



## SUMMER FESTIVAL IN SEATTLE

WEDNESDAY, JULY 7

### **Robert Schumann**

Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 1 in A minor, Op. 105

*Mit leidenschaftlichem Ausdruck*

*Allegretto*

*Lebhaft*

Erin Keefe, violin      Andrew Armstrong, piano

### **Felix Mendelssohn**

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in D minor, Op. 49

*Molto allegro e agitato*

*Andante con moto tranquillo*

*Scherzo: Leggiero e vivace*

*Finale: Allegro assai appassionato*

Andrew Wan, violin      Edward Arron, cello      Adam Neiman, piano

### **Arnold Schoenberg**

*Verklärte Nacht* ("Transfigured Night") for String Sextet, Op. 4

James Ehnes, violin      Augustin Hadelich, violin      Cynthia Phelps, viola

Richard O'Neill, viola      Bion Tsang, cello      Robert deMaine, cello

### **Robert Schumann (1810–1856)**

Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 1 in A minor, Op. 105 (1851)

Prodigiously gifted in both music and expository writing, Schumann's intermittent and increasingly frequent bouts of mental illness at times thwarted the clear expression of his artistic impulses. A nascent career as a piano virtuoso ended because of problems in both hands due to a combination of improper practice, alcohol abuse and well-intended mercury treatments that went awry. A difficult engagement with his future wife Clara—made so by the fierce opposition of her father, Friedrich Wieck—took an emotional toll. Clara's success as a concertizing pianist clearly eclipsed Robert's reputation as a composer, adding further to his depression and self-doubt. At times psychosis would render him less than coherent, minimizing his effectiveness as a conductor and performer, with serious fallout in his career. Still, by the end of the 1840s he had created a considerable body of highly regarded music: the superb solo piano pieces of the 1830s, the outpouring of *Lieder* in 1840, the chamber works of the early 1840s, and the

orchestral music of mid- to last-1840s. By 1850 it seemed as if life were settling into a manageable, essentially happy, pattern.

That year—1850—the Schumanns moved to Düsseldorf, where Robert had secured the position of music director (despite a checkered history as a conductor). Things went well through 1851, especially in his capacity as a composer. His third (“Rhenish”) symphony came into being, as did his cello concerto, third piano trio and two sonatas for violin and piano. Thereafter, his mental illness worsened, leading him to his attempted suicide (by throwing himself into the Rhine) in 1854 and his eventual death in the asylum at Endenich. Visitors, including Brahms, as well as the medical staff, describe an increasingly remote and pathetic figure whose genius was undermined by increasing auditory hallucinations and other manifestations of psychosis.

But in 1850-51, the prognosis looked good. Some works from those two years have remained in the standard repertoire (especially the “Rhenish” and the cello concerto), manifesting richness of imagination, a healthy emotional range and sure compositional technique. The two violin sonatas have not become repertoire staples, though they have always had their advocates despite less than idiomatic part-writing and a prevalingly dark, minor-key tonality.

Schumann laid out the A-minor Sonata No. 1 in three movements. The opening *Mit leidenschaftlichem Ausdruck* (“with ardent expression”) maintains a rather slower pace than the above instruction might suggest, but passion abounds even at a relatively even-paced tempo. Sweeping subsidiary ideas temper the prevailing somber cast of the music.

The F-major *Allegretto* functions as a combination of slow movement and *Scherzo*. The opening theme, alternatively serene and gently buoyant, serves as a breather from the troubling spirit of the first movement. A central episode conveys rustic bumptiousness before a graceful return to the restrained lyricism of the opening motto.

A highly charged and manic romp—a virtual race to the finish—constitutes the galloping finale, aptly marked *Lebhaft* (“lively”). Brief slashing chords periodically punctuate the otherwise “perpetual motion” atmosphere; so too, occasional lyrical episodes add interest. Schumann also reprises the ardent theme from the first movement to create a sense of unity that sadly was lacking in his life at the time.

### **Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)**

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in D minor, Op. 49 (1839)

We are now a year beyond the bi-centennial of Felix Mendelssohn’s birth. Happy to say, this miraculously gifted composer’s posthumous reputation seems far more secure than at virtually any time since his sadly early death. He seems to have swept ahead of Mozart on the short list of great child prodigies among composers. Such adolescent gems as his Octet, Overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Hebrides* (aka “Fingal’s Cave”) have led some commentators to denigrate his later music as sub-par. One wag even

described Mendelssohn as the only composer to “have *un*-matured.” Clever, perhaps, but unfair and untrue!

Mendelssohn wrote music that was always idiomatic and fluent (attributes often given him as left-handed compliments). At a deeper esthetic level, he also dipped into a reservoir of great melodic possibilities, appealing warmth of emotion, and yes, even passion. He composed a considerable amount of chamber music including the Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor. It was enthusiastically received when first performed and has remained one of his most popular chamber works.

