Quintet for Flute, Oboe, Violin, Viola and Cello in D major, Op. 11, No. 6, W. B75

JOHANN CHRISTIAN BACH (1738-1782)

Published in 1774.

In the winter of 1782, Leopold Mozart received a letter from his son, Wolfgang, in Vienna: “I suppose you have heard that the London Bach is dead? What a loss to the musical world!” The “London Bach” was Johann Christian, youngest son of Johann Sebastian, and probably the most famous while he lived of any of the members of that venerable family. Johann Christian profoundly influenced the formation of Wolfgang Mozart’s musical style, and the two composers harbored great mutual respect. They first met in London in 1764, when the eight-year-old Mozart came to entertain the English court; Johann Christian, the Queen’s Music Master, was responsible for scheduling the prodigy’s appearances. The two got along splendidly. One contemporary report noted that Bach seated himself at the keyboard and took the boy upon his knee, with “each in turn playing a bar or so with such precision that no one would have suspected two performers.” To the further delight of the auditors, Johann Christian began improvising a fugue and little Wolfgang completed it. It was the graceful, flowing, galant style of J.C. Bach that served as the foundation for Mozart’s elegant compositional idiom.

Johann Christian was fifteen when his father, Johann Sebastian, died in 1750. He left Leipzig to continue his education with his older brother Carl Philipp Emanuel in Berlin, and moved to Italy in 1754 to study composition with the renowned pedagogue Padre Martini. Christian began writing Latin church music, and by 1757, he had been received into the Roman Catholic faith. (His staunchly Lutheran family might well have dubbed him the “Renegade Bach” for such a heretical action.) His appointment as organist at the Milan Cathedral in 1760 was quickly followed by the composition of his first opera, and it was not long before his church duties were neglected in favor of the more glamorous opera house. Reputation followed success, and in 1762, he accepted an offer to compose operas for the King’s Theatre in London, a city that was to be his home for the rest of his life.

Though his earliest operatic efforts in England met with considerable acclaim, Bach was soon forced from his position at the King’s Theatre by political intrigues. He turned to instrumental music, and established himself in the royal favor of the German-born Queen Charlotte with such effect that he was appointed Master of the Queen’s Music within two years of his arrival. At the same time he also renewed his friendship with Carl Friedrich Abel, a German composer and performer who had studied with Johann Christian’s father in Leipzig. Together they organized the Bach-Abel Concerts that were to be such an important stimulus in establishing the public instrumental concert. Their first concert was given in February 1764 (only two months before Mozart arrived) and their series of January-to-May weekly programs continued for almost twenty years, with much of the programming devoted to Johann Christian’s instrumental music. The modish currents of British taste began to flow away from Bach in his last years, and he suffered several financial reverses, including his overextended investment in a new hall for the concerts. His health began to decline in 1781 and he died on New Year’s Day 1782, deeply in debt. It is said that only four people attended the funeral. Queen Charlotte, however, remembered her old music master, and she enabled Bach’s wife, an opera singer, to return to her native Italy and live on a royal pension for the rest of her life.

In May 1771, Johann Baptist Wendling, the celebrated flutist of the Mannheim orchestra, appeared in London. Bach was impressed with Wendling as both man and artist, and he quickly established a close friendship with the family. (Close enough indeed that he fell in love with Wendling’s beautiful nineteen-year-old daughter, Augusta, and suggested marriage, but was spurned. Augusta later became the mistress of the Mannheim Elector, Karl Theodor, who compensated her favors with a patent of nobility as Countess von Parkstein.) Bach enlisted Wendling for his concert series, and wrote for him a quintet with oboe and strings for the spring programs of 1772. The piece succeeded so well that Bach wrote five more for the same instrumentation, which were collectively issued as his Op. 11 in 1774.

The opening sonata-form movement of the D major Quintet is built around a spirited main theme and a gentler second subject of hesitant, sighing figurations, both of which figure in the development section. The recapitulation bypasses the main theme in favor of returning just the second subject. The Andantino is a lovely pastorale with a central section whose delicate trills evoke birdsongs at dawn. The
finale is a rondo based on an exuberant melody whose returns are separated by two intervening episodes, the first begun by a duet for violin and viola, the second more shadowed in mood.

