



SUMMER FESTIVAL IN REDMOND

FRIDAY, AUGUST 12, 2011

Ludwig van Beethoven

Sonata for Violin and Piano in A Major, Op. 30, No.1

Allegro

Adagio, molto espressivo

Allegretto con variazioni

Ida Levin, violin Orion Weiss, piano

Ernest von Dohnányi

Serenade for String Trio in C Major, Op. 10

Marcia: Allegro

Romanza: Adagio non troppo

Scherzo: Vivace

Tema con variazioni: Andante con moto

Rondo: Finale

James Ehnes, violin Richard O'Neill, viola Robert deMaine, cello

Johannes Brahms

Quartet for Piano and Strings in G minor, Op. 25

Allegro

Intermezzo

Andante con moto

Rondo alla Zingarese

Scott Yoo, violin Che-Yen Chen, viola Ronald Thomas, cello
Adam Neiman, piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Sonata for Violin and Piano in A Major, Op. 30, No. 1 (1802)

After more than a decade of growing fame as a pianist and composer, the year 1802 threatened Beethoven's prospect for a successful career. A number of attempts to secure a court position failed to materialize. Worse yet, his deepening deafness and attendant despair began to isolate him from the world around him. In October came his famous

lament, the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, a letter he wrote but never sent to his brothers wherein he expressed his terrible anguish and doubt, and admitted to thoughts of suicide. The writing of this epistle served as a genuine catharsis for the composer, freeing him to get on with the task of his life—to redirect his considerable energy and eruptive feelings into musical form. By year's end he had completed his Second Symphony, the massive so-called “Eroica” Variations, the three Op. 31 Piano Sonatas, and the three Sonatas for Piano and Violin, Op. 30. Beethoven dedicated the Op. 30 set to Tsar Alexander I, though he had to wait until 1815 to get paid for his efforts when the Russian ruler attended the Congress of Vienna.

The Sonata in A Major begins with an *Allegro* that starts quietly and rather unhurriedly despite the tempo indication. Rapid scale fragments, however, hint at greater speed to come. Very shortly Beethoven presents the main theme announced by the piano. Briefly the theme moves into the minor and sounds as if it's going to turn fugal, but it almost immediately abandons that seeming journey. Throughout the movement up and down scales frequently recur. As if to establish parity among the players the music is highly “conversational,” a true duet rather than piano with violin obbligato (as in earlier violin/piano sonatas). Note that the original title was “sonata for piano and violin,” very typical at the time. As the movement proceeds the *Allegro* marking seems increasingly appropriate, though the music frequently alternates between excited episodes and moments of quiet reflection. The main theme is built from a series of rising intervals. A brief coda ends it peacefully.

In triple meter the *Adagio, molto espressivo* starts with a floating violin line over gently coaxing rhythmic thrusts on the piano. As if to stress the importance of the violin the piano supports the bowed instrument's expressive long-breathed melodies with understated prodding alternating with simple arpeggios. It is the piano, however, that has the final, albeit softly spoken, word at the movement's end.

In its initial form, Beethoven provided an energetic and virtuosic finale before replacing it with an *Allegretto con variazioni* based on a lyrical tune with six variations. The theme itself is a sweet rising melody that could easily be taken for Schubert. Violin and piano exchange leadership roles in episodes embracing lyricism and skittish humor. The fifth variation, reverting to the minor, allows Beethoven to flex his contrapuntal strengths before returning to an uplifting conclusion back in the major. And what did he do with the rejected original finale? He saved it until finding an appropriate place for it as the finale to the far better known “Kreutzer” Sonata.

Ernst von Dohnányi (1877–1960)

Serenade for String Trio in C Major, Op. 10 (1902)

Ernst Dohnányi was the central figure in a musical family that included his father, a respected amateur cellist, and his son Christoph, who preceded Franz Welser-Möst as music director of the Cleveland Orchestra. Ernst, a friend of Bartók from childhood on, developed a mature piano technique at an early age. Indeed, his triumphant London debut in 1898 performing Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto launched a career as a virtuoso, though one with allegiance to core musical values rather than showmanship. His first published work, the C-minor Piano Quintet, Op. 1, attracted the attention of Brahms, who arranged to have it performed in Vienna shortly after its premiere in Budapest in 1895.

By 1899 Dohnányi's piano career was well underway; he was also beginning to command attention as a talented composer. Three years later, he composed his String Trio, Op. 10. That combination—violin, viola and cello—had enjoyed some currency in the closing years of the 18th century. Mozart's E-flat Divertimento, K. 563 (1788) is the earliest example of a truly great work for string trio, its title not at all conveying the depth of its expression and the consummate skill of its structure. Beethoven's Opp. 3, 8 and 9 trios emerged in the 1790s. Both of those Viennese masters (and others composers as well) soon learned that writing for string trio was actually more of a challenge than that encountered in the ubiquitous string quartet. The four instruments of the latter ensemble more readily lent itself to basic four-part harmony, the *lingua franca* of Western classical music.

