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Schubert Cello Quintet

Sensitivity to beauty both fulfills and exacts an exorbitant price. Eugene Ionesco has written:

Beauty is a precarious trace that eternity causes to appear to us and that it takes away from us. A manifestation of eternity, and a sign of death as well. Often it seems to me to be an evil flower of nothingness, or else the cry of the world as it dies, or a desperate, sumptuous prayer.
(Present Past Past Present, 1968)

More than almost any other composer, Schubert expressed the duality of beauty, its innocence and its terror, its embrace and its rebuff. With exquisite sensitivity he shows us gleaming visions and the pain of their unreachable distance; his all too human longing for the Eden beyond our grasp speaks to the exile in each of us. Schubert is the quintessential exile, feeling alienated from the comforts of society, excruciatingly aware of the ambiguities of nature and fate, both seductive and cruel.

From the very first phrase of the C Major Quintet all is laid bare. The opening C Major harmony is the very embodiment of stability and purity, and yet it destabilizes immediately, gapes open and exposes a previously hidden harsh dissonance, then turns back to the opening harmony, now, in one fell swoop, stripped of its innocence. At the ending of the phrase that same dissonance, free of the underlying C of the opening, resolves as it should; this resolution is answered by a distant echo, a siren call. Removed in dynamic, rhythm and register from the rest of the phrase, this siren call is emblematic of a yearned for purity that seems unattainable in the real world of the opening chord. After the opening phrase is reinterpreted in a darker hue, in minor, by the lower four instruments the siren call takes over and lures us, as Sirens are wont to do, toward the rocks. The cataclysm of this arrival, however, dissipates and the music melts, unexpectedly, into a second theme which seems the apotheosis of tenderness. This is among the most beloved themes in the literature, and for good reason, as it seems to express a perfection of balance and contentment. And yet, it is painfully private and far away, a vision rather than an enveloping serenity. (As we explore the space around it, we are eventually shown the stone wall that seals it off from us, a half step above where we are.) This sort of vision is one of Schubert's greatest gifts to us; it is all the more beautiful because he is removed from it, perennially glancing through the window. One of the most piercing of these visions is found in the outer sections of the second movement of this quintet, a hymn which floats above the mortal sphere.

It is beheld with wonderment by the second cello and first violin who gaze upon it offering only inchoate whispers and sighs, for there is no more than that to be said. (Here, too, the vision provokes anxiety and desperation in the middle section, again up a half step.) In the final movement, we are twice privy to the most intimate moments of tranquility, two duets for the celli (echoing the second theme of the first movement) which disappear all too quickly into the mists of the accompanying drones and arpeggios.

These visions, being always out of reach, inspire wandering, pathos and defiance. In all of these, Schubert had recourse to identification with a group with whom he would have been familiar in Vienna, the Gypsies. (In the following discussion I am indebted to the writings of Jonathan Bellman for insight and clarification.) Peripatetic in lifestyle and in soul, they were journeyers across an inclement landscape, much as Schubert felt himself to be, and much as we all find ourselves at times. Whether or not common perceptions were reliable, the stereotype of the Gypsies was of a proud and defiant people who were able to express profound sorrow and exultant joy in an abandoned, almost animalistic way, untempered by kowtowing to society. They were cursed as outcasts, yet found ways to put forth a brave face when confronted with adverse circumstance. All this aligned almost frighteningly well with Schubert's own self-image and the issues he sought to relate in his work. From a musical standpoint, Schubert had access to all of these associations by recourse to the then popular style hongrois, which was not only an exoticism but a summoning of a complete expressive world. Certain types of syncopations (*alla zoppa*, meaning limping), snapping grace notes, dotted rhythms, the spondee (a metric foot comprising two longs), bagpipe drones and quite a few other devices served to evoke this style. In the C Major Quintet, there are evocations of the style hongrois in every movement, and the last movement is almost completely within the Gypsy mood.

The end of the exposition of the first movement brings the first of these, distinguished by syncopation, the spondee, snapping grace notes and dotted rhythms. This figure takes over the entire development section, and even for Schubert, who is in any case king of wandering, traveling music, it is uncommonly searching and troubled. Hungarian virtuosic flourishes even infiltrate the opening material when it makes its final appearance in the coda of the movement. The Gypsy music is taken up again in the central section of the slow movement, as a response to the seraphic chorale, now with a defiant rage, shut off from the paradisiacal vision. It is alluded to with a single threatening gesture at the close of the movement as well, once the hymn has been restated, as a reminder that our dreams are not ours to inhabit. In the scherzo, a movement as outward as can be, filled with hunting horns and extroverted dancing galore, the Gypsies reappear in the extraordinary central trio section.

Here there is a turning inward, and low droning bagpipe fifths give a consoling warmth to lines that plead and despair. The degree to which the trio contrasts with the scherzo part of the movement in mood, key and meter is fairly revolutionary, and this contrast brings it into relief as having uncommon profundity and truth. By referencing the style hongrois here Schubert can call upon the mystery of a song which comes from the depths of pure pathos, shut off from societal influence. The Gypsy music thus comes at the center of each of the first three movements.

There have been people who find the last movement of this quintet a letdown, too light and too much in a popular style to be a fitting peroration for such a monumental masterpiece. But in tracing the Gypsy element from movement to movement one can see that indeed this is a fitting and, in a sense, a necessary conclusion to the journey. Schubert is not one for a Beethovenian sense of conquest or victory. Once we have experienced the tension between utopian vision and earthly shackles we can expect no tidy coming to terms. In the face of persecution, the Gypsies continue to dance and make music, to entertain even those who oppress them. Schubert, in the midst of a world that doesn't understand him, and which doesn't offer him the peace he craves, finds strength in his status as an outcast. Vienna is here, too, with its swoop and sway, but inevitably it is the Gypsy music which takes over in the end. Unable to sum up, the music accelerates as the piece draws to a close and when the fundamental C is reached at the end it is not without the D-flat a half step above pressing against it, reminding us that there is, in the end, no easy sense of home.

Note by Mark Steinberg