

## *Program Notes*

Piano quartet is a long-established chamber music combination; solo wind instrument with strings equally so. Thus the works by Bridge and Mozart. You frequently see this array of instruments on concert stages. The “broken consort” pieces by Martinů and Dubois, with their more disparate group of players, are seldom performed. The Adaskin Trio likes to mix it up.

Frank Bridge is best known to modern audiences, when he’s known at all, as Benjamin Britten’s mentor, a far greater influence on his young protégé than were Britten’s professors at the Royal College of Music. Britten often paid homage, notably in his brilliant string orchestra piece “Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge” (1937). The pupil may have overshadowed the teacher (as he did every other mid-twentieth century British composer), but Bridge was no slouch. His musical language ranged widely. His earlier works are redolent of the English pastoral tradition, both folkish and impressionistic, like Vaughan Williams. Gradually his style became more knotty and less conventionally tonal. This is partly attributable to the century’s political and military horrors; like Britten, Bridge was a pacifist. Audiences were not receptive to these later works, which embittered him. But the Phantasy Quartet from 1910 is a friendly piece. It was written for the annual Cobbett Competition for chamber compositions, which asked composers to take the older English one-movement “Fantasia” (as practiced by Henry Purcell, among others) for a model, instead of the multi-movement Germanic genre. Here’s what Britten wrote about his mentor’s work: “Sonorous yet lucid, with clear, clean lines, grateful to listen to and to play. It is the music of a practical musician, brought up in German orthodoxy, but who loved French romanticism and conception of sound—Brahms happily tempered with Fauré.”

When Mozart was summoned to Munich to supervise the premiere of his opera *Idomeneo* he was impressed by the court orchestra, one of whose members was the oboist Friedrich Ramm. He wrote his Oboe Quartet for Ramm, as well as his Oboe Concerto. The Quartet is a virtuoso piece. It incorporates several high F’s, rare for that time, and even on modern instruments near the top of the compass. Passagework in the outer movements calls for wide leaps and rapid fingering. In the third movement there’s an astonishing section where the oboe plays sixteenth notes in groups of four against the strings playing eighth notes in groups of three, a rhythmic sleight-of-hand you expect to find in twentieth century music, certainly not in eighteenth. The middle movement is Mozart at his most plaintive and rhapsodic. Throughout the piece the oboe is treated as the star to whom the strings defer.

Martinů was born in Bohemia, lived in Paris in the 1920’s, fled Europe for the U.S. during the Nazi era (he was closely associated with Tanglewood), and after the war lived the rest of his years in Switzerland. He had a rough life, plagued by exile, homesickness, and physical injury. You rarely hear it in the music. Like other prolific composers such as Telemann and Milhaud, he has taken a lot of critical hits, his music dismissed by haughty critics as mere note-spinning. Wrong. His sound is distinctive -- it takes only a few measures before you know you’re listening to Martinů -- but incorporates the folk influences of his native land, the cheeky neoclassicism of his Parisian years, and American jazz. The neoclassic flavor is especially strong in this Quartet, which links it to the Mozart we hear this evening.

Back to Paris for Theodore Dubois, though several generations earlier. He studied with Ambroise Thomas at the Conservatoire (where he won the Prix de Rome, the golden ticket for French composers) and later taught there; among his students was Paul Dukas of “Sorcerer’s Apprentice” fame. His music is resolutely Romantic; despite his long life he never succumbed to such fin-de-siècle decadence as Impressionism.

The Quintet (1905) is a late work. Dubois chose this unusual combination because he wanted the sound of the oboe, but realized that getting such a group together might be impractical, so he also provided versions of the oboe part for either clarinet or second violin. Curiously, the oboe is often treated in the texture as if it actually were a second violin, dwelling in its low register. The way in which the last movement incorporates themes from the previous movements shows the influence of “cyclic form” as practiced by Hector Berlioz and César Franck.

Of these three works, only the Mozart can be called standard repertoire. As usual with the Adaskin Trio, what we get is the unusual.