

WINTER FESTIVAL



SEATTLE
CHAMBER
MUSIC
SOCIETY

JANUARY 29, 2015

7:30 PM

PROGRAM

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in C minor, Op. 101

Allegro energico

Presto non assai

Andante grazioso

Allegro molto

James Ehnes violin / **Andrés Díaz** cello / **Orion Weiss** piano

FRANZ SCHUBERT

Sonata for Viola and Piano in A minor, D. 821 "Arpeggione"

Allegro moderato

Adagio

Allegretto

Che-Yen Chen viola / **Anton Nel** piano

INTERMISSION

CÉSAR FRANCK

Quintet for Piano and Strings in F minor

Molto moderato quasi lento—Allegro

Lento, con molto sentimento

Allegro non troppo, ma con fuoco

Karen Gomyo violin / **Yosuke Kawasaki** violin / **Beth Guterman Chu** viola / **Wendy Sutter** cello /

William Wolfram piano

JOHANNES BRAHMS

(1833–1897)

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in C minor, Op. 101 (1886)

Brahms spent the summer of 1886 soaking up the pleasures of the Swiss resort of Hofstetten. Typically, this kind of recuperative interlude left him sufficient time to focus on composition; in effect he was on a “working vacation.” Comfortably ensconced, he balanced work on three major pieces, his second sonatas respectively for violin and cello, both with piano, of course, and his final Piano Trio, Op. 101, cast in the historically dramatic key of C minor. Keeping his fingers active, he handled the piano role at the Trio’s premiere in 1887, joined by members of the Heckmann String Quartet.

As he matured as a composer, Brahms’ music underwent a process of remarkable concision. Largely gone were the leisurely and expansive movements of some of his early works, such as found in the oceanic scope of the Op. 5 Piano Sonata and the first version of the Op. 8 Piano Trio. He sought to pare the “fat” from his late scores, taking to heart a sentence he had underlined in a copy of a book in his library, Vischer’s *Goethe’s Faust*. “The artist should provide only the essentials, and eliminate everything inessential; in this way he will transform the real into the ideal.” Faintly Platonic, this remark resonated to Brahms’ evolving esthetics, and has special meaning for a work such as the Op. 101 Piano Trio. As with his slightly later Clarinet Quintet, a basic three-note thematic kernel informs all four movements, creating great musical wealth from a minimal (in size, not implication) thematic germ.

This “germ” appears virtually immediately in the left-hand piano part at the beginning of the opening *Allegro energico*. At this point the music bespeaks aggression and defiance, yet the wizard-like Brahms conjures a flowing and lyrical second theme that grows and ripens from the terse three-note figure. Overall, the movement’s heated and agitated passion belies the usual attribution of the adjective “autumnal” to Brahms’ late works.

Otherworldly sonorities inhabit the ensuing *Presto non assai*. These ghostly thematic incantations also derive from the three-note figure, though the rhythm differs considerably from its earlier appearance. Plucked cello arpeggios set against quietly martial piano chords add further to the eerie atmosphere.

The meltingly lovely and unabashedly expressive theme announced by the strings at the beginning of the *Andante grazioso* does, at last, give us a hint of the “autumnal,” and here too the heartfelt melody, so nobly intoned especially on the cello, is an outgrowth of the abovementioned motive, though with wider spaces between the notes. The theme is unusual in its atypical seven-beat length. Moments of sublime yearning darken and intensify meaning in this movement.

Energetic and *Angst*-filled, the concluding *Allegro molto* generates great thrust, borrowing the altered three-note germ for both of its primary themes. Brahms mixes and refashions new tunes from permutations of the theme’s already varied manifestations. Finally, Brahms bids goodbye to the storm and stress of C-minor, ending the piece in the major, enveloped in warmth.

