The VMI Department of English and Fine Arts
and
The Timmins-Gentry Music Society

present

The Audubon Quartet

Akemi Takayama, violin Doris Lederer, viola
Ellen Jewett, violin Clyde Shaw, cello

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PROGRAM

Peter Schickele . . . . . String Quartet No. 1 ("American Dreams")

1. **Opening Diptych**
2. **Four Studies**
3. **Music at Dawn**
4. **Dance Music**
5. **Closing Diptych**

Hugo Wolf . . . . . Italian Serenade in G major

Intermission

Johannes Brahms . . . . . String Quartet in C minor (Op. 51, No. 1)

1. **Allegro**
2. **Romanze: Poco Adagio**
3. **Allegro molto modrerato e commodo–Un poco più animato**
4. **Allegro**

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Jackson Memorial Hall, V. M. I.

November 14, 2007

PETER SCHICKELE, STRING QUARTET NO. 1 ("AMERICAN DREAMS"). Composer, musician, author and consummate parodist, Peter Schickele is probably best known as the creator of P.D.Q. Bach, the "last and least"of the twenty-odd children of Johann Sebastian Bach and the composer of such ageless classics as *Iphigenia in Brooklyn*, *The Stoned Guest*, and *Last Tango in Bayreuth*. Less familiar perhaps are the 100-plus works of the "serious" Schickele, one of which we are about to hear: the String Quartet No. 1. The work was commissioned by the Audubon Quartet—in an effort, perhaps, to steer the composer into the paths of musical righteousness.

Schickele himself has explained the subtitle of the work: "There are several kinds of American music echoed in the quartet, but they are usually transformed, or combined, or interrupted, or given a feeling of distance; hence . . . 'American Dreams.'" "Diptych," the heading of the first movement, designates a two-panel painting whose images are separately framed but thematically linked. Here it identifies a two-part musical structure whose parts are audibly distinct but rhythmically and harmonically linked. The first section opens with a tune in the viola that, as the composer says, "sounds somehow Appalachian" and closes with a series of sustained harmonics. The second consists of an extended meditation by the cello—in fact, a long sequence of emphatic plucked notes against what Schickele calls "an interlocking figure" in the higher strings.

As the composer's quirky but suggestive labels indicate, each of the four "studies" composing the second movement echoes a convention of jazz performance: "Group cadenza," "Up tune of bop persuasion," "Slow fox-trot," and "Blues toccata." The first study opens with a raucous, seven-note jazz figure whose several repeats are linked by busy, rapid figurations. The "bop" of the second study is suggested by both the dryness of its sketchy tune and the extremity of its syncopations. Contrasting sharply with this in both tempo and mood is the meandering, seductively dissonant foxtrot that follows. The last study, like the first, is fast and energetic. "Toccata" traditionally designates a lively, free-form display piece for keyboard. The blues element of "Blues toccata" is audible in its jazz melody. The toccata element, somewhat more elusive, is perhaps audible in its clipped rhythms.

As "Music at Dawn" suggests, the third movement is less an echo of a musical form than a recollection of something actually heard, an aural image. Above a soft, steady drone in the low strings that is probably meant to evoke the tranquillity of dawn, the first violinist plays an imitation of a bird song. We will hear this, or slight variations of it, ten times, at which point the drone begins to swell into what the composer calls "a chorale-like melody in the second violin and viola and a bit of scurrying music in the cello." Now a soloist in the dawn chorale, the bird continues to sing, falls silent for a long interval, then surprises us with seven final variations on his theme. The dawn music continues for a few measures, then softens into silence.

Of all of Schickele's transformations, those that open "Dance Music" are perhaps the least transformed. In fact, as he admits, the two fiddle tunes that we hear were not composed but recollected—"remembered from the playing of my brother, back in the days when we were teenagers and he used to accompany square dances. . . ." Not remembered but imagined are the three chromatic downscale slides that punctuate the melody at wide intervals—sudden reminders that we are not really at a hoedown. Improbably, the soft, slow passage that follows was derived from an old recording of a Navajo song. Following a brief, slightly out-of-kilter waltz, something like a scrambled version of the lively opening section returns.

"Closing Diptych" opens with a richly harmonized folklike melody—"something," says

Schickele, "that sounds as if it might be a dulcimer tune." A repeat of this melody leads to a reprise of both the sustained harmonics of the first movement and the "Appalachian" tune that preceded them.

HUGO WOLF, ITALIAN SERENADE. Although Wolf's reputation rests mainly upon his more than 300 art songs, he also wrote a handful of works for instruments, including three pieces for string quartet: the early String Quartet in D minor, an Intermezzo in Eb, and the brief, exhilarating Italian Serenade in G Major that we are about to hear.

