

The Arnica Quartet

Fumino Ando & Shin-young Kwon, violins; Charles Noble, viola; Heather Blackburn, cello
The Old Church | Portland, Oregon
15 March 2013 @ 7pm

Homunculus for string quartet (2007)

Esa-Pekka Salonen (b. 1958)

Homunculus is a short (circa 15 minutes) work for string quartet, which I wrote during the autumn months of 2007 for the Johannes Quartet. I wanted to compose a piece that would be very compact in form and duration, but still contain many different characters and textures. In other words, a little piece that behaves like a big piece. In Homunculus the four main characters (in order of appearance) are “Scherzo”, irregularly pulsating, jagged music; “Slow movement”, continuous metamorphose of an easily identifiable slow phrase; “Main movement”, intricate mid-tempo web of four voices densely woven together, and “Chorale”, a static, somewhat melancholy progression of chords. These characters, which in a traditional string quartet form would each form their own movement, are here interrupted by each other, and interspersed throughout the single movement of Homunculus. They keep developing and changing throughout the piece however, so when a character reappears it is rarely, if ever, an exact repetition of a previous appearance. At the end the “Scherzo” music brings the piece to a violent climax on a C major chord in an impossibly high register followed by a long glissando down. All the other characters appear one more time. Homunculus ends with a prolonged chorale which in my ears sounds somewhat sad and deeply nostalgic. The title of the piece refers to the arcane spermists’ theory, who held the belief that the sperm was in fact a “little man” (homunculus) that was placed inside a woman for growth into a child. This seemed to them to neatly explain many of the mysteries of conception. I decided to call my piece Homunculus despite the obvious weaknesses of the 17th century theory, as my goal was to write a small scale piece that would nevertheless contain all the elements of a “fully grown” string quartet.

24 July 2009 - Esa-Pekka Salonen

Fratres for string quartet (1977; version for string quartet 1985)

Arvo Pärt (b. 1935)

The Estonian composer Arvo Pärt is a composer whose works written since the late 1970’s are beloved of audiences around the world in general, and of documentary filmmakers in particular. Early in his compositional career, Pärt experimented with serialism, neo-classicism, and extreme dissonance - all approaches that earned him little goodwill with the Soviet authoritarian regime. In 1968 he wrote *Credo*, a work in which he tried to, as Tom Service writes “symbolise his frustration with what had become, for him, the dry, desiccated, “children’s games” of the avant garde, a world of purity represented by tonality and a quotation from Bach, and a setting of a religious text.” The piece became a calling card in the protest movement in Estonia. Then, Pärt left the musical scene for eight years of self-imposed exile. During this time he explored the music of Gregorian chant, his own Russian Orthodox faith, and his growing need for harmonic simplicity. *Fratres* was one of the first pieces to emerge from this period of monastic hibernation. The secret to its compelling power and seemingly inevitable structure derives from Pärt’s creative discovery during his isolation:

tintinnabulation. Pärt says “*Tintinnabulation is an area I sometimes wander into when I am searching for answers - in my life, my music, my work. In my dark hours, I have the certain feeling that everything outside this one thing has no meaning. The complex and many-faceted only confuses me, and I must search for unity. What is it, this one thing, and how do I find my way to it? Traces of this perfect thing appear in many guises - and everything that is unimportant falls away. Tintinnabulation is like this. . . . The three notes of a triad are like bells. And that is why I call it tintinnabulation.*” It really is a rejection at the

deepest possible level of overt complexity, of the *avant garde*, and an embracing of a rigorous compositional method that turns what seems very simple on the face of it into a complex and ever-shifting web of sounds and harmonies, all presaged by the pealing of bells.

BRIEF INTERMISSION

Tenebrae for string quartet (2002)

Osvaldo Golijov (b. 1960)

"I wrote *Tenebrae* as a consequence of witnessing two contrasting realities in a short period of time in September 2000. I was in Israel at the start of the new wave of violence that is still continuing today, and a week later I took my son to the new planetarium in New York, where we could see the Earth as a beautiful blue dot in space. I wanted to write a piece that could be listened to from different perspectives. That is, if one chooses to listen to it "from afar", the music would probably offer a "beautiful" surface but, from a metaphorically closer distance, one could hear that, beneath that surface, the music is full of pain. I lifted some of the haunting melismas from Couperin's *Troisième Leçon de Tenebrae*, using them as sources for loops, and wrote new interludes between them, always within a pulsating, vibrating, aerial texture. The compositional challenge was to write music that would sound as an orbiting spaceship that never touches ground. After finishing the composition, I realized that *Tenebrae* could be heard as the slow, quiet reading of an illuminated medieval manuscript in which the appearances of the voice singing the letters of the Hebrew Alphabet (from Yod to Nun, as in Couperin) signal the beginning of new chapters, leading to the ending section, built around a single, repeated word: Jerusalem." - Notes by the composer.

String Quartet No. 1 in A minor, Op. 7, Sz 40 (1909)

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

- I. Lento
- II. Allegretto
- III. Allegro vivace

Béla Bartók's first string quartet gains its both the elements of its form, language, and emotional potency from three completely different factors: his ill-fated and unrequited love of a woman, the looming shadow of the quartets of Ludwig van Beethoven, and his intense interest in folk music. At the age of 26, Bartók became utterly smitten with a former classmate, the 17 year old violinist Stefi Geyer. He dedicated his First Violin Concerto to her, and asked her to marry him. She rebuffed his advances, which left him devastated and nearly suicidal. He wrote this quartet partly, as Kodály said "a return to life," and as a way of coping with her rejection. The opening musical figure of the fugue-like slow movement that opens the work is a reworking of Stefi's theme (originally depicting her "cheerful, witty, and amusing" character) from the second movement of the First Violin Concerto. Bartók referred to this movement as his "funeral dirge" in a letter to Geyer. The motif would later become a prominent part of his opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*. This first movement also reflects Bartók's interest in the string quartets of Beethoven, most specifically his Op. 131 in C-sharp major. That quartet also begins with a slow and tortured fugue, hovering between meditative and anguished. Over the course of Bartók's quartet, the Stefi motif is gradually left behind (after being musically mocked and subjected to all manner of indignities), while the folk music elements become stronger and stronger. The quartet itself actually comprises a journey from the very slow to the very fast, retreating from the depths of despair and culminating in a joyous and frenzied dance of life.