



SUMMER FESTIVAL IN SEATTLE

FRIDAY, JULY 22, 2011

Franz Schubert

Introduction and Variations for Flute and Piano in E minor, "Trockne Blumen", D. 802
Lorna McGhee, flute Jeewon Park, piano

Heitor Villa-Lobos

Assobio a Jato (The Jet Whistle) for Flute and Cello

Allegro non troppo

Adagio

Vivo

Lorna McGhee, flute Johannes Moser, cello

Ludwig van Beethoven

Quartet for Strings No. 10 in E-flat Major, Op. 74, "Harp"

Poco adagio—Allegro

Adagio ma non troppo

Presto

Allegretto con variazioni

James Ehnes, violin Amy Schwartz Moretti, violin

Richard O'Neill, viola Robert deMaine, cello

Johannes Brahms

Quartet for Piano and Strings in C minor, Op. 60

Allegro non troppo

Scherzo: Allegro

Andante

Finale: Allegro comodo

Erin Keefe, violin David Harding, viola Johannes Moser, cello Alon Goldstein, piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Introduction and Variations for Flute and Piano in E minor, "Trockne Blumen", D. 802
(1823-24)

Franz Schubert was the shortest-lived of the great composers. Had Beethoven or Haydn died as young, their places in history might well have been seriously altered, for neither of these masters had developed his art as fully as Schubert had done by the end of his adolescence. In a decade-and-a-half of active writing, he penned more than 600 surviving

songs. The sum of works in all areas—symphonies, chamber works, operas, etc.—numbered around 1,000. Schubert’s music shows astonishing lyric and harmonic originality, thorough familiarity with established classical forms, and a poet’s gift to tap deeply into the human soul.

Yet despite his precocious and genuine talent, few composers have been shrouded in myth and misinformation as Schubert. In the years immediately following his death at age 31, ill-founded attributions of laziness and sub-par intelligence further sullied his posthumous reputation. Not even the championship of Robert Schumann and Felix Mendelssohn, who premiered important works by Schubert years after his early death, could eradicate charges that he was “merely” a miniaturist ill-equipped to deal with the larger symphonic and sonata forms evolving during the 1820s. More recently, the great Viennese composer has been more sympathetically and accurately portrayed as a pioneering voice whose expansion of symphonic form set the stage for the post-Beethovenian succession of Anton Bruckner and Gustav Mahler. The string of aborted symphonic fragments bears testimony to the crisis of conception that faced symphonic composers in the wake of Beethoven's epic “Choral” Symphony.

Even early detractors recognized his mastery of the nascent German *Lied*, which Schubert did not actually invent. Paralleling Haydn’s role in the evolution of the string quartet and symphony, Schubert truly elevated the German “art song” to a level of greatness never surpassed. More than 600 songs flowed from his fecund imagination beginning in mid-adolescence. Contrary to the old view—and despite his obvious natural gifts in this domain—Schubert worked assiduously at his craft, polishing and perfecting the raw materials that seemed to spring so readily from his quill.

In 1823 and still in his mid-20s, Schubert composed his masterly song cycle of lost love, *Die Schöne Mullerin* (“The Miller's Beautiful Daughter”). The cycle of 20 songs limns a journey from initial infatuation and optimism through an ever-darkening series of moods and events. The 18th in the set, “Trockne Blumen” (“Faded Flowers”), conveys deep sadness. A funereal rhythm and static minor-key harmony (very similar, in fact, to the well-known song “Death and the Maiden,” which theme figures prominently in the composer's 14th string quartet in D minor) might seem an odd choice for the bright and cheerful timbres of a flute. Yet shortly after the flutist Ferdinand Pagner heard the “*Mullerin*” cycle, he asked his composer friend to write a set of variations specifically on “Trockne Blumen,” and Schubert accommodated with this inventive if quixotic work.

Schubert begins with a lengthy introduction movingly initiated by the dark minor-key harmonies and sonorities in the piano’s lower register. The prevailing mood suggests anything but a panorama of virtuosic flute escapades, yet Schubert manages to bring off the trick quite nicely. In truth, the burnished beauty of the third variation—the emotional core of the work—balances out the fervent virtuosity of its flanking variations. Note how equitably Schubert obliges the demands of both pianist and flutist; each instrument has its special dangers and chances for display. Variations 1 and 5 make heavy demands on the flute; numbers 2 and 4 test the mettle of the pianist.

Particularly intriguing is the seventh and final variation, a (mock?) heroic march in miniature. Is Schubert echoing the final stanza of the song, in which the month of May brings fresh flowers (and its implicit renewed optimism) to replace the dead and faded blossoms? Is he thumbing his nose at the seriousness of the song cycle itself, and thereby laughing at himself? Is he simply following standard practice by ending a set of soloistic variations on a positive note? We shall never know the composer's intentions here, partly because Schubert rarely set his thoughts to paper—he wrote few letters and no memoirs—other than in music.

