



WINTER FESTIVAL

SUNDAY, JANUARY 30, 2011

Felix Mendelssohn

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in C minor, Op. 66

Allegro energico e con fuoco

Andante espressivo

Scherzo: Molto allegro quasi presto

Finale: Allegro appassionato

Emily Daggett Smith, violin Andrés Díaz, cello William Wolfram, piano

Gabriel Fauré

Quartet for Piano and Strings in C minor, Op. 15

Allegro molto moderato

Scherzo: Allegro vivo

Adagio

Allegro molto

Scott Yoo, violin Richard O'Neill, viola

Ronald Thomas, cello Jeewon Park, piano

Antonín Dvořák

Quartet for Piano and Strings in E-flat Major, Op. 87

Allegro con fuoco

Lento

Allegro moderato grazioso

Allegro ma non troppo

Ida Levin, violin Erin Keefe, viola Edward Arron, cello Adam Neiman, piano

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in C minor, Op. 66 (1845)

Mendelssohn's extensive canon of chamber works boasts a pair of splendid Piano Trios. The deservedly popular D-minor Trio of 1839 is heard more often than its younger sibling, the C-minor Piano Trio completed in 1845, but the latter piece lacks nothing in terms of drama, thematic richness and Mendelssohn's typical fluency in instrumental writing.

The opening *Allegro energico e con fuoco* begins with a rippling, restless piano theme picked up in turn by the cello and violin. Growing out of this swirling maelstrom is a related theme with a searching quality supported and intensified by the piano's ceaseless and obsessively running figuration. An expansive, sweeping new thematic idea in E-flat Major moderates the tempest, providing an unexpected atmosphere of comparative serenity and well-being. For the remainder of the movement Mendelssohn interweaves the opening minor-key thematic material with its complementary major-key tune. If ever a piece gave the lie to the tired charge that Mendelssohn's music lacks fire and passion it is this emotionally wide-ranging movement.

It is the piano again that initiates the following *Andante espressivo* with a series of dotted chords in quest of a lyrical tune, which is provided when the blended strings appear. Another series of piano-uttered chords prefaces a brief and touching excursion into the minor mode, returning to the major in time for the strings to resume their combined lyrical, song-like duet. Occasional forays into minor tonality darken spirits before the movement ends gently.

The *Scherzo: Molto allegro quasi presto* presents another example of Mendelssohn's penchant for creating "elfin" flights of fancy that harken back to his music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. No doubt the key setting—G minor—imparts more of an "impish" than benignly "elfin" mien. The switch to G Major for the Trio in no way diminishes the perpetual motion of the opening *scherzo* section, which is, naturally, repeated to ultimately arrest the headlong romp.

The *Finale: Allegro appassionato* begins with high energy, but Mendelssohn obviously has other things on his mind. This engaging rondo has contrasting episodes in E-flat and A-flat, plus an uplifting theme that has been traced back to a chorale, "Vor deinem Thron," found in the mid-16th-century Geneva Psalter and later used by J.S. Bach in Cantata 130, "Herr Gott, Dich fürchten alle wir." At one point the composer combines the chorale with the main rondo theme, creating a moment of grand exultation. The movement ends with a resumption of energy that largely defines the entire Piano Trio.

Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924)

Quartet for Piano and Strings in C minor, Op. 15 (1876–79)

Gabriel Fauré's voice is typically a gentle one. His justly loved Requiem eschews altogether the terrors of the *Dies irae*, and in general his music forswears violent passions in favor of refinement, elegance and grace. That said, it must also be stressed that his music is not merely polite and urbane. A current of deep emotion courses through his best works, though it is more often covert, subtle, and aristocratic in its considered expression.

In his youth he studied with Saint-Saëns (who, parenthetically, acknowledged using a melody by his student in his own second piano concerto). Saint-Saëns introduced Fauré to such notables as Schumann and Liszt, both of whose music influenced the young man's early Romantic style. Later he expressed admiration for Wagner but his music did not come under the sway of the Master of Bayreuth.

During the 1870s, Fauré was a frequent guest at the famous *soirées* held by the equally famous contralto Pauline Viardot. At these distinctly upper crust affairs he met many of the era's artistic luminaries, e.g., Flaubert, Turgenev, Georges Sand, and also managed to fall in love with the hostess' daughter Marianne. Fauré's ardor was not matched by the young woman's. Though they eventually became engaged, she came to her senses and terminated the relationship within a few months. Though shaken, Fauré redirected his emotions into his Piano Quartet No. 1 in C minor, Op. 15. Despite the somber/dramatic key signature—think Beethoven's *Pathétique*, Fifth Symphony, Third Piano Concerto, etc.—Fauré's Quartet does not live in darkness. For one thing, it was not his nature to burden his music with Germanic *Angst*; as a French artist he always strived to balance sincerity of feeling with a high regard for formal elegance and poise.

