

Left Bank Concert Society
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Smithsonian American Art Museum

Notes by Bonnie Jo Dopp

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)
Sonata for Oboe and Piano (1962)

In Wikipedia's list of Neoclassical composers, Poulenc files directly ahead of Prokofiev, so bookending our concert with pieces by these two important figures of twentieth-century music seems appropriate, especially since Poulenc, who deeply appreciated Prokofiev's artistry as a pianist, dedicated his *Sonata for Oboe and Piano* to the memory of Prokofiev.

We open with a work its composer evidently never heard, though his inner ear had been contemplating an oboe sonata for several years before Francis Poulenc began writing it. Just days after sending the manuscript to his publisher, Poulenc, who had been in frail health, died of a heart attack. The composer had become deeply religious over his lifetime, and he described the last movement of this final composition as "*une sorte de chant liturgique*." We may hear its serenity as a statement of acceptance of life's inevitable end, or of faith in an everlasting spiritual existence for musical beauty.

The slow first movement *Elégie* is in three-part form, with a stormy central passage encircled by sunnier arms. The contrasting *Très animé* Scherzo displays its more relaxed section in its interior. The minor-key third movement 'liturgical song,' marked *Très calme*, is short, but recalls both figurations and themes from the first movement.

We may expect to find a swansong filled with signature, reflective gestures. In fact, a detailed study of Poulenc's music by Keith Daniels draws on the *Sonata for Oboe and Piano* to illustrate many points about the composer's musical style. In Poulenc's case, one of those elements was charm, that enviable ability to do elegant things with common stuff, to put everyone at ease while making a memorable impression. As Peter Dickinson put it in his assessment of the oboe sonata, this agreeable piece cannot be labeled superficial because as incongruous as it may seem, "with extraordinary expertise the music draws upon trivial material with profound effect." Composer Ned Rorem, who found the same contrasts in the man (simultaneously "dapper and ungainly") as in his music, wrote a memorial tribute to Poulenc just days after his death, saying, "Both man and music were delicious—an adjective now suspect to the brainwashed public alerted to disrespect what it might understand or like. The very nature of Poulenc's art is to be liked and understood, which is therefore its momentary [in 1963] defeat." Nearly fifty years later, as we presumably less brainwashed folks openly enjoy 'delicious' music we can comprehend, Poulenc's *Sonata for Oboe and Piano* remains a favorite with players and audiences, alike.

For further exploration:

Francis Poulenc: His Artistic Development and Musical Style by Keith W. Daniel (UMI research Press, 1980/82). Daniel feels the *Sonata for Oboe and Piano* is an excellent summation of Poulenc's art. "In it can be found elements of his mature style (graceful lyricism, religiosity, a full harmonic vocabulary emphasizing seventh and ninth chords), as well as reminiscences, in the second movement, of his lighthearted, impertinent first period works and his sentimental, romantic works of the 1940s."

Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998)
Piano Quintet (1976)

Russian composer Alfred Schnittke was subjected to Soviet severity during much of his creative life. Musicologist and Russian music specialist Richard Taruskin in a *New York Times* article in July 1992 paired Schnittke with Dmitri Shostakovich: Soviet composers who had to knuckle under but who retained clear voices of their own. Taruskin hears "a Tolstoyan conscience" in the music of both Shostakovich and Schnittke, judging that "they share an ascetic predilection for (or a fatal limitation to) homey unprepossessing ideas, just this side of hackneyed (or even that side), stretched taut (or thin). This can result in banal obviousness, but "The wonder of it all ... is how often Mr. Schnittke, like Shostakovich before him, manages to skirt the pitfall and bring off the catharsis – a catharsis a mere hairbreadth from blatancy and all the more powerful for having braved the risk." (This sounds a bit like some critical response to Poulenc.)

In an interview from 1980, Schnittke explained that his Piano Quintet evolved over several years. The piece is dedicated to the memory of his mother, who had died of a stroke in 1972. He soon completed the first movement of the quintet "almost without effort," but not until 1976 did he 'find' the second movement waltz, using the notes B-A-C-H (in German notation, the tone B-flat and B are spelled 'B' and 'H'). He explained that the third and fourth movements were "based on real experiences of grief which I would prefer not to comment on because they are of a very personal nature and words could only cheapen them." He ended the piece with a passacaglia: a theme repeated fourteen times, "while all other tonal events are mere shadows of a tragic sensation that has already faded." Schnittke created an orchestral version of this quintet and titled it *In memoriam*.

The five movements of the Piano Quintet are performed without pause. In much of the work, microtones create cramped 'close harmony,' but gradually half steps occur, then wider intervals until at last, the openness of the passacaglia tune provides a sense of ease: that catharsis Taruskin so admires.