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887–1959)

“Assobio a Jato” (“The Jet Whistle”) for Flute and Cello (1950)

Few composers in relatively modern times have written so prolifically as Brazilian-born Heitor Villa-Lobos. Not since the heyday of such Baroque era luminaries as Georg Philipp Telemann, Antonio Vivaldi, J.S. Bach and George Frideric Handel have composers channeled their creativity into such voluminous compositional enterprise.

His varied canon embraces some 700 works, including 12 symphonies, 17 string quartets, myriad solo concertos for piano, harmonica and guitar, operas, ballets, and all manner of miscellaneous pieces bearing a distinctly national character. Potent musical streams flowed into this torrent of creativity, ranging from Brazilian folk and popular traditions, music-like sounds from world of nature and the multiple tributaries of European classical music. His hero among the established pantheon of great composers was J.S. Bach (“an intermediary between all cultures” Villa-Lobos reverently opined), but his harmonic language derived from late Romanticism and Impressionism. During his long and almost continuously productive life he never abandoned tonality; his sense of color and rhythm imparted freshness and seeming spontaneity that seldom failed him.

After initial training from his father, himself an amateur cellist, Villa-Lobos earned a living and honed his skills by playing cello in cafés and restaurants. Like Bartók and Kodály in Hungary and Vaughan Williams in England, he collected folk music throughout Brazil from 1905–12 while continuing his formal studies. A meeting with pianist Artur Schnabel, who became a virtual lifelong champion of Villa-Lobos’ music, was one of many milestones along his successful career as a largely self-taught composer. Villa-Lobos’ lack of traditional musical training may well have been a great benefit for him, since it both challenged and freed his imagination to develop his own musical language. “I have always searched for a synthesis between western culture and that of my own country,” he wrote, words that underlie his series of nine *Bachianas brasileiras* in which he fully explores a vivid and varied personal world of expression, tone color, melodic shape and harmony.

“Assobio a Jato” (“The Jet Whistle”) for flute and cello dates from 1950, a relatively late work in Villa-Lobos’ life. The opening *Allegro non troppo* finds the cello singing rapturously while the flute comments in a sequence of ironic “yips” and flighty asides.

In the *Adagio*, the two instruments merge closely in a spirit of pensive rumination—an intimate dialogue between close friends.

The closing *Vivo* brings out the rambunctious side of the triply prolific composer. The cello begins bouncingly, quickly followed by the skittish flute, Latinate in its rhythmic playfulness. Here, as in the first movement, the two lines are markedly independent, each trading roles as primary and accompanying figures. The piece ends in a series of upwardly scalar flute flourishes over the earth-bound cello.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Quartet for Strings No. 10 in E-flat Major, Op. 74, "Harp" (1809)

Franz Joseph Haydn, erstwhile teacher of Beethoven, developed the string quartet from outdoor entertainment to a vehicle for a composer's deepest and most intimate feelings. Given Haydn's early life soaking up the music of the still-current Baroque era, he also imbued the quartet with increasing independence of line, i.e., rich and inventive contrapuntal writing. Mozart took up the banner with his six "String Quartets dedicated to Haydn" in the mid-1780s, and Beethoven shaped the future of the quartet in terms of length, expression, innovation and technical difficulty. His 16 string quartets remain the iconic works that have defined the chamber music experience for two centuries. From the six Op. 18 quartets of his youth, through the dramatic works of his adventuresome middle years, to the last unparalleled and frequently futuristic masterpieces of his full maturity, Beethoven set a standard of excellence approached but never surpassed.

In 1809, the lives of all residents of Vienna—including Beethoven—were shaken by the bombardment of their city by the French army, presumably spreading liberty, equality and fraternity throughout Europe. Three aristocratic patrons, Prince Lobkowitz, Archduke Rudolf and Prince Kinsky agreed to provide the composer income for life on the condition that he would remain in Vienna or at least within the boundaries of the Habsburg's empire. Over the next several years the generous offer inspired lots of squabbling among donors and their exalted recipient, leading to a settlement in 1815 that did not sit well with Beethoven. Still, in 1809 and in the face of unsettling political events, Beethoven felt relieved by the offer and composed his String Quartet No. 10 in E-flat Major, Op. 74, dedicating the new chamber work to Prince Lobkowitz (as he did that same year with his Fifth and Sixth symphonies). The nickname "Harp" was appended later because of pizzicato figures in the opening movement.