**Quartet for Clarinet, Violin, Viola and Cello in E-flat major**

**JOHANN NEPOMUK HUMMEL (1778-1837)**

*Composed in 1808.*

**Sic transit gloria mundi.** During his lifetime, Johann Nepomuk Hummel was judged to be among the greatest musicians of the age. As a composer, he was placed second only to Beethoven. Many thought his piano playing without peer, especially in his improvisations. He was one of the most respected (and expensive) keyboard teachers in Europe, who published a tutor that sold thousands of copies within days of its appearance. His talents for conducting and management enabled him to assume the position as successor to Haydn at Esterháza, as well as important posts in Vienna, Stuttgart and Weimar. He was among the first musicians to campaign for a uniform copyright law. He traveled widely, befriended such notables as Goethe, and seemed to be a thoroughly likeable person whose success did not go to his head. Today, he is largely forgotten.

Hummel, born in November 1778 in Pressburg (now Bratislava), was a prodigy. When his father, a string player and conductor, moved the family to Vienna when Johann was eight to take a job at the little theater run by Emanuel Schikaneder (the librettist five years later of *The Magic Flute*), the boy came to the notice of Mozart, who took him into his household as a pupil for the next two years. After this brief apprenticeship, Mozart encouraged Johann to go out into the world and make himself known, and a five-year series of concert appearances was undertaken throughout northern Europe and England. Hummel enjoyed good success, and he was an accomplished musician when he returned to Vienna in 1793. During the next decade he performed little, concentrating instead on study (with Salieri, Albrechtsberger and Haydn), composition and teaching. He met Beethoven, and the two began a long, though stormy, friendship. In 1804, Hummel replaced Joseph Haydn as head of Prince Nikolaus Esterházy’s musical establishment (on Haydn’s recommendation), composing, conducting, training the choirboys in singing and violin and keyboard, assembling a Haydn archive, and overseeing the music for the court theaters until 1811. He then toured as a concert virtuoso until receiving an appointment as Kapellmeister at Stuttgart in 1816. That position did not allow him sufficient time to pursue his career as a pianist, however, so two years later he negotiated a more suitable contract at Weimar, where he remained for the rest of his life. The 1820s were a productive time for Hummel as composer and performer, but he suffered a decline in popularity during his last years, when the public was dazzled by the virtuoso wizardry of Paganini and Liszt, and beguiled by the new sensitivity of the music of the early Romantic composers. Hummel’s death, in 1837, was regarded as the passing of the Classical era.

Hummel occupies an important place in the history of music. He carried the Mozartian tradition into the 19th century and flavored it lightly with some newer harmonic and stylistic confections, resulting in a style that the noted scholar and pianist Charles Rosen called “post-Classicism.” Elegance, reserve and a certain formal predictability characterize much of Hummel’s large output, which includes works in all the major genres of the time except the symphony. He was especially known for the elaborate decorations with which he filled his own keyboard performances, a quality that resulted in a rather mannered version of what seems in Mozart fresh and inventive. Some of his keyboard techniques and compositional devices were appropriated by such Romantic composers as Mendelssohn, Schumann and even Liszt, but Hummel himself remained more closely allied to the 18th than the 19th century. His musicianship and talent are unquestioned, but, as Joel Sachs wrote in the *New Grove’s Dictionary*, “His music reached the highest level accessible to one who lacks ultimate genius.”

