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A free concert by the Afiara String Quartet

By Stephen Smoliar

Yesterday afternoon the Afiara String Quartet offered a free recital in the McKenna Theatre of the Creative Arts Building on the San Francisco State University campus. This was the latest concert in the Morrison Artists Series, created as part of the May Treat Morrison Chamber Music Center, which is committed to cultivating an audience for chamber music. The program covered composers from three centuries, eighteenth (Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart), nineteenth (Felix Mendelssohn), and twentieth (Alban Berg); but the Berg offering, his 1926 "Lyric Suite," constituted the core contribution.

Berg's quartet is fascinating for the double life it led for so many of us studying music in the second half of the twentieth century. In his pre-concert talk, Ronald Caltabiano singled it out as the string quartet of the twentieth century; and, while I have never been a fan of rank ordering, I find it hard to believe that any study of either music history or music theory would be so audacious as to ignore the composition. On the surface it is a highly accessible work, a product of both all that Berg learned from his teacher, Arnold Schoenberg, and those subsequent practices through which he found his own voice. It combines structurally sophistication with intense emotional expression. It even teases the ear with little referential cues, the most obvious being a passing glance at that first chord in Richard Wagner's Tristan und Isolde, recognized by so many as the first notes of twentieth-century music.

However in 1977, after the death of Berg's widow Helene, it was revealed by George Perle that the referential nature of the "Lyric Suite" went far beyond a few teasing cues. Perle made the case that the entire composition has a "secret program," which was a love letter to Hanna Fuchs-Robettin, wife of the Prague industrialist Herbert Fuchs-Robettin. Berg met Fuchs-Robettin in May of 1925 and was passionately involved with her (apparently

without his wife ever suspecting anything) until his death in 1935. Through a variety of encryption techniques, Berg, Hanna, and her two children by her legitimate husband all appear in the music; and the final movement is a setting of a love poem by Charles Baudelaire from which the words and any vocal line were dropped.

The intensity of Berg's passion for Hanna also emerges through that aforementioned structural sophistication. The work is in three movements. The odd-numbered movements keep getting faster: Allegretto gioviale, Allegro misterioso (with a Trio estatico), and Presto delirando. The slow ones get progressively slower: Andante amoroso, Adagio appassionato, Largo desolato. The result is one of bipolar crisis swinging radically between extremes of ecstasy and desperation. Is it any wonder that Berg's most explicit reference should be to the illicit relationship between Tristan and Isolde, immortalized by Wagner's efforts to capture such extremes through some of his most profound music?

When properly executed, the "Lyric Suite" can thus be a shattering experience, even if one does not know all the details of its emotional undercurrents. The Afiara String Quartet has homed in on that execution most effectively. If every note that Berg wrote was a matter of detailed precision, the Afiara clearly recognized that a listening experience depends on a "bigger picture" perspective. There is no doubt that every note matters to them, but their performance delivers through their capacity to place each note in its proper perspective. Whatever one may feel about rank ordering, this performance was a major event in the current San Francisco season; and the Morrison Center provided a significant act of community service in making it available without charge.

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When compared with the textures of the "Lyric Suite," the dissonances that Mozart employed in the opening Adagio of his K. 465 string quartet in C major are pretty mild. However, if we are to assume that this music was originally conceived for a gathering of like-minded friends, then Mozart was simply confronting them with a challenge that went beyond the limits of their usual performance practices. One can imagine a fair amount of indignant sputtering among those who first tried to play that introduction, to which Mozart probably replied with encouraging remarks to convince the others that getting it all right would not take that much additional effort. They were then rewarded for their efforts with some of his most amicable writing for the following Allegro and three remaining movements. Today that Adagio challenges neither performers nor listeners.

However, the Afiara did well to begin their program with it as a subtle approach to warming up the ears for the far more "emancipated" dissonances that would then be encountered in the "Lyric Suite."

Similarly, the selection of Felix Mendelssohn's Opus 13 string quartet in A minor for performance after the intermission provided a bit of emotional relaxation from Berg's intensity. At the same time, it offered its own modest lesson in encryption through a three-note motto that links all four movements of the quartet. The motto refers to the text "Ist Es Wahr?" (Is it true?) from a poem by Johann Gustav Droysen that Mendelssohn had previously set to music. However, this is not the product of an adult wrestling with the throes of illicit carnal knowledge. Rather, it is an overt expression of a nineteen-year-old having recently discovered love and choosing to be clever in expressing the emotions now encountering him. Of the three composers on the program, Mendelssohn ran the highest risk of sounding too routine (either because of or in spite of his cleverness); **but the Afiara gave this quartet a lively reading that was perfectly consistent with the freshness of Mendelssohn's own emotions.**

During the academic year of 2007–2008, the Afiara String Quartet was Quartet-in-Residence at San Francisco State under a Morrison Fellowship. In that capacity they were mentored by the "faculty resident" Alexander String Quartet. They now hold a similar sponsored position at The Juilliard School. They have clearly learned much from both settings, and yesterday provided an excellent opportunity for them to repay the Morrison Chamber Music Center for their many acts of sponsorship. Those who missed this opportunity to hear this promising young ensemble will get another chance on Tuesday, when they are scheduled to play Ludwig van Beethoven (Opus 59, Number 1) in a Noontime Concerts recital at Old Saint Mary's Cathedral.