Program Notes

CONCERT

A Free People (SCMS Co-Commission)
KIAN RAVAEI
Born: 1999
Composed: 2025

A Free People was commissioned by the Mimir Chamber Music Festival, Seattle Chamber Music Society, and Charlottesville Chamber Music Festival for the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. The first and last movements set the Declaration's opening and closing words, while the second movement deals with its longest, yet least often talked about, section: a list of grievances against a cruel and tyrannical king. Musical references from the Revolutionary era abound, including drum and fife music, bugle calls, the British patriotic song Rule Britannia (which is also the opening theme of Beethoven's Wellington's Victory), and a paraphrase of The Star-Spangled Banner. The unnarrated third movement, "Of Bondage and Freedom," reflects the history of the American people up to the present day, asking if we have lived up to the ideals of the Declaration over the last quarter of a millennium.

Program note by Kian Ravaei.

Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor, Op. 49
FELIX MENDELSSOHN
Born: 1809
Died: 1847
Composed: 1839

I. Molto allegro agitato
II. Andante con moto tranquillo
III. Scherzo. Leggiero e vivace
IV. Finale. Allegro assai appassionato

From 1835 until 1846 Mendelssohn was conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. Not only were these the happiest and most productive years of the composer's life, but they also marked one of the most distinguished associations ever between a conductor and an orchestra. During his tenure in Leipzig, Mendelssohn raised both performance standards and the salaries of the players, lengthened the season, and worked hard to introduce unfamiliar music to new audiences, seeking out the music of both contemporary and forgotten composers. Once the busy concert season was over, Mendelssohn would use the summer to rest and compose. In the summer of 1839—shortly after he had conducted the premiere of Schubert's "Great" Symphony in C Major—Mendelssohn took his wife and young children to Frankfurt for a rest. He had long intended to write chamber music that would include piano, and on June 6 he set to work on the Trio in D minor. The score was finished on July 18, but Mendelssohn continued to tinker with it until the end of the summer, and he was the pianist at the trio's premiere in Leipzig on February 1, 1840.

Impassioned, full of good tunes, and beautifully written for the three instruments, the Trio in D minor has always been an audience favorite. Both the trio and its composer were extravagantly praised in Robert Schumann's review of the premiere:

> It is the master trio of today, as in their day were those of Beethoven in B flat and D, as was that of Schubert in E flat; a wholly fine composition, that, when years have passed away, will delight grandchildren. Mendelssohn is the Mozart of the nineteenth century, the brightest among musicians, the one who looks most clearly of all through the contradictions of time, and reconciles us to them.

What Schumann meant by that final line has been open to some debate—Mendelssohn's music hardly seems to admit the existence of contradictions, let alone resolve them—but there is no denying this trio's appeal.

The opening Molto allegro ed agitato is dramatic music, and Mendelssohn's performance markings suggest the kind of performance he wanted—in the score continually admonishes the performers that their playing should be animato, agitato, and marcato. An unusual feature of this movement is that it is the cello that introduces both principal themes: the dramatic opening subject and the flowing second theme, which Mendelssohn marks cantabile.

The Andante con molto tranquillo brings sharp contrast. Piano alone has the serene opening melody, a continuous flow of song, and the violin and cello are frequently cast in supporting roles here, decorating and embellishing the piano's music. The scherzo—Leggiero e vivace—is one of those fleet and graceful fast movements that only Mendelssohn could write (and which he could apparently write at will). It sounds very much like the scampering fairyland scenes from his incidental music to A Midsummer Night's Dream, but it also brings some surprises: this scherzo is in 6/8 rather than the expected 3/4, and it has no trio section.

The finale returns to the mood and manner of the dramatic opening movement. Mendelssohn marks it "Very fast and impassioned," and the music sometimes drives to moments of an almost orchestral intensity. The second theme-group arrives on a big, soaring cello tune, and Mendelssohn alternates these quite different kinds of music before a superheated coda drives the trio to its emphatic conclusion, now firmly in D Major.

