

WINTER FESTIVAL

SEATTLE
CHAMBER
MUSIC
SOCIETY

JANUARY 23, 2015
7:30 PM

PROGRAM

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH
Sonata for Violin and Continuo in G Major, BWV 1021

Adagio
Vivace
Largo
Presto

Amy Schwartz Moretti violin / **Efe Baltacıgil** cello / **Luc Beauséjour** harpsichord

BOHUSLAV MARTINU

Duo No. 2 for Violin and Viola, H. 331

Allegro
Lento
Allegro (poco)

Erin Keefe violin / **Rebecca Albers** viola

INTERMISSION

EDWARD ELGAR

Quintet for Piano and Strings in A minor, Op. 84

Moderato—Allegro
Adagio
Andante—Allegro
James Ehnes violin / **Arnaud Sussmann** violin / **Cynthia Phelps** viola / **Robert deMaine** cello /
Anne-Marie McDermott piano

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

(1685–1750)

Sonata for Violin and Continuo in G Major, BWV 1021 (1730–1734?)

To composers of the late Baroque era, the term “sonata” simply meant a piece of music that was not sung. Bach wrote some three dozen works bearing that basic nomenclature, of which six were specifically designated as sonatas for violin and keyboard, and another three—including BWV 1021—for violin and continuo. Note the distinction between violin and *keyboard* and violin and *continuo*. The continuo was, of course, performed by a keyboard player (harpsichord, clavichord or even organ) often augmented by a viola da gamba or bassoon. Its primary role was to provide a harmonic armature for the soloist’s musical line. In the hands of an imaginative keyboardist, the continuo part could truly partner the soloist through improvised counterpoint and other stylistic devices.

Bach and his confreres distinguished between a “sonata da camera” (“chamber sonata”), whose movements consisted of modified dance rhythms, and the “sonata da chiesa” (“church sonata”), where movements bore tempo indications. BWV 1021 is a four-movement example of the latter type. The work opens with an *Adagio* featuring a leisurely and lengthy cantabile melody accompanied by a walking bass continuo. Throughout the movement the flowing theme is freely ornamented by the violin and imitated per the keyboardist’s inclination. A sprightly, animated and brief *Vivace* follows, urged by slashing violin chords that add lively energy without duress. The music’s sheer verve disguises finely wrought counterpoint.

The third movement *Largo* reverts to minor-key tonality, bringing music of expressive intimacy and melancholy heightened by gulping sob-like interruptions in the generally ascending melodic shape. Happily returning to G Major the concluding *Presto* erases all inward musing. Like the *Vivace* the finale is both brief and energetic.

BOHUSLAV MARTINŮ

(1890–1959)

Duo No. 2 for Violin and Viola, H. 331 (1950)

During his lifetime essentially self-taught composer Bohuslav Martinů drew influences from several 20th-century stylistic streams, including Bohemian and Moravian folk music, Stravinsky’s neo-Classicism, the music of Albert Roussel and Debussy, Renaissance polyphony, and even jazz. His music has immediate coloristic appeal, rhythmic vitality and a bracing economy of texture.

Born in a church tower where his father was both watchman and tower keeper, Martinů took violin lessons with a local tailor, but even before adolescence, he was smitten with an urge to compose. His formal training in composition was haphazard, and was more or less an autodidact. By his 20s, he had already written well over a hundred works in many genres. Admitting to weaknesses in his compositional technique, he studied briefly with Joseph Suk, then in 1923 with Roussel in Paris.

Martinů composed two duos for violin and viola, one in 1926–27 and another in 1950. Between the two works the world moved ever closer to the eruption of World War II. In 1940, Martinů fled the German invasion of France and settled in the United States, where he taught at Princeton University and at the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood, Massachusetts. After the war, he returned to Prague to teach. In 1957 he served as composer in residence at the American Academy in Rome.

The Duo No. 2 begins with an energetic and quirky *Allegro*. Swirling figures and syncopated rhythms frame a theme that suggests Mozart—including a rapid Alberti bass accompanying figure that further underscores the Classical period connection—juiced up, to be sure, with 20th-century harmony. Nearly constant energy prevails, only briefly interrupted by slower episodes. Occasional echoes of American hoedown reflect Martinů’s years in the States, perhaps a nod to fellow Czech composer Antonín Dvořák, who composed his “American” string quartet

and string quintet while living in Spillville, Iowa in the early 1890s.

The following *Lento* begins as a quiet and sad dialogue. Slow melodic lines meander through the landscape side-by-side, generally maintaining an intimate connection in both sound and mood. A middle section finds the two instruments intoning very different material from each other as the emotional level and volume intensify before returning to shared musing of the opening bars of this movement.

Marked *Allegro (poco)*, the finale in duple meter also suggests the heady energy of a hoedown. Much of it is subdued in dynamics yet is inherently energetic. Parallel musical lines contrast with alternating episodes of greater independence.

EDWARD ELGAR

(1857-1934)

*Quintet for Piano and Strings in A minor,
Op. 84 (1919)*

In 1887, Edward Elgar composed his first two chamber works, a string quartet and a violin and piano sonata. Though both works were published he had second thoughts about their worthiness and had them destroyed. Three decades later, as World War I drew to a close, he returned to chamber composition, producing his Op. 82 Violin Sonata, Op. 83 String Quartet and his Piano Quintet in A minor, Op. 84, the largest and most symphonic of the three works. The horrors of the “war to end all wars” continued to reverberate in his soul, soon deepened by the death of his beloved wife Alice. Palpable anger, seemingly bottomless grief and unrelenting anxiety permeate all three of these synchronous minor-key chamber pieces. As is well known, he virtually ceased composing after his virtually valedictory Cello Concerto of 1919—also cast in the minor.

While crafting the three chamber works in 1918 and 1919 Elgar lived in an area known as the Brinkwells, a wooded environment haunted by an old myth about a settlement of Spanish monks

punished for “impious rites.” Part of the legend involved “sinister trees” struck by lightning, a metaphor for the monks’ unhappy end. Elgar found himself strongly affected by the legend and the gnarly, twisted trees that inspired it. His dying wife described the sight as “sad” and “dispossessed,” both of which paralleled her husband’s state of mind.

In her diary Mrs. Elgar alluded to the “wonderful, weird beginning” of the Piano Quintet, making explicit reference to the “sinister trees.” Ghostly and chant-like, the *Moderato* introduction establishes a mood of profound unease in no way diminished in the ensuing *Allegro* that transforms the intro theme into an urgent rush of troubled spirits. The second subject is an exotic theme whose *pizzicato* accompaniment suggests Spanish guitar music. This episode does not provide a calm respite, but in fact heightens the movement’s disquiet by the very strangeness of its departure from what has preceded it. The movement ends in mysterious quietude.

The viola posits a legato theme that opens the *Adagio*, whose mood of *Sensucht* (“longing”) is the essence of Romanticism. Unforced in its slow-paced unfolding, this deeply touching movement remained a personal favorite of the composer. In A-B-A “song” form, the outer sections provide a lyrical respite from the emotional upheaval of the first movement, though not entirely; an agitated central paragraph dispels serenity.

The concluding *Andante—Allegro* stirs up painful associations and thematic material from the opening movement, but ultimately awakens from the nightmarish images of the “sinister trees” in an energetic burst of A-Major optimism—sadly more of a “whistling in the dark” gesture than true joy. Elgar never fully recovered from the death of his wife. Though he lived another decade and a half, he all but stopped composing after this heartfelt work.

Program Notes by Steven Lowe

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