JONATHAN BISS, PIANO
AND THE ELIAS QUARTET

Saturday, April 6 | 2:00 pm | The Folly Theater

Sara Bitlloch  violin  Jonathan Biss  piano
Donald Grant  violin  Carol McGonnell  clarinet
Martin Saving  viola  Eric Reed  French horn
Marie Bitlloch  cello  Brad Balliet  bassoon

MOZART
Concerto No. 13 in C Major, K. 415 (Quartet Version)
  Allegro
  Andante
  Allegro

JANÁČEK
Concertino for Piano and Chamber Ensemble, JW VII/11
  Moderato
  Piú mosso
  Con moto
  Allegro

INTERMISSION

SCHUMANN
Piano Quintet in E-flat Major, Op. 44
  Allegro brillante
  In Modo d’una Marcia: Un poco largamente
  Scherzo: Molto vivace; Trio II: L’istesso tempo
  Allegro, ma non troppo

This concert is underwritten, in part, by The Sosland Foundation
The International Chamber Music Series is underwritten, in part, by the William T. Kemper Foundation
Concerto No. 15 in C Major, K. 415 (Quartet version)
Wolfgang Amade Mozart (1756-1791)

How can this piece be both a piano concerto and chamber music? And what does “quartet version” mean?

We have the answers in Mozart’s own explanation. The C Major concerto was one of three that he first offered for sale in mid-January 1783. The Wiener Zeitung, an important Viennese newspaper, published the news:

Herr Kapellmeister Mozart announces herewith to the highly respected public the issuance of three newly completed piano concertos: These 3 concertos, which can be performed with a large orchestra including wind instruments, or only a quattro, that is with 2 violins, 1 viola and violoncello, will be available at the beginning of April to those who have subscribed from them (they will be beautifully copied and revised by him personally) . . . The subscription tickets are available at 4 ducats. Mozart’s apartment is on the High Bridge in the small Herberstein House no. 327, on the third floor.

What a different world Vienna was in the 1780s! The imperial Austrian capital was a small enough city so that subscribers were invited to call on Mozart at his residence to purchase tickets.

The announcement quoted above clarifies that “quartet version” meant the reduction of the orchestra part to four individual string players, resulting in the instrumentation of a piano quintet when performed with keyboard. Because the piano part is unchanged whether performed with full orchestra or string quartet, the work remains a concerto.

Mozart included this work on a program at Vienna’s Burgtheater on March 29, 1783. The program was a benefit concert attended by Emperor Joseph II and the cream of Viennese society. That is the performance for which he probably added trumpets and drums, which are generally included in modern orchestral performances of K. 415.

The chamber version that we hear was a crafty economic ploy on Mozart’s part. In the late 18th century, nearly every middle class person played a musical instrument; certainly all the nobility had some formal musical education. By sanctioning performance with a smaller ensemble, Mozart made this concerto and its companion pieces (K. 413 in F Major and K. 414 in A Major) available to a wider audience. Plenty of gifted pianists could assemble a quartet of string players for domestic music-making; a full orchestra was a more expensive undertaking. Mozart’s intent was thus commercial, for he could sell more copies by offering an alternate instrumentation.

The standout movement of this concerto is its finale, a splendid sonata rondo with two adagio interruptions and a metric switch from 6/8 to 2/4. Mozart’s melodic genius is in free flow. No fewer than three themes unfold in the perky, mischievous rondo section. Each time that section returns, Mozart alters it. His episodes, including the minor mode adagio segments, have an element of whimsy, and the dance-like gigue pulse is irresistible.

Mr. Biss uses Mozart’s own cadenzas.

Concertino for Piano and Chamber Ensemble
Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

The River Morava divides what is now the Czech Republic into two principal areas. To the west lies industrialized Bohemia, the province of diatonic folk songs and European traditions, and birthplace of Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák. To the east are Moravia and the agricultural Slovakian regions; these are the home of modal folk melodies, jagged rhythmic patterns, and Leoš Janáček. Like Joseph Haydn, Janáček developed his highly individual musical style in comparative isolation, without distraction or outside influence. He never left Czech-speaking regions except for brief stays during his youth in Vienna and Leipzig, and spent virtually his entire creative life in and near his native Brno. Also like Haydn, he was little known outside his own immediate world until quite late in life.
Today, Janáček is remembered primarily as an opera composer. While he came to chamber music only late in his life, a considerable amount of his reputation rests on these works, many of which are scored for small ensembles. The Concertino from 1926 is a fine example. Originally planning a piano concerto with chamber orchestra, Janáček found his musical ideas better suited to the smaller forces of seven players: piano, violin, viola, cello, French horn and clarinet.

Even the reduced ensemble of six players (in addition to the pianist) is used sparingly.

For example, in the first movement only the French horn interjects commentary on the piano part; in the second movement, piano and E-flat clarinet spar playfully with one another, unaccompanied until the last measures. The full ensemble participates for the first time in the third movement, with the piano remaining in full command.

Not until the finale does Janáček approximate a traditional chamber ensemble. The composer explores bold color ideas by associating particular themes with individual instruments, for example, the haunting horn motif in the first movement.