In the first movement *Moderato*, a quiet air of mystery envelops a five-note motif that is never quite 'developed,' but repeated in variation. Halfway through, a relentless, steady pounding of a single high note on the piano begins and insists on remaining until near the end of movement where it fades so softly that the pianist is instructed to strike keys soundlessly. A coda-like reprise of the opening motif leads immediately to *In tempo di Valse*, a sadly sweet dance with an oompah-pah beat that, as in Ravel's orchestral *La*

valse, becomes deranged, but with more despairing downwardness. Here the notes B-A-C-H comprise the main motif of the movement, which also calls for a single repeated note, this time as a trill high on the first violin. Without pause the *Andante* third movement begins in the strings in continued close harmony that is maintained by tone clusters in the piano when it finally enters. Buzzy strings play quartertones in intense tremolo. The “private grief” Schnittke mentioned may be partly revealed here: Shostakovich, who had inserted the notes D-S(E flat)-C-H(B) in many of his scores as a signature, had died in 1975. Schnittke felt the weight of his giant legacy. Here all the strings open the movement with D-S, fall to C via quarter tones and half steps, and then the cello reaches H. Transformation of this spacing of four notes continues until, in the intense final motivic phrase of the movement, the top two notes on the first violin are D-S, followed by C-H in the second violin. Another piano ostinato, reminiscent of the first movement but this time in the low octaves, ends pianississimo with ten beats of just the sustain pedal being pressed and released, like footsteps falling away, and leading directly to *Lento*. Quiet, close tone clusters in the strings slowly and explosively expand space between the notes. The piano emerges with a repeating five-note motif emphasizing C Sharp that becomes another one-note obsession in the end, this time much louder. Without pause the *Moderato pastorale* opens *pppp* with a fourteen-measure soprano piano melody that will be repeated fourteen times, with a shadowy, muted string accompaniment. At the very end, the pianist is again instructed to press notes silently for a tiptoeing, ghostly exit.

For further exploration:

Alfred Schnittke by Alexander Ivashkin (Phaidon Press, 1996). Ivashkin says, “The Quintet ... feels static, like a crystal which turns to show its different sides, similar in its metaphysical character to certain works by Olivier Messiaen or Arvo Pärt. We can feel no development in it; it is as static as eternity....The music generally sounds quite traditional, but it is impossible to say which tradition comes to mind.”

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) **String Quartet No. 2 on Kabardinian Themes (1941)**

Ten years after the premiere of his first string quartet (commissioned by the Library of Congress), Prokofiev decided to write another, this one more or less ‘commissioned’ by a patriotic arts manager in the northern Caucasus. Prokofiev, along with several other Soviet ‘artistic laborers,’ was evacuated in August 1941 to escape German bombardment of Moscow. He was taken to Nalchik, capital of the Kabarda-Balkar Autonomous Republic (now the Kabardino-Balkar Republic, or Kabardino-Balkaria, a violently troubled part of today’s Russian Federation) where the head of the Nalchik Arts Committee suggested that local Balkar and Kabardinian music be incorporated into Prokofiev’s compositions. Though mention of the Balkars (ethnically Turkic) was later stricken from Soviet publications because of their alleged collaboration with Germany during WWII, the name “Kabardinian” (for the North Caucasian people in the area) was attached to the string quartet Prokofiev produced at this time. In letters soon after its

composition, he continued to refer to the piece as the “Quartet on Kabardino-Balkarian Themes.”

As a ‘People’s Artist,’ Prokofiev did a good job of incorporating rhythmic and melodic folk material here, and in places he makes the four soberly formal instruments sound like accordions, country harps, and fiddles. Various sources say the first movement *Allegro sostenuto* was inspired by a dance for old men called *Udzh Starikov*, a four-part song, *Sosruko*, and another dance taken from an 1885 collection, “On the Music of the Mountain Tatars.” The second movement *Adagio* begins and ends with music based on a Caucasian Kabardinian shepherd’s love song, *Synilyaklik Zhir* and does a Turkic Balkarian folkdance titled *Islamei* or *Izlameym* at its center. The sonata-rondo third movement *Allegro* incorporates material from a mountain dance known as *Getegezhev Ogurbi*. A few years after the premiere of his second (and last) string quartet, Prokofiev wrote, “The combination of fresh, striking and undeveloped musical material with the austere classical form of the string quartet seemed to promise interesting results. The work was given a cordial reception by the inhabitants of Kabardino-Balkaria, who recognized their familiar tunes in it.”

For further exploration:

Sergey Prokofiev by Daniel Jaffé (Phaidon Press, 1998)

Succinct and pertinently illustrated this book lives up to the high standards of the Phaidon series on 20th-century composers.

The Prokofiev Page. All Prokofiev. All the time.

Web page at <http://www.prokofiev.org/index.cfm>

String Quartet No.2 (On Kabardinian Themes), by Sergei Prokofiev. Web article at <http://www.circassianworld.com/new/articles/art-and-literature/music/1319-prokofiev-stringquartet.html>

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