

SEATTLE
CHAMBER
MUSIC
SOCIETY



**WINTER
FESTIVAL**

JANUARY 31, 2016 – 3:00 PM

ANTON ARENSKY

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in D minor, Op. 32

Allegro moderato—Adagio

Scherzo: Allegro molto

Elegia: Adagio

Finale: Allegro non troppo—Andante—Adagio—Allegro molto

Scott Yoo violin / **Astrid Schween** cello / **Gloria Chien** piano

WITOLD LUTOSŁAWSKI

Variations on a Theme by Paganini for Two Pianos

Anton Nel piano / **William Wolfram** piano

MAURICE RAVEL

La Valse for Two Pianos

William Wolfram piano / **Anton Nel** piano

INTERMISSION

FRANZ SCHUBERT

String Quintet in C Major, D. 956

Allegro ma non troppo

Adagio

Scherzo

Allegretto

Andrew Wan violin / **Tessa Lark** violin / **Che-Yen Chen** viola /

Yegor Dyachkov cello / **Bion Tsang** cello

ANTON ARENSKY

(1861-1906)

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in D minor, Op. 32 (1894)

Over the past few decades Anton Arensky's music has finally begun to attract an audience concomitant with his talent. It was not always so. His mentor Rimsky-Korsakov summed up his opinion of his former student thusly: "In his youth Arensky did not escape some influence from me; later the influence came from Tchaikovsky. He will quickly be forgotten." Not exactly a vote of confidence! Nonetheless, poor maligned Arensky eventually won a gold medal in 1882 from the St. Petersburg Conservatory and became a professor at the Moscow Conservatory where his students included both Rachmaninov and Scriabin.

Several of his chamber works have retained a respected place in the chamber repertoire. He composed his first piano trio (of two; the second dates from 1905) in 1894 as a belated memorial tribute to Karl Davidoff, first cellist of the St. Petersburg Opera and director of that city's famous conservatory, who died in 1889. As befits its composer's intent, the mood is elegiac and engagingly lyrical, with understandable nods to Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov.

Marked *Allegro moderato*—*Adagio*, the lovely first movement emerges from the interplay of three song-like themes, all attractive *sui generis* and work together in this engaging movement.

A virtuosic and muscular *Scherzo: Allegro molto* ensues; its almost breathless urgency is leavened by a sentimental waltz-like Trio section.

The third movement, *Elegia*, fulfills Arensky's wish to memorialize Davidoff; naturally, it is the emotional heart of the piece. Both the violin and cello are muted, imparting a sad and inward demeanor. The mood, though, is less painfully grieving than fondly reminiscent and personal, and brightens somewhat during the movement's midsection.

The *Finale: Allegro non troppo*—*Andante*—*Adagio*—*Allegro molto* leaps forward with an optimistic theme that alternates with material recalling the previous movement. Toward the end of the piece, Arensky slows the tempo and reprises the main theme of the first movement before concluding with a vigorous coda.

WITOLD LUTOSŁAWSKI

(1913-1994)

Variations on a Theme by Paganini for Two Pianos (1941)

In common with many of his central European artistic colleagues, Witold Lutosławski had to negotiate the treacherous straits between Nazi and Soviet repression. In truth, the trials and tribulations began very early in life. Born into a well-to-do Polish family, his father and uncle were arrested and executed in 1918 for political activism while the family was living in Moscow. His mother moved the rest of the family to Warsaw, where young Witold began his musical studies, eventually entering the Warsaw Conservatory to continue with piano studies and embark on serious study of composition. During World War II, he supported himself by playing piano in cafés with fellow composer Andrej Panufnik, always fearful of capture and/or deportation.

The two musicians made some 200 arrangements of classical pieces ranging from the Baroque era to the early years of the 20th century, among which was a set of variations for two pianos based on Paganini's 24th Caprice, whose well known theme may have spawned even more variations than the medieval "Dies irae."

Well over a century separates the piece from Paganini's original from 1817; we need not be surprised, then, that Lutosławski's opus reflects enormous changes in the musical vocabulary of 20th-century composers. In 1977, the composer reworked and expanded the Variations for use as a Piano Concerto for Felicja Blumental.

The acerbic harmony that supports Paganini's motto is apparent in the initial presentation of the familiar theme, with pungent "tone clusters" in the pianos' bass regions. Though not abandoning tonality, the engagingly abrasive chromaticism asserts modernity. Forays into virtual polytonality demonstrate not only Lutostawski's credentials as a product of his/our time, but also shows how well Paganini's theme serves as a departure point for modern harmony. The virtuosic writing testifies to both Lutostawski's and Panufnik's prowess as pianists. Lutostawski follows Paganini's basic scheme: 11 variations and a finale. Scintillating and pointillistic episodes alternate with heartily chugging rhythms and others of a comparatively introspective demeanor.