Piano Quartet No. 3 in C minor, Op. 60
JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born: 1833
Died: 1897
Composed: 1875

I. Allegro non troppo
II. Scherzo. Allegro
III. Andante
IV. Finale. Allegro comodo

While it is difficult—and dangerous!—to search for biographical significance in a piece of music, Brahms' Piano Quartet in C minor is one of those works that seems to cry out for such an interpretation. Brahms labored on the quartet for twenty years before it was first performed in Vienna on November 18, 1875. He had begun work on it in 1855 when as a young man of 22 he found himself part of the Schumann household during the cataclysmic period of Robert's rapid decline in a mental institution. Torn between his friendship with the dying Robert and his hopeless love for the suffering Clara, Brahms turned inward. He began three piano quartets during the year 1855 and completed two of them. The last, the most personal and powerful of the three, he put away—this was not music he was ready to take before the public.

But by 1868 he had begun to think about revising it, a process that took several more years. To a friend he tried to describe the spirit of the music: "Imagine a man for whom nothing is left, and who wishes to put an end to himself." When he finally completed the score in 1875, Brahms suggested to his publisher: "On the cover you must have a picture, a head with a pistol pointed towards it. Now you can form an idea of the music! For this purpose I will send you my photograph! Blue coat, yellow breeches and top-boots would do well . . . " The blue coat and yellow breeches refer to the hero in Goethe's The Sorrows of the Young Werther. In that novel, Werther—a young man of sensitive and artistic nature—takes his own life when the woman he loves marries someone

else, and at some level Brahms clearly identified with the romantic young hero whose love was unrequited.

Brahms revised the quartet thoroughly. He transposed it from the original (and unusual) key of C-sharp minor into C minor, and he added an extra movement, a scherzo, to the original three-movement form. He also destroyed his first finale and wrote an entirely new one, as well as completely revising the surviving movements. With his usual self-deprecation, Brahms described the final version to his publisher: "the Quartet is half old, half new—the whole thing isn't worth much!"

Brahms' description of the music as both old and new is quite accurate: to the Sturm und Drang music of a composer in his early twenties he brought the technical skill of a seasoned composer in his forties. If the opening movement does not strike the modern listener as music for a man on the verge of suicide, it is nevertheless somber and serious. The piano's opening—a unison C four octaves deep—is quickly answered by the three strings, whose falling half-step will recur throughout. The piano alone has the second theme, unmistakably Brahmsian in its nobility and breadth; in an original touch, Brahms quickly presents four variations on this theme, highly unorthodox in a sonata-form movement. The development is dramatic, with the two-note figure hammering darkly into the listener's consciousness before the movement comes to a quiet close.

The piano introduces the main idea of the Scherzo, built on a propulsive 6/8 meter. This short movement is extremely focused: a brief section for strings marked espressivo functions as a trio section before the menacing pound of the original rhythm returns to drive the movement to its close.

Some critics have regarded the Andante as a love-song, and given the mood of the music and the circumstances of its composition, such a conclusion may well be justified. It opens with a long flow of golden song from the cello—this extended melody is accompanied just by the piano, and only much later do the violin and then the viola join them. The mood of the music is intimate, and that intimacy is only a little ruffled by the extended syncopations of the development. In a wonderful touch, Brahms gives the reprise of the opening theme to the piano, which is accompanied by pizzicato strings, and on fragments of that opening melody this expressive music comes to its quiet close. By contrast, the Finale returns to the C-minor urgency of the opening. Brahms' marking—Allegro comodo—suggests a leisurely or moderate tempo, but the mood of the music is dark and insistent throughout. The second theme is a chorale for strings, and the development has a great deal of sweep, with the main theme returning in a grand unison for the strings. Curiously, the movement stays in C minor until the very end, when Brahms wrenches it into C Major with the final two chords, as if unwilling to conclude with an ending as dark as all that has gone before. But after those final two chords have faded, it is the dark, troubled urgency of this music that stays to haunt the memory.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger.