

WINTER FESTIVAL



SEATTLE
CHAMBER
MUSIC
SOCIETY

JANUARY 31, 2015

7:30 PM

PROGRAM

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Sonata for Violin and Piano in B-flat Major, K. 454

Largo—Allegro

Andante

Rondo: Allegretto

Karen Gomyo *violin* / **Anton Nel** *piano*

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Six Épigraphe antiques for Piano, Four-Hands

Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'Été ("For invoking Pan, god of the summer wind")

Pour un tombeau sans nom ("For a tomb without name")

Pour que la nuit soit propice ("So that the night may be propitious")

Pour la danseuse aux crotales ("For the dancer with crotales")

Pour l'égyptienne ("For the Egyptian girl")

Pour remercier le pluie au matin ("For thanking the morning rain")

Orion Weiss and **William Wolfram** *piano*

INTERMISSION

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Sextet for Strings in B-flat Major, Op. 18

Allegro ma non troppo

Andante, ma moderato

Scherzo: Allegro molto—Trio: Animato

Rondo: Poco Allegretto e grazioso

James Ehnes *violin* / **Yosuke Kawasaki** *violin* / **Che-Yen Chen** *viola* / **Beth Guterman Chu** *viola* /

Wendy Sutter *cello* / **Andrés Díaz** *cello*

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

(1756-1791)

Sonata for Violin and Piano in B-flat Major, K. 454 (1784)

Mozart occupies a high spot in the pantheon of truly great composers, yet during his foreshortened but famously productive lifetime he was even better known to the public as a superb pianist. Renowned less for his technique (which was exemplary) than for his improvisatory powers, his legacy of more than two dozen piano concertos, plus copious numbers of solo sonatas and incidental works, reinforced the association of Mozart with the piano. Yet—no surprise—he was also a master violinist (and violist, which role he preferred to fill when performing string quartets).

Naturally, he wrote frequently and fluently for the violin and piano in combination. As was customary at the time, Mozart termed his early examples “sonatas for piano with violin *ad libitum*” but not the later Sonata in B-flat Major, K. 454, which he characterized as sonatas for piano with violin accompaniment, still putting the keyboard first yet according the violinist essentially equivalent status. In comparison with many of the earlier sonatas, K. 454 demands a string player of consummate skill.

The opening movement starts with an unhurried and stately *Largo* shared by the two players; it quickly retreats into a tender and lyrically rocking statement that pauses before launching into a swiftly flowing *Allegro* in which conversational give-and-take alternates with passages of parallel lines. The overall mood is clearly positive throughout this engaging movement.

An *Andante* follows in which a relatively spare piano accompaniment supports the soaring violin line. Mozart achieves a masterly blend of cantabile singing and virtuosity. An episode in the minor darkens the emotional level while maintaining enchanting lyricism. Though the piano

has moments of prominence throughout the movement the violin remains the dominant voice.

As if to stress the importance of the violin Mozart opens the concluding *Rondo: Allegretto* with a skipping statement first uttered by the stringed instrument. The intervening episodes sandwiched between reprises of the main theme give Mozart the opportunity to give expression to his penchant for unexpected and delectable melodic twists and turns. The movement ends in a brief virtuosic flurry.

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

(1862-1918)

Six Épigrapbes antiques for Piano, Four-Hands (1914)

What Chopin had done for the piano earlier in the second quarter of the 19th century, Debussy accomplished from roughly 1890 to the onset of the First World War. His genius to create new sounds, to coax the piano’s complex mechanics into myriad shadings of light and darkness, textures that danced like light on water, and harmonies whose radiance disguised their revolutionary displacement of major-minor tonality with modal-inspired chordal arrangements—all these are the hallmarks of Debussy’s piano-writing. Though not a prolific composer, he wrote a fair amount of music for the piano, the only instrument he could play with any degree of authority. The major part of his keyboard output was for solo piano, but his canon includes a few for piano duet: the early *Petite Suite*, a brief and lively *Marche écossaise*, and his *Six Épigrapbes antiques* of 1914.