The first movement opens with a *Poco adagio* introduction that begins quietly but breaks the near silence with several unexpected *sforzandos* as if to foretell the drama around the bend. The introduction leads into a lyrical yet energetic *Allegro* wherein we hear the accompanying *pizzicato* figures that eventually yielded the quartet its nickname. As in the introductory section, a number of unexpected and assertive dynamic outbursts dot the landscape, yet the overall tenor of the music remains largely lyrical rather than overtly dramatic. In between the pointedly sharp-edged chords, two flowing themes serenely establish themselves even as the plucked notes vie for the upper hand. The development section breaks the quartet into two rival sonorities—cello and first violin versus second

violin and viola. In the recapitulation the *pizzicatos* come to the fore. A brilliant and busy coda brings the movement to an incisive close.

The following *Adagio* anticipates the radiant otherworldly yet deeply personal slow movements of Beethoven's late quartets. Essentially based on one simple yet emotionally promising theme, the music unfolds in a series of variants separated by contrasting episodes in the manner of a *rondo*. A minor key section darkens matters but eventually yields to a noble major-key episode of luminous spirituality.

Marked *Presto* and cast in dramatic C-minor the *Scherzo*—in fact if not in name—recalls the rhythmic figure that drives the Fifth Symphony (same key, of course) to its triumph-over-adversity conclusion. It leaps forward with powerful concentrated energy that alternates between minor-key ferocity and exhilarating flights in the major. As Beethoven had achieved in the first “Razumovsky” Quartet, Op. 59, No. 1, the music conveys a nearly symphonic heft. Midway, the cello introduces a highly contrapuntal section that some commentators hear as a parody of academic counterpoint exercises—of which young Beethoven had many with his early mentor Niefe.

Without pause Beethoven draws us into the concluding *Allegretto con variazioni* that retreats from the heated passion of the *Presto*, using a modest three-note dotted theme to launch six variations. The odd-numbered episodes are assertive, even energetic, while the even variations give expression to Beethoven's lyrical side. An accelerating coda leads to a brilliant horse-race-to-the-barn conclusion based on material drawn from the third variation.

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

Quartet for Piano and Strings in C minor, Op. 60 (1875)

Brahms was his own most persnickety critic, destroying scads of early music (some of which drew praise from his inspiring mentors Robert and Clara Schumann). We need not be overly surprised, therefore, that some of his music underwent long gestations filled with recurrent self-doubt before achieving a successful birthing and long life in the concert hall. The First Symphony comes to mind, of course, since Brahms felt lost in the shadow of that great “specter” Beethoven, as well as the D-minor Piano Concerto and other works that were visited and revisited by the perfectionist composer. So too it was with his Quartet for Piano and Strings in C minor, his third and final essay in that format. He began thinking about the piece as early as 1854, shortly after his fateful meeting with the Schumanns. He produced some preliminary sketches in C-sharp minor but took more than 20 years to complete the task, which involved recasting the music into C minor—same key as his First Symphony and, wouldn't you know—Beethoven's tonal center for music of great drama.

As early as 1856 a first version emerged that was performed by an ensemble that included Brahms' older and admired friend, the violinist and composer Joseph Joachim. Presumably Joachim mailed Brahms a list of suggested changes, but the quartet remained virtually untouched for nearly two decades.

The opening *Allegro non troppo* establishes an atmosphere of relentless tragedy through its descending main theme. Relief from the turmoil comes intermittently in Brahms' treatment of the major-key second theme, but dark foreboding prevails. In a letter to his friend Dr. Theodor Billroth, a physician with a deep and knowledgeable grasp of music, Brahms wrote, "This quartet is only communicated as a curiosity, say as an illustration to the last chapter of the man with the blue jacket and yellow vest," referring to Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, where the young protagonist takes his own life (as Schumann had attempted to do in 1854 before committing himself to an asylum where he died two years later).

A *Scherzo: Allegro* follows the exhausting dark drama of the opening movement, though little respite is found in this movement's nervous and biting energy other than a brief reprieve in the calm haven of the Trio. Since this is a *Scherzo* in typical A—B—A form the trio's serenity is broken by a repeat of the first section.

It is possible that Brahms' choice of the tonally unrelated key of E Major for the ensuing *Andante* may have been inspired by Beethoven's identical choice in his C-minor Piano Concerto, which also moves into E Major for that work's touchingly beautiful slow movement. Here Brahms draws upon his often not fully appreciated gifts at sublime melody and creates what has been considered a gesture of farewell to Robert's widow Clara, an acknowledgment that Brahms and Clara could remain close friends and musical confidantes, but nothing resembling a consummating relationship.

The *Finale: Allegro comodo* moves along in the manner of a *moto perpetuo*. Despite carrying a *tranquillo* marking and a major-key ending, this is not especially happy music; clearly the 20-year-old memories of Robert Schumann's death and Brahms' deep grief still had power to color the closing movement of the Piano Quartet. The strings weave warmly flowing melodies while the piano—the composer's voice—quickly noodles around the keyboard in a slightly nervous and obsessive fashion that can't obliterate lingering sadness.

Program Notes by Steven Lowe