Dohnányi's Op. 10 Trio bears a structural resemblance to Beethoven's Op. 3 string trio in its five-movement format. Given the later composer's lifelong admiration for his famed predecessor, it was a reasonable enough decision to emulate the master, especially for a composer still searching for "guidance" from the past.

The harmonies of the energetic opening *March: Allegro* recall Dvořák, though sharpened with a bit of a harmonic edge. A drone-like figure adds to the Central European folk-derived sound. The supple melodic material keeps the martial aspects in check.

Against gentle *pizzicatos*, the slowly unfolding theme of the *Romance* begins benignly on the viola before upping the passion through strenuous arpeggios in the lower sonic

regions. Another quietly flowing section supported by an unobtrusive *pizzicato* cello line appears.

Fleet and virtuosic, a quirky canonic *Scherzo* follows. Here the “model” may well have been Mendelssohn, evident in the movement’s delightfully impish quality. Not unexpectedly, its mildly dissonant chromaticism could be characterized as “Mendelssohn meets Prokofiev.” The amiable Trio is lightly punctuated by more *pizzicatos* courtesy of the cello.

The penultimate movement is given over to a set of variations that would have been *de rigueur* in a Classical period serenade. The modal and essentially homophonic theme moves through a series of expressive, even elegiac, harmonies supported by the cello. As the variations flow by, polyphonic treatment increases. The independence of the three instruments is quite striking at times, showing how well the still young composer had solved the challenge of writing for three strings. Dohnányi uses effective *tremolandos* elsewhere, enhancing the timbral contribution of the cello’s frequent *pizzicatos*.

The *Rondo-finale* launches itself vigorously. Freshly minted material keeps appearing, along with changes in tempo, inflection and frequent changes in color and texture. A reprise of the opening movement’s March is the glue that holds this motoric movement together.

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

Quartet for Piano and Strings in G minor, Op. 25 (1856–1862)

“This is Beethoven’s heir,” said Joseph Helmesberger of Johannes Brahms in 1862. The occasion was the premiere of the composer’s Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor, and the speaker was the first violinist of the performing ensemble, the Helmesberger String Quartet. One can only imagine that Brahms may have felt somewhat uncomfortable about the compliment given his apprehensive awareness of the gigantic shadow of Beethoven hovering and threatening his sense of self-worth as a composer!

In any case, the G-minor Piano Quartet was greeted with great enthusiasm by its first audiences, and for nearly a century-and-a-half, it has remained one of Brahms’ best known chamber works. Robert Schumann had referred to some early sonatas by Brahms as “veiled symphonies,” and there is an orchestral quality throughout much of his chamber music as well as the solo piano works to which his mentor was referring.

It is not surprising, then, that Arnold Schoenberg, a lifelong devotee who wrote an article in the 1930s titled “Brahms the Progressive,” was sufficiently enamored of the piece to transcribe it for orchestra.

The expansive opening movement of the Piano Quartet, marked *Allegro*, overflows with inventiveness. The bipartite main theme consists of a serene and beautifully sculpted melody that grows from a repeated descending melodic fragment after a brief silence. The violin and viola state an ascending second theme in unison. An agitated theme announces the brief development where Brahms mingles the two parts of the main theme before unifying them in an expanded version thereof, newly joined by a recurrent four-note rhythmic figure.

In 9/8 time, the ensuing *Intermezzo* (which Brahms initially called a *scherzo*) employs a muted violin that adds a sense of internalized mystery to the music. An ostinato figure gives it a slightly ominous, obsessive (which is what “ostinato” means, of course) touch. Throughout the main sections of the *Intermezzo* Brahms shifts between wistful minor-key episodes and cheerier major-key passages. An animated Trio provides an energetic foil to the sub-rosa mystery of the opening and closing parts.

The third movement, *Andante con moto*, is dominated by a theme both expansive and bold. One hears sharp contrast from a march-like interlude termed by one commentator as a “parade of toy soldiers.”

Joseph Joachim, the noted Hungarian-born (despite the German name) violinist/composer and virtually lifelong friend of Brahms, expressed a special fondness for the Hungarian-inflected finale. Marked *Rondo alla Zingarese*, an irresistible élan and folk-like immediacy pervades the proceedings. By terms rhapsodic and volatile, the music surges forward with unstoppable energy, as Brahms pulls out all stops in this swirling, whirling Dervish-like dance.

Program Notes by Steven Lowe