FRANZ SCHUBERT

(1797–1828)

Sonata for Viola and Piano in A minor, D. 821 “Arpeggione” (1824)

Music has never been immune to advances in technology and the Romantic and Modern eras’ shared paradigm of progress. Among the dramatic successes was, of course, the rapid evolution of the modern grand piano from the dynamically limited *fortepiano* of Mozart’s time, an instrument whose feeble mechanism drew passionate criticism from Beethoven. In distinct contrast to the fate of the piano was that accorded the *arpeggione* (also known as a *guitare d’amour*), a hybrid of the guitar and the viola da gamba that was taken up by one Vincenz Schuster, who prevailed upon his friend Franz Schubert to compose something for him to perform. Like the guitar, the *arpeggione* had six

strings and was tuned like a guitar, from bottom to top: E–A–D–G–B–E. Quickly falling into oblivion, the *arpeggione* essentially became a footnote in music history, but it did engender a work by Schubert for that hapless instrument—the Sonata in A minor, D. 821. Despite the shortcomings of the *arpeggione*, the delightful duo has proved more durable in alternate versions for cello and piano, and as in this performance, for viola and piano.

Vienna in the 1820s was swept up in the contagion of Italian opera, which is evident in the vocal orientation of many of the themes in the Sonata. Drawing inspiration from the passion for Italian opera, the opening *Allegro moderato* can be described as an extended aria for the viola-as-singer, deftly accompanied by the piano's harmonic underpinning and jesting asides.

The second movement *Adagio* achieves a fine balance between dark emotion and Viennese *Gemütlichkeit*. Schubert had, by 1824 (the year of composition for the *Arpeggione* sonata), already come close to death from syphilis and its toxic mercury treatment, and the potentially fatal encounter resonates in the occasional shards of pain heard in this movement. Even so, a beguiling sweetness prevails.

After a recitative-like and improvisatory introduction, the concluding rondo marked *Allegretto* abounds in virtuosic gestures and high spirits.

CÉSAR FRANCK

(1822–1890)

Quintet for Piano and Strings in F minor (1879)

Unlike the preternaturally gifted Felix Mendelssohn, who composed memorable works while in his teens, Franck's finest works emerged only in the last two decades of his life. He established a fine reputation not only as a pianist, but as a highly esteemed organist and teacher. Ultimately it is because of his legacy as a composer that he remains in the conscious memory of classical music enthusiasts. He was, in essence, a very

private and self-effacing person, preferring the quiet world of teaching, organ playing and composition.

Although he had little love for Wagner and Liszt's "music of future," Franck adopted the concept of "cyclical" composition—essentially using identical or related thematic material throughout a piece of music—favored by the abovementioned composers. Although some commentators associate Franck's use of chromatic harmony with Wagner, others note Bach as the source, a not unreasonable assumption given Franck's practical and intimate knowledge of Bach's organ works. And, of course, to his contemporaries he was frequently called the "French Brahms" (even though he was Belgian).

Cyclical composition can easily be traced to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, but it really gained tremendous currency through the works of Saint-Saëns. By the time Franck composed his Piano Quintet in 1879, Saint-Saëns was already moving from youthful radicalism into an increasingly nasty form of musical reaction. At the first performance of Franck's Quintet, the composer was pleased by Saint-Saëns' handling of the piano part, and expressed his appreciation afterwards by offering his older colleague the manuscript. To his astonishment and hurt feelings, Saint-Saëns made a sour face and walked away ungraciously.

Franck laid out the Quintet in three movements. The first movement, *Molto moderato quasi lento—Allegro*, begins with a slow and restive introduction that foretells the drama and passion of the lengthy *Allegro*. The second subject of this movement, a tender "motto" theme suggestive of Romantic longing, recurs throughout the entire work in keeping with the composer's cyclic style.

The *Lento* middle movement, in "song" form (A–B–A), employs a pensive theme that provides needed contrast with the storminess of what has preceded it.

The finale, *Allegro non troppo, ma con fuoco*, marks a return to heightened passion, beginning

with strong tremolo-laden strings to set a feverish mood. The primary tune, a bold and rhythmically exciting variant of the recurring “motto” theme, impels the music onward.

One of Franck’s biographers, Léon Vallas, suggested that the sweeping passion of the Piano Quintet reflected the composer’s feelings for Augusta Holmes, one of his pupils. There’s nothing like love—unrequited or fulfilled—that inspires artists to intense expression. Giving ironic weight to Valla’s interpretation of the music in question was Mme. Franck’s reaction to the Quintet: she absolutely hated it! Not that she was objective, of course...

Program Notes by Steven Lowe
