November 20, 2011 Sounds of Stow Concert - Program Notes

Concerto for Piano, Violin and Cello in C Major
Ludwig van Beethoven, December 17, 1770 – March 26, 1827

Beethoven's Triple Concerto comes in what is widely considered his "heroic style," the midlife stage in which he began to produce vastly scaled works of breathtaking vision and power. The concerto was written in 1803, around the same time as transcendent works like the "Eroica" Symphony and the opera Fidelio. The philosopher Theodor Adorno wrote of Beethoven's middle-period works that they caused him to feel "exaltation — an expression of pride that one is allowed to be present at such an event, to be its witness."

While the Triple Concerto may not scale the emotional heights of its neighbors, it is a triumph of technical mastery. The choice of three solo instruments effectively makes this a concerto for piano trio, and the only concerto Beethoven ever wrote for more than one solo instrument.

One of Beethoven's favorite pupils was Rudolph, Archduke of Austria and scion of the Hapsburg line. Beethoven instructed the young man in piano and composition; when questioned once whether Rudolph played well, Beethoven replied diplomatically, "when he is feeling just right." Rudolph remained a lifelong friend and patron of Beethoven, and received the dedication of important works like the Fourth and Fifth Piano Concertos, the "Hammerklavier" Sonata, and the "Archduke" Trio. When Rudolph was a boy of 16, though, his teacher wrote him his own composition, one that showed off his piano skills in a sympathetic setting – the Triple Concerto.

The choice of piano trio for the concerto is unprecedented in the literature, although there was a popular genre known as the sinfonia concertante for two or more soloists. The string parts are florid and virtuousic, woven around the piano part so as to show off his favored student in a dazzling light. Adorno also describes large-scale middle Beethoven works as being written in a kind of "novel form" – so rich in thematic material that the motives interact like characters in a novel: playful, tender, brash, exhilarating.

Beethoven set himself up for a compositional challenge: how to give each of three soloists a fair hearing without inordinately bloating the work. Technically speaking, each theme should appear four times – once by the orchestra and once by each of the soloists! The themes he chooses are thus compact and tightly-wound. The work's interest lies in the concerto grosso-style interplay between the soloists and the orchestra.

The first movement opens with hushed and halting statements in the strings and bursts into full song as the orchestra lays out the thematic material. The soloists enter, led – as usual throughout this concerto – by the cello. The dotted rhythms lend a fashionable dignity to the thematic material that would have been recognizable to its listeners.

As in the "Eroica" Symphony, the brief but profound slow movement is an emotional heart of the work. Between the Olympian first movement and the rambunctious finale, the Adagio's muted colors are as luminous as a soft hymn. The key is A-flat major – a major third below the key of the first movement, the same relationship we find in the "Emperor" concerto. For all its transcendent beauty, the movement is nothing but a paean-like introduction to the finale.

The boisterous finale bursts forth in high spirits, also not unlike the syncopated dance that ends the "Emperor" concerto. It is a strutting Polacca in the style of the Polonaise, the traditional Polish dance that Chopin immortalized in his keyboard works. The cello again introduces the dance-like rondo theme, and a duple-meter coda propels the work to a rousing finish.
—Ariana Falk, 2011

Coronation Anthem No. 2, "The King Shall Rejoice"
George Frideric Handel , February 23, 1685 – April 14, 1759

"Mr. Handel, the famous Composer to the opera, is appointed by the King to compose the Anthem at the Coronation which is to be sung in Westminster-Abbey at the Grand Ceremony." Recently a naturalized British citizen through an act of King George I, Handel eagerly embraced this commission and produced four festive anthems for the October 11, 1727 coronation of King George II. These works, performed singly or as a set, have remained immensely popular ever since, and one or more have been performed at every subsequent coronation of a British monarch.

As always, Handel was a master at creating music appropriate to the occasion and building in which it would be performed – and since few ceremonies are grander than a coronation, this music is expansive, extroverted and confident in every regard. While fine points of delicate shading and nuance would be lost in the vast spaces of Westminster Abbey, Handel still achieves a remarkable variety of effects through various combinations of his large instrumental and vocal forces, and inventive manipulation of his musical material. Original sources list 47 singers accompanied by as many as 160 instrumentalists(!) in the original performance.