In composing the last-named work Debussy used material from his 1901 song cycle *Chansons de Bilitis*, a setting of a half-dozen erotic poems from Pierre Louÿs’s eponymous work. “For Invoking Pan, god of the summer wind” evokes the sound of panpipes in its depiction of a lazy summer day. The elegiac

“For a tomb without name” is followed by the languid “So that the night may be propitious.” “For the dancer with crotales” (small hand-held metal cymbals known as “antique cymbals”) is a glittering and mercurial work that reflects Debussy’s enchantment for exotic sounds. A much darker, even dissonant tone marks “For the Egyptian girl.” The concluding “For thanking the morning rain” is something of an *étude* for the pianists with its rapid-fire figures.

JOHANNES BRAHMS

(1833–1897)

Sextet for Strings in B-flat Major, Op. 18 (1858–60)

Much of Brahms’ finest music resides in his substantial canon of chamber works. In addition to three string quartets, he composed three piano quartets, five trios of varied instrumentation, four quintets (also for a variety of instruments) and a pair of string sextets. The sextet is a format with relatively few representatives in the repertoire. Beyond Brahms’ twosome are Tchaikovsky’s *Souvenir of Florence*, another by Dvořák, and Schoenberg’s early *Verklaerte Nacht*. Both Tchaikovsky’s and Schoenberg’s sextets also exist in string orchestra arrangements where they have been able to capture a larger audience but are in no way inherently superior to their modestly scored originals. Indeed, they lose a degree of clarity and intimacy.

Brahms’ sextets command a nearly orchestral heft but still retain the textural clarity of true chamber writing. Robert Schumann’s insightful comment that Brahms’ early sonatas were “veiled symphonies” could have equally applied to the Op. 18 Sextet. Orchestral music was on the younger composer’s mind when he began working on this piece in 1858. At that moment he was simultaneously crafting the two serenades for orchestra, often seen as warm-ups for the psychologically daunting task of writing his first symphony. The overall

emotional tenor of the Sextet was far lighter than his recently completed Piano Concerto No. 1, a powerful and turbulent work in which he expressed anger and grief in response to Schumann’s death in 1856; by 1858 he had regained his equilibrium and was, in fact, in a hopeful and optimistic mood.

The B-flat Sextet opens with an expansive *Allegro ma non troppo* whose broadly flowing main theme recalls the equivalent melody that initiates the composer’s Op. 8 Piano Trio—in both cases spun by a cello. Two subsidiary themes ensue: a brief and sad descending figure courtesy of the first violin, followed by a rocking tune from the entire ensemble gently prodded by pizzicatos. Additional variants of the primary melodic material infuse the movement, moving at times into the minor mode and thereby imparting a wistful quality enhanced by casting much of the music in the middle and lower registers. In the recapitulation Brahms revisits the opening material before a brief coda.

Throughout his life Brahms obviously loved Hungarian folk and Gypsy music, reflecting his long friendship with Hungarian-born violinist and composer Joseph Joachim. One of many instances of this enchantment is found in the Sextet’s *Andante, ma moderato*, a stalwart Hungarian-inspired theme and six variations. Throughout the movement an emphatic rhythmic figure urges the music onward. Cast in D minor (except for the fourth variation) Brahms cannily alternates passages of inexorable forward motion with quiet understated moments of reflection. Elsewhere rapid and energetic scalar motion is balanced by the aforementioned fourth variation, a rich hymn-like episode followed by a sparsely scored emulation of a music box. The concluding variation returns to restatement of the opening theme, once again in D minor with its rhythmic underscoring.

A brisk *Scherzo: Allegro molto* brings a rousing dose of unhindered jauntiness replete with syncopated accents. The mid-movement *Trio: Animato* ups the bouncing pace further in an energetic gallop before returning to opening *Scherzo* music and a final zestful coda.

Brahms' classical period structural proclivities mark the concluding *Rondo: Poco Allegretto e grazioso*. Note the similar shape and demeanor of the graceful first and second themes to the work's opening music. After repeating this material at a higher pitch Brahms balances the Mozart-inspired lightness of the primary material with a forceful episode from the violins and violas. The finale's sectional construction provides time for dramatic outbursts that serve to reinforce the music's overall sweet lyricism. After a gentle pizzicato-laden interlude the pace accelerates to a hearty finish.

Program Notes by Steven Lowe
