

Schumann Quartet #2

Robert Schumann called the string quartet a “by turns beautiful and even abstrusely woven conversation among four people.” To him, the genre was venerable and worthy of deep study; he knew and revered the quartets of Haydn and Mozart, and like his contemporary and close friend Mendelssohn, he was demonstrably influenced by Beethoven’s quartets when he wrote his own. In fact, when considered vis-à-vis his fanciful, wildly romantic output for solo piano, Schumann’s quartets appear as an astonishingly concise, contained and classical group; the “road map” through each movement is crystal-clear, sometimes severely so. On the other hand, the spirit and intent which invest every note of this music bear the unmistakable stamp of Schumann the Romantic, the yearner, the impulsive.

Schumann wrote his three quartets virtually simultaneously, in a couple of summer months in 1842. It was not the easiest time of his life; married only a short time to Clara, who was one of the most celebrated pianists of her generation, he was reconciling himself to being the moon to her sun, and often living at home without her. His letters and journal entries from this year repeatedly refer to gloomy moods, fatigue, and ill health. However, the quartets contain little indication of this state, being filled with decidedly more sunlight than shadow.

In the F major Quartet, which is the second of the group, we find a work whose *raison d’être* is the quest for lightness. Each of the four movements is formally traditional -- employing a sonata form, a variation form, a simple scherzo-trio form and another sonata form, respectively -- but in each case we have the impression that Schumann seeks to give us the leanest, most unencumbered version of each. The first movement, a fleet, ardent Allegro, has only one real melody, which is borne along on thermal currents of eighth-notes; the absence of a second theme, structural ballast which we would normally expect in this type of movement, lightens the music’s progress. What is more, there are rising sequences everywhere, which only increase the sensation of defying gravity, of rising higher and higher.

The second movement is darker and more intimate in its key and its coloring of the quartet’s sound. It recalls unmistakably the slow movement from Beethoven’s opus 127 Quartet, written less than twenty years earlier. In its key, its meter, its swaying rhythms, and its variation form, this movement represents a kind of homage to Beethoven’s masterpiece. However, the similarities appear superficial when one considers the intent and the scope of these two movements. Beethoven’s soul-excavating variations seem to be imparting a message too intimate and painful for words, and there are

moments where one almost feels the earth move. Schumann's movement, on the other hand, makes no such claim, preferring to illuminate the beauty of the everyday, to paint the ordinary in glowing hues so that it becomes extraordinary. The easy, lilting theme is viewed through many different rhythms and textures as we pass from variation to variation. At first the music merely acquires more and more life, employing ever more active rhythmic textures; then follows a very still and beautiful variation, where the melody is reduced to quiet undulations over an intoned pedal in the cello part. A more chipper, flirtatious variation follows, succeeded at last by a gentle coda.

The scherzo, an agile, arpeggiated movement, showcases one of Schumann's favorite tricks, where he shifts the rhythm of the music back and forth between true and false downbeats. The result is a kind of fake-out game, with the listener kept perpetually on rhythmic tenterhooks -- just as we get accustomed to the "false" location for the beat, we are tersely corrected by the true one. The trio, amiable and straightforward by comparison, is a conversation of trivialities, held between the cello and the upper instruments. The return of the quicksilver Scherzo ensues, and the movement closes with a coda, wherein the trio and the scherzo materials are merged against an unexpectedly darkening backdrop.

The finale opens with a gesture like a band striking up for a village dance. What follows is in fact a rather intricately textured movement, full of gaiety and wit. The main idea is a perpetual motion in the first violin, played against a simple rhythmic accompaniment. This idea soon gives way to other striking events: a syncopated, slimy rising figure that passes through all the instruments, and a more charming idea that gets explored thoroughly in the middle, developmental section of the movement. Especially notable is a section where the tempo suddenly speeds up, and the cello somewhat buffoonishly goes slipping and sliding up and down the banister. That section heralds the return of the opening music, and resurfaces later at the end of the movement; in this second sped-up section, the cello apparently inspires the other instruments to join more completely in the fun, and the movement comes to an exuberant close.

Note by Misha Amory