s five quartets on prestigious stages in the United States and Europe. The Pacifica Quartet serves as Faculty Quartet-in-Residence at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Performing Artists-in-Residence at the University of Chicago and the Longy School of Music.

For more information about the Pacifica Quartet, please visit: www.pacificaquartet.com.