The opening *Allegro molto moderato* plays out in basic sonata allegro form, but eschews the dramatic, often combative style of Beethoven. Still, a robust and emphatic main theme is set in motion by the strings and further impelled by chords from the piano. The complementary second theme calms the waters through winning lyricism and grace. Throughout the movement the music anticipates the harmonies and shimmering textures of Debussy and especially of Fauré's student, Ravel. The development shows the composer's ability to skillfully work out the various permutations of the main subject. A brief and stormy climax leads to the recapitulation of the main themes before the movement closes with a gentle coda.

A relatively brief *Scherzo* marked *Allegro vivo* follows. Gently animated by string pizzicatos and lightly articulated piano figurations, the music conveys the quirky/dreamy ambience of a Frenchified Mendelssohn. In the central Trio Fauré mutes the strings while the piano continues to delight with its gossamer arpeggios. Here, too, we know that musical Impressionism is already illuminating the horizon with the light of dawn.

Undoubtedly the emotional heart of the Piano Quartet lies within the ensuing *Adagio*, perhaps the one movement where Fauré gives voice to his disappointment over the ending of his engagement with Mlle. Viardot. Slow, halting and grieving, the music proceeds from two themes fashioned from an ascending scale; the overall effect is that of a regal *pavane*. An intimate and pensive middle section personalizes the music even more than the chordal grandeur of the main thematic material.

As if to dispel the understated but real sentiment of the *Adagio*, Fauré concludes the Piano Quartet with an animated, occasionally stormy *Allegro molto*. Emphatically and with propulsive drama, the movement opens in the minor and then proceeds to gallop its way through surging and ebbing episodes of contrasting color and emotions. Fauré admitted that he was not happy with the original version of the finale and revised it “from top to toe” in his words in 1883.

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)

Quartet for Piano and Strings in E-flat Major, Op. 87 (1889)

Born in Bohemia during an era of rising cultural nationalism, it was all but inevitable that Antonín Dvořák would absorb the folk traditions of his birthright, reinforced by the powerful example set by his older colleague, Bedřich Smetana. Another strong though less enduring influence was Richard Wagner, under whom Dvořák first played as a violist in 1863. Several of his early symphonies, numbers 3 and 4 in particular, evoke the “Master of Bayreuth.” Later, Dvořák came under the spell of Brahms, whose early and lasting advocacy led to lifelong friendship and further compositional influence.

By the late 1880s, Dvořák was well established as a composer, enjoying a reputation that went far beyond the borders of his homeland; he was especially esteemed in England. Around 1885, the composer’s publisher Simrock asked Dvořák for a new chamber work. Since he was preoccupied with other projects Dvořák had to table the request, fulfilling the commission in 1889 with his Piano Quartet No. 2 in E-flat Major, Op. 87—14 years after his far less mature Piano Quartet No. 1. Though nearly four years had passed since Simrock’s request, the composer sketched out the new work in just three days, completing the final scoring but a few weeks later. He wrote to a friend that the “melodies just surged upon me.” Despite the lyric and rhythmic imprint of Dvořák’s Bohemian heritage, the second Piano Quartet also evokes Brahms’ brand of German Romanticism.

The opening *Allegro con fuoco* begins with a bold unison string statement that provides the basic material for the entire movement. After a vigorous response from the piano, Dvořák adds a bit of leavening humor before the strings introduce a lyrical reshaping of the stark unison theme. Much of the development section relates to the primary theme, but atypically the recap reverts to the second, song-like motive, before giving us another variant on the initial theme in the coda. Dvořák’s mature writing and organizational facility recalls Brahms and belies the absurd and by now thoroughly discredited idea that Dvořák lacked requisite intellect regarding form.

Marked *Lento*, the second movement is laid out in five distinct sections that vary in mood in the manner of the traditional Central European *dumka*, used winningly by Dvořák in his irresistible *Slavonic Dances* and elsewhere.

The spirit of Terpsichore is also recalled in the *scherzo*-like third movement, *Allegro moderato grazioso*. The piano figurations at times suggest the plucked sounds of a *cimbalom*, the dulcimer familiar in much Czech and Hungarian folk music. When the main theme appears for the third time, the piano’s triplet-based accompaniment greatly enhances the sense of momentum. The Trio suggests the influence of Middle Eastern music. While atypical of Dvořák, as a musician from Central Europe he was amply familiar with exotic musical colorings that traveled west from Asia.

In the finale, *Allegro ma non troppo*, Dvořák has another music trick to engage our attention. He begins, not in the expected E-flat Major, but in E-flat minor. Even so, the prevailing mood is exuberantly upbeat and vivacious. Its second subject is fashioned from a chain of theme fragments, two of which give pride of place to the viola—Dvořák's chosen instrument as a performer (not that he couldn't play the violin and piano parts with considerable dexterity). After a sequence of dazzling modulations, the movement closes emphatically in E-flat Major.

**Program Notes by
Steven Lowe**