For the first two movements of today's work, the first violins are divided into three (rather than the usual two) parts, while timpani and three trumpets lend majesty and strength to the sound. The text of two of the original four anthems, "Let Thy Hand" and "Zadok the Priest," follow the text of the 1685 coronation of James II (Interestingly, 1685 also saw the births of J.S. Bach, Handel, and Dominico Scarlotti, the three greatest Baroque composers). Handel himself selected the text for "The King Shall Rejoice" after rejecting official suggestions, stating "I have read my Bible very well, and shall choose for myself." "The King Shall Rejoice" draws from Psalm 21. Handel sets each of the four sentences and a final Allelujah as separate musical movements, tempering the music to reflect the mood and meaning of each phrase, in typical Baroque fashion.

The work opens with an extensive orchestral introduction, full of pomp and festive fanfares. The chorus expresses complete confidence, elaborating on the word "rejoice." The second movement, minus trumpets and drums, is a lilting dance expressing the King's gladness "of his salvation," with wonderful spinning suspensions on "salvation," suggesting the everlasting nature of that grace. A noted feature of both the second and third movements is the delightful use of hemiolas*, which contribute to the sense of lightness and lift in these musical gems. The third movement opens with full fanfare, then returns to the dance-like . meter, but in minor mode, with "Thou has prevented (prepared) him." Four distinctive musical motifs, each illuminating a different aspect of the text, intertwine. The extended melisma** on "blessing" suggests it will go on and on. "And set a crown of pure gold upon his head" is appropriately grand, sturdy and set in major mode.

The final "Allelujah," an exuberant double fugue, gives the piece both a complex and appropriately robust conclusion. This movement will no doubt remind listeners of the great "Halleluiah Chorus" from Messiah, which will follow several decades later. The good humor and optimism is reflected in the almost literal laughter (ah-ha), which punctuates several cadence points. No wonder these works have remained such favorites for nearly 300 years!

*hemiola – a rhythmic device of superimposing 2 notes in the time of 3, or 3 notes in the time of 2. Another way to think of it is in a group of 6 notes. They can be divided into 2 groups of 3, with accents on 1 and 4; or divided into 3 groups of 2, with accents on 1, 3, and 5. The alternation between these two groupings creates the hemiola effect.
**melisma – a group of notes sung on a single syllable

Theresienmesse (Theresa Mass)
Franz Joseph Haydn, March 31, 1732 – May 31, 1809

Few composers approach the rich, varied and immense range of Haydn's musical accomplishments – piano sonatas, concerti, quartets, trios, solo songs, operas, oratorios, masses – let alone create works in each genre that have remained fresh and popular through the present day. While many today think of him primarily as a composer of instrumental works, more than half of his compositions are vocal. Of the three main categories of 18th century music—church, chamber and theatre—Haydn rarely wrote music for the church during the first five decades of his composing career, mainly because church music was never strictly a part of his contractual obligations with the Esterhazy family between 1761 and 1791. Upon the death in that year of Nicholaus I, the new and shortlived Prince Anton Paul dissolved the court orchestra in a cost-cutting measure.

By 1794, the new Prince Nicholaus II asked Haydn to reorganize the court orchestra, revive music in the court, and compose a mass every year for the name day of his wife, Princess Maria Josepha Hermenegild Esterhazy. Between 1796 and 1802, Haydn produced six spectacular masses, each with its own sonority and approach to the task at hand. All were intended for actual liturgical use, which greatly limits their length and therefore the amount of detail possible in sections with lengthy text, such as the "Credo." He did not have the luxury that Bach and Beethoven did when they created their great oratorio-length masses. Perhaps because of these limitations, Haydn's compression of musical material makes for even stronger musical expression.