MAURICE RAVEL

(1875-1937)

La Valse for Two Pianos (1919-20)

Never in truly good health, Maurice Ravel managed to enter the armed forces in World War I as an ambulance driver, only to be discharged for medical reasons. He had witnessed the horrors of that execrable slaughter first-hand, and was left shaken by the deaths of six comrades memorialized in *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. Following the war, the composer gave delayed utterance to an idea he had held in check for several years: a musical homage to Johann Strauss. Originally intending to call it *Wien* ("Vienna"), the bad taste left by the war led him to change the title to *La Valse*. In any case, the immediate motivation to write the work came from a commission from the renowned impresario Serge Diaghilev, for whom Ravel had composed *Daphnis et Chloé* in 1912. When completed, Diaghilev declared the new work "a masterpiece, but not a ballet." Ravel's mastery of the piano is evidenced in this transformation of the vibrant and well known orchestral score into a thoroughly idiomatic two-piano version in 1921.

Filled with loving reminiscences and gestures of appreciation to the "waltz king," *La Valse* goes far beyond the notion of a breezy romp in 3/4 time.

Powerful undercurrents of darkness permeate this brilliant score, bearing witness to the haunting memories of the dreadful war years. The lilt of the waltz metamorphoses into a threatening and assaultive sequence of dissonant chords and rhythmic dislocations, bringing the work to a disquieting close.

FRANZ SCHUBERT

(1797-1828)

String Quintet in C Major, D. 956 (1828)

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 psyche. Though healthy through his early 20s a bout of syphilis in 1822 brought the young man perilously close to death's door. Though he recovered physically (only to die of typhoid fever six years hence), the encounter with his mortality deepened his music considerably.

In his final year, Schubert created a number of magnificent chamber works, including the Quintet for Strings in C Major, generally called the "Cello" quintet to distinguish its deployment of a second cello from the "normal" complement of a string quartet with added viola. In so doing Schubert essentially reincarnated Boccherini's identically scored quintets.

Schubert's "Cello" Quintet's rich melodic profile and aching humanity have assured its composer a place among the immortals. It is no surprise that musicians and audiences alike count it among the most beautiful chamber works ever written. One respected annotator wrote of this quintet, "In nobility of conception, beauty of melody, and variety of mood it is without equal."

The very opening measures of the first movement *Allegro ma non troppo* are simplicity itself: the four upper strings play a simple C major chord that swells and contracts before moving into new harmonies attended by gradually increasing emotion. After the music intensifies in feeling, Schubert brings forth a disarming melody of

exquisite tenderness, a lovely and loving tune that stands in splendid contrast to the fervor that surrounds it. The movement proceeds as a journey through an emotions-rich landscape, guided with a master's sure hand for beguiling melody and expressive harmony.

The *Adagio* in the remote key E Major invites us to share in the profound sadness of a hitherto healthy and energetic young man ravaged by live-threatening disease, though the music is by no means maudlin or mawkish. It is, however, ravishing in its lyricism and brilliantly imaginative in its explorative harmonic modulations. Here the presence of a second cello adds soul-stirring grief and an almost orchestral grandeur. The upwardly reaching main theme given by the first violin is touchingly accompanied by pizzicatos from the second cello and richly expressive chords from the middle strings. Seemingly out of nowhere, the music suddenly grows increasingly restive, anxiety-ridden and almost unbearably intense. Low-pitched rumblings in the cello darken matters further. (Similar unearthly sounds darken the first movement of his great posthumous B-flat Major Piano Sonata.) Long silences, a feature of much late-Schubert keyboard and chamber music, haunt the proceedings. Near the end of the movement a flare-up of these smoldering feelings resurfaces, only to be replaced by a mood of quiet acceptance.

At first, relief appears to come to the *Scherzo* in the guise of a stroll in the countryside. Hunting calls mingle with folk-dance gestures in what seems initially like a bracing affirmation of renewed vigor. Yet there is something of a manic, as opposed to genuinely happy, quality herein. The sad mood and slow pace of the Trio, marked *Andante sostenuto*, suggest that the enthusiastic and outdoorsy mood of the *Scherzo* proper may have been a brilliant, even irresistible ruse—a kind of “denial,” as it were.

Yet though the concluding *Allegretto* has moments of repressed despair, its rollicking, rhythmically infectious demeanor suggests not so much a resignation to fate but a determination to get on with life. A fusion of sonata and rondo, its pages abound in ingratiating themes beginning with a paprika-flavored rambunctious dance tune, followed by a warm and lyrical melody associated with Viennese *Gemütlichkeit*. Any doubts about Schubert's determined optimism are dispelled in the up-tempo coda, which ends spiritedly on a positive note. It seems almost cruel to note that two months after he completed the Quintet, Schubert was dead.

Program Notes by Steven Lowe
