



SUMMER FESTIVAL IN SEATTLE

MONDAY, JULY 5, 2010

**Claude Debussy**

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in G Major

*Andantino con moto allegro*

*Scherzo-Intermezzo: Moderato con allegro*

*Andante espressivo*

*Finale: Appassionato*

Erin Keefe, violin Robert deMaine, cello Andrew Armstrong, piano

**Samuel Barber**

Quartet for Strings, Op. 11

*Molto allegro e appassionato*

*Adagio—attacca:*

*Molto allegro (come prima)—Presto*

James Ehnes, violin Andrew Wan, violin Cynthia Phelps, viola Edward Arron, cello

**Johannes Brahms**

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in B Major, Op. 8

*Allegro con brio*

*Scherzo: Allegro*

*Adagio*

*Allegro*

Augustin Hadelich, violin Bion Tsang, cello Adam Neiman, piano

**Claude Debussy (1862–1918)**

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in G Major (1880)

Debussy was a diffident man, more comfortable with cats than with his fellow human beings; his persona and music elicited strongly contradictory responses among those who experienced the man and his artistic creations.

In his quiet, at times even secretive, manner, Debussy was a true harbinger of musical modernism. Though we tend to think of the dramatic first performance riot of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in 1913 as the great symbolic clash between the old and the new worlds of music, it was the Frenchman's early demolition of traditional Western harmony that set the table for the Russian émigré. As a student, Debussy gleefully pounded out audacious chord progressions at the piano—to the delight of his classmates

and to the consternation of his teachers. By the final decade of the 19th century he had already embraced, rejected, and transcended his early and passionate Wagnerism, newly espousing a musical vocabulary rejecting the time-focused expectations of tonal music. Chords were no longer to function harmonically. Dissonances no longer served to allow relaxation into consonance. By absorbing non-Western scales from Asian and Pacific Island cultures, he broke away from our sacrosanct system of tonal harmony. Whole-tone and pentatonic scales facilitated the breakdown of the system of harmony in use since the Renaissance.

Yet these major developments in his musical thinking lay in the future when he composed his Piano Trio in G Major in 1880. Unlike Ravel's oft-played Trio, Debussy's is scarcely known, even by sophisticated chamber music buffs. Indeed, it was published only in 1986. Janus-faced music that looks backward to Schumann and Franck, it only hints at the non-traditional harmonies he would "discover" after being exposed to Eastern music at the 1889 Paris Exhibition.

Debussy had spent much of 1880 traveling with Nadezhda von Meck—long-time patron of Tchaikovsky—and her family. He had been recommended by his piano teacher, Antoine Marmontel, to the wealthy widow to serve as pianist and teacher to her children. After traveling throughout Europe, including Russia, Debussy composed his Piano Trio. The charming dedication, "A lot of notes accompanied by a lot of affection," was directed at his primary mentor, Émile Durand. Still in his teens, Debussy was far from a fully evolved composer, and the derivative nature of the music suggests a gifted musician absorbing and emulating past masters. Even so, it is at the very least a work full of charm and promise, one worth sampling if only to ferret out clues to his future evolution.

A gently rocking theme in the piano initiates the opening *Andantino con moto allegro*, soon picked up by the violin. When the cello enters it restates the theme in a manner that subtly changes its demeanor from sweet buoyancy to comparative melancholy. As the movement proceeds the music periodically assumes a more energetic pose, though salon-like charm is never far from the surface.

String pizzicatos and modal piano chords sound much more like the later Debussy in the ensuing *Scherzo-Intermezzo: Moderato con allegro*. Unmistakable Eastern fragrances pre-date by nine years his exposure to Javanese Gamelan at the above-named Paris Exhibition. The plucked strings may also suggest a coincidental similarity to the second movement of Ravel's later String Quartet.

In the *Andante espressivo* delicate phrases from the piano introduce a quietly rhapsodic theme played by the cello, soon commented on by the violin. A flowing section recalls Schumann at his most effulgent.

The finale, marked *Appassionato*, begins in the minor; it is led initially by the piano and urgently prodded along by a repeated triplet figure that shifts among the three instruments. A more lyrical middle section soon yields to the movement's essential

galvanism. Before the closing jaunt to the finish, a brief pizzicato episode permits a moment of respite.

### **Samuel Barber (1910–1981)**

Quartet for Strings, Op. 11 (1936)

Although not a child prodigy in the sense of a Mozart or Mendelssohn, Samuel Barber began composing in his youth. His abundant musicality received nurture from his aunt, the famous contralto Louise Homer, who taught the boy to sing at a tender age. A note to his mother written in his tenth year proved to be prophetic: “I was meant to be a composer and will be I’m sure. Don’t ask me to forget this unpleasant thing and go play football...please.” In his teens, he served as a church organist, which was followed by study at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. He continued voice studies with the baritone Emilio de Gogorza, and also managed to secure instruction in piano and conducting. By adulthood he had already found his composer’s “voice,” a neo-Romantic style he never forsook even when adopting techniques from more modern schools of composition.