His contemporary colleague and friend, Robert Schumann wrote in his capacity as a music critic, “It is the master trio of today as in their day were those of Beethoven in B-flat [the *Archduke*] and D [the *Ghost*]; as was that of Franz Schubert in E-flat; indeed a lovely composition which years from hence will still delight grand- and great-grand children...he has raised himself so high that we can indeed say he is the Mozart of the nineteenth century; the most brilliant among musicians; the one who has most clearly recognized the contradictions of the time, and the first to reconcile them.”

Despite its marking, *Molto allegro e agitato*, the first movement is notable for its enchanting melodic profile. The flowing opening theme bears a spiritual likeness to the same spot in young Brahms’ Op. 8 Piano Trio (written a decade-and-a-half later), even to the point of entrusting it to the cello. An equally lyrical and expansive theme, also entrusted to the strings, shows a bit of modesty on Mendelssohn’s part, for despite being a quite decent fiddler, his bread-and-butter instrument was the piano. Another point about this movement relates to the standard view of Mendelssohn as a neo-classicist during the Romantic age. Striking in this movement is the avoidance of structural thematic fragments, or “germs,” that Beethoven in particular used as building blocks for his sonata movements.

The piano gently initiates the *Andante con moto tranquillo* with a solo whose graceful contours is a virtual “song without words.” How much more intimate and sweetly Romantic can any music be than this ravishing interlude of calm.

*Scherzo: Leggiero e vivace*: so reads the instructions at the head of the third movement, as accurate a description of the music as can be expressed in words. Here is the familiar and much-loved Mendelssohn of the “elfin” trio, its light and airy atmosphere captured only through three performers of considerable technical assets. Easy on the ears, most definitely, but challenging to the fingers! Here, too, the piano gets things going before inviting the two stringed instruments to join in. The music moves seamlessly, almost in the manner of perpetual motion. A middle section, herein not called a Trio, makes a quantum increase in storm-like dramatics before returning to the deft humor of the scherzo proper.

The final movement returns emphatically to the minor mode. A punched-out theme pregnant with potential energy erupts into a dynamic surge towards the finish line, propelled by the roiling piano’s propulsive arpeggios.

### **Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)**

*Verklärte Nacht* (“Transfigured Night”) for String Sextet, Op. 4 (1899)

Nearly six decades after his death, Arnold Schoenberg remains a *bête noire* for most concert audiences throughout the United States. His reputation—perhaps notoriety is the operative word—has rested mainly on the serial or “twelve-tone” technique of composition he fathered (and which served as the model for the fictional composer Adrian Leverkühn in Thomas Mann’s novel, *Dr. Faustus*). Most listeners still respond to his serial works—and those by other members of the second Viennese school and their spiritual offspring—with a mixture of consternation, confusion and contempt...perhaps even fear.

Yet it was not always so. In 1899, a mid-20ish Schoenberg was busy carrying out the tonal implications of post-Wagnerian harmony in a series of grandly conceived, chromatic, but thoroughly digestible musical feasts. These ripe blossomings of late Romanticism blended the harmonic daring and endless melody of Wagner with the classical formalism of Brahms—with a dash of Richard Strauss-like audacity to boot.

Schoenberg, inspired by an 1896 poem by Richard Dehmel, threw himself into a flurry of compositional activity, emerging three weeks later with the score to *Verklärte Nacht* in its original guise as a string sextet. In 1917, he recast it for string orchestra, making still further revisions in 1943. Both versions continue to be heard, though it has prospered more fully (i.e., more performances and recordings) in its expanded wardrobe. In both formats, however, one revels at the contrapuntal richness of the young master, as well as the stretched-to-the-limits-of-tonality chromaticism that infuses almost every bar.

The story concerns two lovers walking together in the woods on a clear winter’s night. The woman admits that she had become pregnant by another man before meeting and truly falling in love with her present lover. He assures her that their deep love is strong enough to unite them and the unborn child. They embrace and walk off together. (Ah, life should be so simple!)

Five connected sections comprise both poem and music. A distinctive falling motif introduces the first section and recurs throughout the work as a unifying device. A feeling of agitation permeates the second section, reflecting the woman’s palpable sense of guilt. In the third section, the recurring theme is presented in a declamatory style by the first violin. The fourth section corresponds to the man’s compassionate response and the music yields to a loving tenderness that builds to a passionate climax. The final section serves as a coda, at first reiterating the man’s impassioned utterance, then softening as the lovers’ mutual anxiety ebbs. Again we hear the opening motif of the lovers’ walk, and finally gossamer high string sonorities suggest the poem’s concluding words, “...the exalted brightness of the night.”

**Program Notes**  
**by Steven Lowe**