Haydn regarded his highly successful sojourns to London (1791-92 and 1794-95) as the happiest and most exciting times of his life, yet opted to return to Austria in 1795 to resume his position with the Esterhazy family. Inspired by his religious devotion and composed at the height of his creative powers, these late masses are supreme examples of the Viennese Classical style. The orchestration becomes increasingly symphonic, colorful and independent. In the Theresienmesse in particular, there is a complete balance between the forces of the chorus, orchestra and vocal quartet. Old-fashioned structural divisions between aria and chorus are eliminated, as is the clear distinction between homophony and counterpoint (although "Et Vitam Venturi" is a most memorable fugue.)

First performed on September 8, 1799, the Theresienmesse is the fourth of the six masses, composed between the two great oratorios, The Creation and The Seasons. The orchestration reflects the reduction in wind players experienced in the court at the time (only clarinets and trumpets, no oboes and horns). Although bassoon parts are not shown in the autograph, it is assumed they were included in the authentic instrumentation and will be present in today's performance. Haydn more than compensates for the missing winds with incredibly intricate, beautiful and inventive string writing.

One should remember that the late masses were part of birthday celebrations. Haydn said his faith was best expressed in feelings happiness and joy, rather than contemplation or mysticism. The radiant happiness of "Papa Haydn" is present throughout this work, reflected in its optimistic energy, and sheer beauty of sound.

The "Kyrie" opens with one of Haydn's famous "surprise" devices: a deceptive cadence in measure 3 before delivering the expected harmony with the simple, calm, beautiful choral entry. The gentle, lyrical mood of the Adagio frames the movement, in direct contrast with the fully voiced, powerful, driving central fugal section. This dichotomy of material – strong, martial

interruptions of texts pleading for mercy or peace – will be seen in other movements, especially the concluding "Dona Nobis Pacem."

The "Gloria" positively bursts its seams, so full of excited energy that the chorus cannot even wait the expected 4-measure phrase before releasing its shout of praise (another of Haydn's surprises – manipulation of phrase length). The mood shifts quickly, reflecting the lowly state of the "terra" vs. the more exalted praise reserved for "Te" (Thou). The solo quartet spins a lovely response ("Gratias agimus") which is interrupted by the agitated triplets in minor mode, and the chorus' powerful "Qui Tollis." The movement ends with a sense of suspended time, as the a cappella chorus offers its final plea for mercy. Never in a dark mood for long, Haydn returns to a buoyant feeling in the "Quoniam" and a bright fugue on "Cum Sancto Spiritu." The Amen dialogue between chorus and solo quartet, hung with playful figures in the strings, is one of the great joys of the piece.

The "Credo" begins appropriately with a unison statement of the creed. The constant alternation of piano and forte choral sections, as well as inventive voice crossings between sopranos and altos, tenors and basses, maintain the sense of drama through this rather wordy text. No one can miss the pictorial setting of "descend it de coelis." The solo quartet (rather than the usual soprano solo) takes up the "Et incarnatus," while the alto solo dramatically portrays "sub Pontio Pilato." Haydn continues to surprise with his use of key and tonality, as this movement ends in the very remote key of B-flat minor, and the explosive "Et Resurrexit" that follows in G-minor, not the usual and expected major tonality. The quartet and chorus continue to unfold the story in dialogue, leading to the energetic and complex fugue, "Et Vitam Venturi."

The "Sanctus" is the shortest of movements, beginning (surprisingly) quietly, then exploding with splendor. The "Benedictus," in contrast, is unusually lengthy, and features a charming orchestral opening, and thorough mixing of choral and quartet passages. In total contrast, the stark unison cry of "Agnus Dei" opens directly, without introduction, with powerfully strong statements set against hushed sections reflecting fear or awe.

This is truly operatic writing and looks forward to the musical development that will be seen in the coming century (think Verdi, for example.) But again, Haydn does not allow this mood to last, and the work concludes with a lively, "Dona Nobis Pacem" that fully engages the quartet, chorus and orchestra. It has always struck me as ironic that this prayer for peace is punctuated with trumpets and drums, almost as if a martial approach to peace is the way to go, but no one can question the optimism and affirmation of this most wonderful of conclusions to a most extraordinary rich, varied and beautiful work.
—Barbara Jones, 2011