Lurking within "serenade" is *sera*, Italian for "evening," which reveals something of the form that it names. *Forms*, actually. Invented in Italy in the early 18th century, the serenade was originally a tender but exuberant love song, sung at night to the accompaniment of a mandolin or guitar and optimistically aimed at a balcony or a lighted window. By Mozart's time, however, "serenade" had also come to designate a multi-movement piece for small orchestra, distinguishable from other forms of entertainment music such as the divertimento or cassation mainly by the fact that it was meant to be performed after dark. In the 19th century, the vocal form of the serenade survived in the German art song, the instrumental form in the serenades of such Romantic composers as Brahms and Dvořák.

Surviving sketches indicate that Wolf set out to write a full-length instrumental serenade, of which the Italian Serenade would have been only the first of three or more movements. Although it is purely instrumental, its infectious, eminently "vocal" main theme, its headlong momentum, its skipping 6/8 beat, and, not least, its occasional, exuberant *crescendi* somehow suggest the rapid, patter-like vocalization of an Italian singer—one critic claims to hear *two* singers—and its frequent eruptions of clipped notes suggest the plucking of strings. In this brief but fully realized piece, therefore, both traditions of the serenade delightfully merge.

INTERMISSION

JOHANNES BRAHMS, STRING QUARTET IN C MINOR. Notoriously self-critical, Brahms was tireless in his pursuit of the perfect harmony, the ideal rhythmic pattern, the exact turn of melodic phrase. This drive for perfection led him to continue to tinker with his C minor piano quintet for sixteen years, his first symphony for more than two decades. He began writing the string quartet in C minor in 1853 but withheld it from publication until 1873. After it appeared, Brahms confessed in a letter to his friend Alwin Cranz that while gestating the quartet and its companion-work, the quartet in A minor, he had written and destroyed over twenty string quartets.

The care with which Brahms composed the work is revealed in its terseness, its sustained tensions, and its extraordinary economy of means. Compared to many of his chamber works, it is relatively brief—an indication, according to Karl Geiringer, that the composer "had . . . achieved an economy which refused to tolerate a single superfluous note." In striving for this economy, Brahms generally avoids using long-breathed melodies typical of the earlier romantics, instead developing his material by means of motifs, or thematic tags. "Motivic concentration," says Walter Frisch, "seldom yields up broader melodies, except perhaps in the noble, restrained lyricism of the second movement."

Brahms, for all of his originality a traditionalist, casts the first movement in the mold of sonata form. But because of the equality of voices, the motivic development, the density of the counterpoint, and, especially, the powerful rhythmic momentum created by endless sequences of clipped notes, most listeners will probably not be aware of the shifts between exposition, development, and recapitulation.What they *will* hear is a dark, fierce dialogue of equal voices, whose intensity is revealed by both the recurrence of what Max Harrison calls "the lusty main theme"—a spare, urgent, rising figure, more motivic than melodic, that emerges most clearly in the cello part—and the relentless fast-note rhythmic sequences that carry across voice-shifts.

As "Romanze" suggests, the slow second movement is much warmer, more lyrical, more obviously designed to stir emotions than the tense, brooding first. A few measures into the movement the memorable main theme appears: a gentle, languishing, typically Brahmsian melody —more melody than motif—that seductively echoes itself. The second theme is perhaps less striking, but is somehow made more touching by what Harrison aptly calls "poignant rhythmic hesitations"— brief, musical "gasps" that interrupt the melodic line. During the leisurely unfolding of the move-ment the two themes, or variants of them, sometimes interweave but are more frequently heard alone. The glowering mood of the first movement returns in the third. Curiously, Cobbett calls the movement a scherzo, a term that Brahms did not apply. Although it has plenty of tension and thrust, it lacks the energy and exuberance of most *scherzi*. Like the scherzo, however, it is divided into three parts, the first and third of which are similar, if not identical. The movement opens with a deliberate, marchlike beat, above which we soon hear the viola playing a querulous, falling, eight-note theme. (Someone has described the result as "churning.") Things lighten up considerably with the arrival of the middle section. Here the rhythm shifts from duple to triple, from marchlike to dancelike, and the viola's complaint yields to a graceful, rising motif in the upper strings, which is reinforced by short skeins of plucked notes.

According to Cobbett, the opening figure of the finale combines the main themes of both the first movement and the Romanze—yet another example of Brahms' fastidious craftsmanship. A brusque, five-note figure, it or some variant of it will recur often throughout the brief course of the movement. Following the initial statement of it is a restless, densely contrapuntal passage that after several measures briefly slows and quietens. The passage, or something closely resembling it, is repeated, its tension heightened by a four-note rhythmic figure played against the basic beat. In the closing measures of the movement the tempo accelerates and the volume rises. The movement ends with three loud chords.

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Next concert:

The Baltimore Consort
January 11, 2008
Jackson Memorial Hall, 7:30

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This concert was made possible by a grant from the Herbert N. Dillard '34 Fund.