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Schubert Quartet #15 in G Major

Borges writes, in his poem *Adam Is Your Ashes*: “All things are their own prophecy of dust. / Iron is rust. The voice, already echo.” The fluid duality which suffuses our experience of the world, joy that melts into sorrow and sorrow that is tinged with hope, is at the very core of Schubert’s music. His experience of time can be more painterly than narrative; all is present simultaneously and we need to approach his works with a patience that allows us to grasp his yearning toward acceptance rather than resolution.

We have one important prose document from Franz Schubert, a brief personal essay entitled “My Dream.” Whether or not it represents an accurate depiction of an actual dream it seems to sum up much of the emotional essence of his music. In it he writes, “For long years I felt torn between the greatest grief and the greatest love...Whenever I attempted to sing of love, it turned to pain. And again, when I tried to sing of pain, it turned to love. Thus were love and pain divided in me.” For Schubert there is no false hope of banishing the one and holding on to the other. Not only do love and pain coexist in his soul but he recognizes that they are one and the same, the one contained in and giving meaning to the other. The opening of the G Major String Quartet is a case in point. The opening major chords erupt into minor. This is not a tragic proclamation or harbinger of doom, but rather an exploration of and an opening of space within the hanging major chords, a recognition of what poet Mark Doty calls “no hope without the possibility of a wound.” Even though the gesture is forceful and vehement, a sense of instability and vulnerability underlies it. And in fact the continuation of the movement brings us to a tremulous place where we can gaze into the uncertainty and begin to look for a way to hold major and minor close and allow them to occupy the same space without vying for exclusive claim on truth. This modal oscillation characterizes each movement of the work, from the dramatic juxtapositions of the opening movement through the wanderings and eruptions of the second, into the scherzo with its magical evocation of far off contentment in its trio, to the finale where Schubert dances between major and minor and turns to nearly every key, bringing more and more of our experience into the circle of acceptance.

To appreciate Schubert’s way of organizing time in general, and certainly in this piece, one must understand his priorities. It may be of use to contrast his trajectory through a piece with Beethoven’s, which for most people is a more immediately satisfying path. One of the things we so cherish about Beethoven is that he admits the full range of human experience and then transcends whatever obstacles he encounters. His is a vision of music as narrative, as a journey toward resolution and a demonstration of the strength of the human spirit. We understand Beethoven because he recognizes so much of our experience of the world and then tells us that we can survive in that world and find our rightful place solidly within it. Schubert has no such certainty, nor does he attempt to find it. Hindu deities have multiple forms, peaceful as well as wrathful, and all are admitted as parts of their divinity. Schubert is like that, opening up more and more to the beauty of experience, whether or not that experience is beautiful as we commonly understand it. His music helps us see the totality of who we are and contain it all without working toward closure and completion. One of the important concepts in Carl Jung’s vision of the human psyche is the existence of the “shadow,” those aspects of ourselves from which we turn away and which need to be reintegrated into our personalities if we are to remain whole and fully ourselves. A work such as Schubert’s G Major Quartet addresses shadow qualities, exploring them and admitting them into the light.

For anyone who will allow herself or himself to be transported into its world, this quartet will offer manifold revelations. There are moments in each movement which seem especially to encapsulate particular truths which are important to Schubert. The recapitulation, or return to the opening material, in the first movement is extraordinary in that the sense of return is strong and unmistakable and yet nothing is the same. The startling dynamic contrasts are gone, the jagged rhythms are smoothed out. Instead of shuddering tremolos we have rolling triplets that seem gently to console. And yet, with all of this contrast, the sense is not that there were conflicts that have been resolved but rather that what we are hearing was there all along had we chosen to understand it in that way; we should have no expectation that the more difficult opening idea has been banished but only that we see how to admit it into our experience without being completely overwhelmed.

The wanderer in the second movement twice encounters a storm. In the midst of its fury, as the music searches for a way out, a defiant two-note rising figure in the first violin and viola (not coincidentally the

inversion of the falling third that comes again and again in the previous movement) tenaciously recurs. Oblivious to the shifting modulations surrounding it, it becomes more and more foreign to its environment. What is extraordinary is that there is no attempt to integrate it into the fabric of the ongoing progress of the music; it is left there, unresolved and unresolvable. Yet the movement ends in peace without having conquered it. There is a way to go on through recognition rather than victory.

Sometimes it happens that performers do their best, freest playing in encores. The pressure of the concert proper is past and there is a sense of easygoing possibility. And sometimes composers write some of their most touching, free music in the middle, trio sections of minuet or scherzo movements, untethered from the more rigorous formal constraints in other movements. The trio of the Scherzo of this quartet is surely one of those cases, where music that is framed by a restless, shuddering movement can for a brief moment revel in the vision of another world, one liberated from earthly concerns. Later in Schubert's "dream" he writes: "And one day I had news of a gentle maiden who had just died. And a circle formed around her grave in which many youths and old men walked as though in everlasting bliss. They spoke softly, so as not to wake the maiden. Heavenly thoughts seemed forever to be showered on the youths from the maiden's gravestone, like fine sparks producing a gentle rustling. I too longed sorely to walk there. Only a miracle, however, can lead you to that circle, they said. But I went to the gravestone with slow steps and lowered gaze, filled with devotion and firm belief, and before I was aware of it, I found myself in the circle, which uttered a wondrously lovely sound; and I felt as though eternal bliss were gathered together into a single moment." This trio is such a moment. Of course it is not a place we can stay, as we see upon the return of the movement proper. Yet even though it is a peace and a bliss which is brought to us through the release of death it becomes a part of who we are and what we can know.

In the same family of movements as the tarantella-like finales of the d minor quartet and the c minor piano sonata, this last movement has the energy of a night ride on horseback through open terrain. A recurrent passage has the whole quartet moving together in gasps reaching for something unknown. The terrible revelation it seems to be reaching toward is unrevealed, always answered by an almost naive sounding dance. The passage is extended each time it appears until its final statement has a nearly unbearable intensity. The chasm opens before us as we go barreling through from key to key waiting for a landing of some sort. And eventually we land, through all our wanderings, back in the key where we started our journey, having seen everything around it and able to live where we are with a feeling of acceptance and hope. That hope is as Vaclav Havel defines it in *Disturbing the Peace*: "Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not a conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

Note by Mark Steinberg