Hummel’s Clarinet Quintet of September 1808 was composed during his Esterházy tenure, though it was really intended for the burgeoning home-music trade of the Viennese publishers. Prince Nikolaus, who looked askance at sharing his music director with the public, was talked out of firing Hummel for his affront by Haydn (though Hummel was ultimately let go three years later). The amiability of Hummel’s string-and-wind ensemble is evident in the opening movement’s main theme, a motive with a prominent turn figure whose phrases are shared by violin and clarinet; the second theme is a genial rising melody initiated by the clarinet. The development section treats mainly the first subject until some
anxious imitative scales and a quietly expectant passage provide the bridge to the recapitulation and its return of the earlier themes. The following scherzo is titled *La Seccatura* ("The Nuisance"), though it is the performers and not the listeners who must deal with Hummel’s sly assignment of a different time signature to each instrument: clarinet in 2/4, violin in 12/8, viola in 3/4, and cello in 6/8. The triplet rhythms of the scherzo are carried into the central trio, where they are frequently interrupted by some lyrical thoughts. The long, serene melody that occupies the outer sections of the *Andante* finds its formal and expressive balance in the plaintive passage at the movement’s center. The finale is a rondo based on a delightful tune of folkish naïveté whose returns are separated by one episode that suggests deeper emotional realms and another given to imitative interplay and playful dialogue.

**Three Preludes for Clarinet and Strings**

*Composed in 1926.*

*Premiered on December 4, 1926 in New York City by the composer.*

Though the 1924 *Rhapsody in Blue* is usually cited as Gershwin’s initial foray into the concert world, he had been dabbling with more serious modes of musical expression for at least a half-dozen years by that time. He started composing piano miniatures — “novelettes” he called them — as early as 1917, and wrote a charming *Lullaby* for strings two years later. In January 1925, he headed a new notebook “Preludes” and started to sketch out some ideas for what he planned to be a set of 24 short piano pieces collectively titled *The Melting Pot*. Late the following year, the British-born (of Peruvian parents) contralto Marguerite d’Alvarez enlisted Gershwin to play in her New York recital, which was to include a set of popular numbers as a foil to her usual repertory of Spanish and French songs. Gershwin agreed to act as accompanist for the popular songs on the program, and also to play three of his new Preludes, which he titled *Prelude No. 1*, *Blue Lullaby* and *Spanish Prelude*. The recital on December 4, 1926 at the fashionable Hotel Roosevelt was a success, and Gershwin and d’Alvarez performed the same program in Buffalo and Boston early the following year. Shortly thereafter, Gershwin published the three Preludes, which have since come to be regarded as his most important concert works.

Gershwin’s Three Preludes, arranged in the classical ordering of fast–slow–fast, were spawned from the familiar popular idioms of the 1920s. The first is a blend of Charleston and tango; the second is a deeply nostalgic blues; and the third is jazzy with a strong Spanish inflection. The Preludes have been transcribed for orchestra (several times), for piano trio, for trumpet, for saxophone, and, in a version by New York composer James Cohn, for clarinet.

**Quartet for Flute, Violin, Viola and Cello in D major, K. 285**

*Composed in 1777.*

During his stay in Mannheim at the end of 1777, Mozart met “a gentleman of means and a lover of all the sciences,” a Dutch surgeon named Ferdinand Dejean, who numbered among his accomplishments a certain ability on the flute. Dejean had heard of the 21-year-old musician’s extraordinary talent for composition from a mutual friend, Johann Baptist Wendling, the flutist with the Mannheim orchestra, and he commissioned Mozart to write three concertos and at least three quartets with strings for his instrument. Though Mozart professed a distaste of writing for solo flute, he managed to finish three of the quartets (K. 285, 285a and 285b) and two of the concertos (the second one is actually just a transposition of the Oboe Concerto from the preceding year) by the time he left Mannheim. He settled with Dejean for just less than half of the original fee, and let it go at that. Despite his disparagement of the instrument, Mozart’s compositions for flute occupy one of the most delightful niches of his incomparable musical legacy — Rudolf Gerber characterized them as combining “the perfect image of the spirit and feeling of the rococo age with German sentiment.”

The D major Quartet (K. 285) opens with a crystalline sonata-form movement that the flute initiates with the presentation of the dashing principal melody. By the time the music has arrived at the second theme, a rising scalar configuration in triplet rhythms, it is clear that the flute is endowed with concerto-
like prominence in this movement — only in the central development section does it relinquish its leadership in favor of some more democratic motivic discussion with its companions. The Adagio, in the expressive key of B minor, is a nocturnal cantilena for the flute couched upon a delicate cushion of plucked string sonorities. This irresistible Quartet closes with a buoyant rondo enlivened by frequent dialogues of the flute and violin.