In 1936, still a young man, Barber composed his String Quartet, Op. 11. The opening movement, *Molto allegro e appassionato*, asserts itself with a vibrant main theme that is eventually pitted against a quiet chorale-like counter theme. A third legato theme emerges before Barber weaves the three elements together.

The ensuing *Adagio* is laid out in arch form. The basic flowing and elegiac main theme slowly moves through the different string instruments, beginning with the violins before a downward shift into the viola’s realm. The work’s expansive central section entrusts the theme to the cello, then builds to a powerful *fortissimo* climax in the high regions of the string ensemble’s range, followed immediately by dead silence—which greatly intensifies the dramatic impact of the climax. A series of wrenchingly sad chords provides a transition to the final section where the opening theme is heard. The affecting conclusion uses the first five notes of the melody, holding the final note over a moment of silence followed by an accompanying figure that ebbs away to nothingness.

Though the *Adagio* seems to come to a full close, the term *attacca* precedes the *Molto allegro (come prima)—Presto* finale that emerges Phoenix-like out of the silence, i.e., without pause. A very brief and fairly quiet figure almost immediately launches an energetic and anxious episode; then the music grows temporarily quiet before bringing the quartet to an energetic, forceful and anxious close.

A year after he composed the quartet, in response to a request from famed conductor Arturo Toscanini for music to be performed at the Salzburg Festival, the 27-year-old composer submitted two pieces: the Essay No. 1 for Orchestra and a string orchestra arrangement of the *Adagio* from the above-mentioned quartet. Toscanini was slow to acknowledge receipt of the scores and returned them without comment. Understandably, Barber was hurt and more than a bit miffed. Toscanini, however, had been impressed by both works, and fully intended to perform them. The *Adagio* received its premiere in New

York City in a broadcast performance that reached a far larger audience than would have been possible in a concert setting.

The *Adagio* has served to commemorate tragic occasions ever since, including the funerals of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Prince Rainier of Monaco, as well as the ceremony at the site of the World Trade Center following the catastrophic events of September 11, 2001. It has appeared in several movies, e.g., *Platoon* and *The Elephant Man*. In 1967, Barber created an eight-part choral work *Agnus Dei* (“Lamb of God”) from the *Adagio*, in which form it has become a staple of the modern choral repertory.

### **Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)**

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in B Major, Op. 8 (1853-54; rev. 1889)

We tend not to view Brahms as a *Wunderkind*, yet even his early works demonstrate an extraordinarily keen musical intellect mediated by a potent undercurrent of Romantic feeling. Famously intimidated by the example of Beethoven’s symphonic canon, Brahms’ youthful works generally confined themselves to solo piano and chamber ensemble. Robert Schumann, who early championed the young Brahms, was an unusually astute commentator on the music of his time. He characterized Brahms’ sonatas as “veiled symphonies.” Perhaps the older composer knew of Brahms’ trepidation *vis à vis* writing for orchestra.

Brahms composed his first Piano Trio, Op. 8 in 1854, the year after he met Robert and Clara Schumann. In 1889, three-and-a-half decades later, he revised the score, jettisoning about one-third of the music by shortening the first movement and tightening the overall structure without, however, compromising the youthful passion of the music. Of special note is how seamless these changes are; the composer was able to maintain a consistency despite years of development in his compositional style. Brahms wrote to a friend that the revision “did not provide it with a wig, but just combed and arranged its hair a little.”

Marked *Allegro con brio*, the opening movement is dominated almost entirely by a broadly flowing, gorgeous theme that announces itself first in the piano, soon echoed by the cello a third higher. The violin’s eventual entry further enriches the spacious unfolding of this rapturous music. After an extensive development, the recap begins with a triumphant restatement of the opening theme, replete with contrapuntal weavings of material from a subsidiary theme.

The following *Scherzo: Allegro*, fleet-footed with a contrastingly lush Trio, is notable for its almost elfin quality à la Mendelssohn. Brahms evidently felt that he had uttered the final word when he first wrote this work in 1854; the later version is essentially unchanged.

The third movement is an *Adagio* in ABA (or “song”) form and has a pervasive autumnal quality associated with Brahms’ later works. Schumann’s prescient observation cited above applies here in Brahms’ rich, orchestra-like sonorities. The opening tune is an

intimate dialogue between the piano and the stringed instruments. Later the cello introduces a keenly felt melody that is ultimately picked up by the violin.

The mood changes abruptly in the *Allegro* finale, beginning with the cello's statement of the first theme, rich in implied agitation and unease. A second theme, uttered by the piano, calms the water in resolute nobility. Brahms plays off the two themes against each other before the opening theme asserts primacy in the coda.

**Program Notes by  
Steven Lowe**