

Music Views and Reviews by Kathy Wolfe

String works of Haydn, Beethoven, and Brahms

Haydn: String Quartets Op. 64, Festetics Quartet, Harmonia Mundi Quintana 903040-41, 2 CDs.

Beethoven: String Quartets Op. 18 No. 1 & Op. 132, Artis Quartett, Sony SK48058.

Brahms: String Sextet No. 1, Amadeus Ensemble and Alban Berg Quartett, EMI Classics 54216-2.

The most beautiful new release of string music is Brahms's Sextet No. 1, a memorial tribute to the Amadeus Quartet's dear departed Peter Schidlöf by his colleagues and the Alban Berg Quartett. This live Jan. 30, 1990 performance in the Vienna Konzerthaus, just released by EMI, is companion to an earlier CD from this concert, Brahms's Sextet No. 2 (EMI 49747). Since it's best to speak of Haydn and Beethoven before Brahms, I didn't want this treasure to be overlooked at the end.

Recordings of Haydn string quartets have been hard to find, but now Harmonia Mundi has two series, by the Festetics Quartet on modern instruments on the Quintana label, and by the Salomon Quartet on period strings on Hyperion. The new Festetics release of Haydn's six 1790 Op. 64 quartets is very good. The phrasing is *cantabile* and the pitch, a low A=425, helps this "singing."

As the fine album notes point out, Haydn and Mozart created a revolution in music in Vienna during 1781-85 with their string quartets (see *EIR* Sept. 18, p. 69). Haydn's 1781 "Russian" Quartets Op. 33 inspired Mozart's breakthrough in his "Haydn" Quartets of 1782-5. Haydn further developed the idea during 1787-90 in three sets of six quartets each, Op. 60, Op. 54-55, and Op. 64.

The six Op. 64 quartets, the last

Haydn wrote in Vienna before the death of Mozart and Haydn's first trip to London, are the summation of this method. The "Haydn principle" has become the name for such composing from a musical statement which has the germ of a growing idea, and generates new ideas, but which unifies the work as a whole.

This musical idea always derives from vocal themes of the human singing voice, and the Festetics Quartet captures this especially in the "Lark" Quartet in D, the finale of Op. 64. The opening lower strings "accompaniment" and the first violin theme itself are the mezzo-soprano and soprano voices, respectively. These are then transposed throughout all four voices of the quartet and through all movements, in a unified way, directly to the D minor fugue in the fourth movement.

Stretching the principle

Beethoven's string quartets take this principle and stretch it to and beyond its limit, while always respecting the principle, creating the most densely conceptual music written. The young Artis Quartett, formed in 1980 at Vienna's Musikhochschule, is not quite ready. They have a touch of the "Juilliard syndrome," known to New Yorkers from the Juilliard Conservatory, where students are drilled to get the right notes and the right pitch, all the notes and nothing but the notes.

Beethoven string quartets require more irony than that. Beethoven respects the human vocal origin of every theme and idea, but then places parts of the bass in the first violin *altissimo*, that is, above the staff, or strews snatches of a singing conceptual voice with lightning speed across all four instruments. Without tremendous humor, and much more give and take,

these echos on another plane, of what has been sung before, cannot be brought out audibly.

Sextet versus quartet

Brahms had great trouble with string quartets, postponing publication of his first quartet from 1853 until after 1870, but the Amadeus Ensemble-Alban Berg Brahms sextet discs are a wonderful introduction to Brahms's use of the human voice in string writing. The breadth of the Sextet No. 1 in B-flat is hinted at by the movements' lengths of 17:24, 10:35, 3:16, and 10:45 minutes.

What a sextet has which a quartet lacks, of course, is *two* violas and *two* 'celli, and Brahms, who wrote much of his vocal music for mezzo-soprano and bass, glories in the lower strings to bring out the mezzo-soprano, baritone, and bass voices. He then moves these ideas to the highest violin notes and then back again through all the voices.

Those who know the singing voice as Brahms did, realize that there is a profundity in the lower register of the mezzo-soprano and bass, unavailable in soprano or tenor, which conveys a certain type of passion. This is the passion of the intellect, which creates from love of God's Creation. Brahms was a tragic figure whose fight to save music was of that depth, but who had faith that these ideas shall survive. This quality can often be heard in his mezzo-soprano songs, such as "Die Mainacht," in which the words are of loneliness, but the voice sings of eternity.

This particular passion pervades the Sextet No. 1. The Amadeus-Alban Berg performance's emotional connection to the deathless nature of the life work of Peter Schidlöf, of Brahms, and of great music, brings this out all the more.