Serenade for Violin, Viola and Cello in C major, Op. 10

ERNST VON DOHNÁNYI (1877-1960)

Composed in 1902-1903.
Premiered on January 5, 1904 in Vienna by members of the Fitzner Quartet.

Ernst von Dohnányi was among the 20th-century’s foremost composers, pianists, teachers and music administrators. Born on July 27, 1877 in Pozsony, Hungary (now Bratislava, capital of Slovakia), he inherited his musical interests from his father, a talented amateur cellist, who gave him his first lessons in piano and theory. At seventeen, he entered the newly established Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest, the first Hungarian of significant talent to do so; his example inspired Bartók to enroll at the school. In 1895, Dohnányi’s Piano Quintet No. 1 came to the attention of Brahms, who arranged a performance of the work in Vienna with the pronouncement that “I couldn’t have written it better myself.” The young composer was honored with the Hungarian Millennium Prize for his Symphony No. 1 in 1895, and two years later he received the Bösendorfer Prize for his First Piano Concerto. He graduated from the Academy in 1897, and spent several weeks preparing for his professional debut in Berlin in October with the celebrated pianist Eugene d’Albert, a student of Liszt. Dohnányi triumphed at his Berlin appearance, and he toured extensively for the next several years, appearing throughout Europe, Russia, the United States and South America. During that time, he not only introduced into the repertory many previously neglected works of Mozart (all of whose 27 piano concertos he performed in 1941), Beethoven (a complete concerto cycle in 1920) and Schubert, but he was also among the first world-renowned pianists to appear regularly in chamber music.

From 1905 to 1915, Dohnányi taught at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik. He returned to Budapest in 1915, becoming director of the Franz Liszt Academy in 1919 and musical director of the Hungarian Radio in 1931. He served as conductor of the Budapest Philharmonic for the 25 years after 1919 while continuing to concertize at home and abroad and remaining active as a composer. In addition to his work as a performer and composer, Dohnányi’s contributions to the musical life of his homeland included inspiring and performing the works of younger composers (notably Bartók and Kodály), reforming the Liszt Academy’s music curriculum, guiding the development of such gifted pupils as Georg Solti, Géza Anda and Annie Fischer, expanding the repertory of the nation’s performing groups, and serving as a model in musical matters through the strength of his personality and the quality of his musicianship.

In 1944, Dohnányi left Hungary, a victim of the raging political and militaristic tides that swept the country during World War II. He moved first to Austria, then to Argentina, and finally settled in Tallahassee in 1949 as pianist and composer-in-residence at Florida State University, where his students included the prominent American composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich. Though in his seventies, Dohnányi continued to appear regularly on campus and in guest engagements; his last public performance was as conductor of the FSU Symphony just three weeks before his death. He died in New York on February 9, 1960 during a recording session.

Dohnányi’s works include three operas, two piano and two violin concertos, two symphonies, the Variations on a Nursery Tune [Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star] for piano and orchestra, several independent orchestral compositions, chamber and piano works. His music, though influenced by Brahms and Schumann, displays an individual voice in which the richly expressive gestures of the late Romantic era are coupled with a Classical clarity of form.

The Serenade for Strings, Op. 10 of 1902, one of the earliest works of Dohnányi’s creative maturity, combines a folkish sense of melody with mastery of form and harmonic sophistication. The composition opens with a March, which, in the fashion of serenades from Mozart’s time, returns at the end of the finale. The principal theme of the first movement is provided balance by a lyrical subject introduced by the cello above a drone-like viola accompaniment. The Romanza embraces a flight of melody for the viola
and a more animated and wide-ranging theme for the violin. The nimble Scherzo is spun out upon featherweight imitative counterpoint; the central trio uses a smooth, contrasting melody, which is ingeniously superimposed upon the Scherzo theme on its return. A set of variations on a melancholy chromatic theme and a dashing Rondo round out this handsome composition.

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