The Concertino is not programmatic per se; however, there is substantial evidence (including a 1927 article by the composer) to support the idea that Janáček conceived of the work as a suite called “Spring,” with three of the four movements a musical illustration of an animal, and the fourth, a stream. Clearly this is music strongly related to the world of his anthropomorphic opera “The Cunning Little Vixen” (1924). In both the opera and the Concertino – indeed, in most of his late compositions -- Janáček achieved an appealing blend of playfulness and lyricism, intimacy and worldliness. The Concertino holds its own without need of a fanciful program. He writes for the piano with restraint, but the instrument still has arresting cadenzas in each movement.

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**Evolvion of a New Chamber Genre?**

Schumann cannot truly be said to have “invented” the piano quintet as Mozart did the piano quartet. The 18th-century Italian Luigi Boccherini (1743-1805), who was active in the Spanish court, wrote a dozen works for the same instrumentation. They are little known today, and were almost certainly unknown to Schumann, whose combination of a piano plus a string quartet was logical in light of his recent completion of the Op. 41 quartets. He was anxious to return to composing for the instrument he knew and loved best -- and Clara’s instrument. At the same time, he was still filled with ideas for the string quartet. By combining the two, he brought together his own considerable musical imagination with the varied sonorities of five players. Clara was, of course, the pianist for whom Schumann wrote the work. She played its premiere, and incorporated it into her repertoire immediately, thereby contributing to its popularity. The piano quintet rapidly became one of Schumann’s best-known compositions. Schumann’s friend Mendelssohn played the second performance, and had a hand in the reworking of the scherzo.

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**Lenten Subscription Series**

In our society, a subscription concert series means a commitment in advance to a designated group of afternoons or evenings during a concert season. Usually such series are linked by common performers or presenters and the same venue. Subscriptions are an accepted cultural phenomenon that we have come to take for granted.

Mozart appears to have been a pioneer in organizing such series during his first years in Vienna. These events were closer to what we would call salon performances. During the Lenten season, the powerful Catholic Church proscribed normal operatic and theatrical activity in Austria; however, concert performances were deemed acceptable. Mozart’s Lenten concerts included various pieces he had composed, including vocal and instrumental music, both chamber and orchestral. The first keyboard work to be presented in “subscription” was the Rondo-Variations in D Major, K. 382, for piano and orchestra. Mozart himself would have been the soloist. Of Mozart’s twenty-seven piano concertos, he composed more than half – from No. 11 in F Major, K. 413 through No. 25 in C Major, K. 503 – for the Lenten subscription series from 1783 to 1787.

Some of these concerts took place in private homes belonging to some of Mozart’s wealthy students or his aristocratic patrons. Others were held in more public spaces, such as Vienna’s Kärntnerthortheater and the Burgtheater.

The Lenten subscription series were a regular feature of Viennese musical life throughout the 1780s. The first group of concertos that Mozart advertised for the 1783 Lenten season included the lively C Major work that Mr. Biss and the Elias Quartet perform this evening.

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Janáček thought highly of this work, albeit with a wry comment about the solo part: "I have a feeling it is like an echo of the time when I was struggling with the piano."

**Piano Quintet in E-flat Major, Op. 44 (1842)**

*Robert Schumann (1810-1856)*

Robert and Clara Schumann were married in September 1840, the day before Clara’s 21st birthday. The ceremony took place after almost four years of prolonged hostility and opposition from Clara’s father, the prominent piano pedagogue Friedrich Wieck -- and against his will. Still, Schumann was elated about his marriage. His ebullience gave rise to a stream of compositional energy, as if there were no end to the music within him.

Schumann’s manic/depressive nature is well known. It is conjectured that his mental illness may have manifested itself in his compositions by an obsessive focus on one particular type of writing for a prolonged period. In the late 1830s, he had written almost exclusively for solo piano. The year 1840 brought forth an outpouring of Lieder, including the magnificent song cycles “Dichterliebe” (“The Poet’s Love”) and “Frauenliebe und Leben” (“Woman’s Love and Life”); 1841 was a year of orchestral works.

In 1842 Schumann turned his attention to chamber music, producing the three string quartets, Op. 41, this evening’s E-flat Major Piano Quintet, and the Piano Quartet Op. 47, also in E-flat. Schumann was creating new paths for himself with these works. This was the composer of brilliant vignettes inspired by literary masterpieces and the writings of Jean-Paul Richter; the composer of “Carnaval” and “Faschingsschwank aus Wien” (“Carnival Scenes from Vienna”), of “Kreisleriana” and the “Davidsbündlertänze” (“Dances of the League of David”) Schumann, the miniaturist par excellence, turned from the extra-musical associations that had dominated the music of his youth. Instead, he immersed himself in the study of counterpoint, particularly fugue, and the composition of absolute music. The first result of his new absorption was the three string quartets. They proved to be his only essay in the genre, but he profited from his fresh experience with them to combine the quartet ensemble with piano in his next chamber work, the Piano Quintet.

– Laurie Shulman ©2012

Jonathan Biss’ biography can be found on page 49.

The Elias Quartet biography can be found on page 91.