Program Notes

PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

Sonata for Violin and Piano in D minor, Op. 9
KAROL SZYMANOWSKI
Born: 1882
Died: 1937
Composed: 1904

I. Allegro moderato
II. Andantino tranquillo e dolce
III. Finale. Allegro molto, quasi presto

Karol Szymanowski composed his single violin sonata in 1904, when he was only 22 and still taking private composition lessons in Warsaw. The passions that would shape his mature music were still ahead of him when he wrote this sonata, which is cast in the standard three-movement form of the classical violin sonata. This music remained in manuscript for five years before it was premiered in Warsaw on April 19, 1909, by two young musicians who were to remain life-long champions of Szymanowski's music: the violinist was Paul Kochanski, who would later receive the dedication of both of Szymanowski's violin concertos, and the pianist was Artur Rubinstein.

Though it may take the general form of the classical sonata, Szymanowski's Violin Sonata is remarkable for its brilliance and expressive freedom. Much of the writing has a cadenza-like freedom (passages written in octaves, great runs and leaps, sections marked ad lib), and Szymanowski's markings in the score emphasize the particular character he wants in a performance: passionato, agitato, precipitato, con passione, patetico. This is intense music, particularly in its outer movements, and it is sometimes driven by a virtuosity that seems more suited to the concert hall than to the restrained atmosphere of chamber music.

The powerful beginning of the Allegro moderato, with its upward rush and jagged contours, establishes this character, though the opening episode quickly gives way to a more subdued and lyric secondary section marked dolcissimo. Such sudden changes of mood will mark this sonata, and Szymanowski's Passionato indication for the development is exactly right; much of the writing for the violin here is quite high in its register. The movement concludes quietly with a quiet coda that is nominally in D Major, yet retains much of the D-minor tension of the main body of the movement.

The Andantino tranquillo e dolce opens with a limpid piano theme almost reminiscent of Debussy, and—following its cadenza-like entrance—the violin picks up this same melody and soars high with it. The striking central episode makes imaginative use of pizzicato writing (some of it left-handed pizzicato), before the return of the opening material, now elaborated much more actively.

The three quiet A's that conclude the slow movement return to launch the Finale, but now they come with a sudden brutality that plunges the music back into the D-minor turbulence of the opening movement. This finale rides furiously along its 6/8 meter, and while there are calmer interludes along the way, the principal impression here is of a barely-contained energy. Once again Szymanowski moves to D Major in the final pages, but there is little sense of triumph in these closing moments, and the Presto coda concludes on a massive unison D from both instruments that remains harmonically ambiguous. It makes a powerful ending to a very impressive sonata by a very young composer.

Hungarian Dances Nos. 7, 2, and 5
JOHANNES BRAHMS
Born: 1833
Died: 1897
Composed: 1869

As a very young man, Brahms fell in love with Hungarian music. He was introduced to traditional Romani fiddle tunes when—at the age of 20—he went on tour with the Hungarian violinist Eduard Reményi, and Brahms immediately began his lifelong collection of Hungarian folk-tunes. Over a period of many years, he wrote twenty-one Hungarian Dances for piano four-hands and published them in two sets, in 1869 and 1880. The Hungarian Dances are not transcriptions of traditional tunes—they are original compositions by Brahms, based on authentic folk melodies. But Brahms very successfully assimilated this traditional style, with its passionate melodies and quick key shifts. It is no surprise that this music instantly became popular with audiences around the world.

It also became popular with performers, and the Hungarian Dances soon appeared in many arrangements. Brahms himself arranged some of the dances for solo piano and orchestrated three others, while his good friend Dvořák—who found the inspiration for his own Slavonic Dances in this music—orchestrated the last five. Joseph Joachim arranged several for violin and piano, and many other violinists, Fritz Kreisler and Jascha Heifetz among them, have made similar arrangements: this music sounds particularly good on the violin. The present program offers Hungarian Dances Nos. 7, 2, and 5. Audiences will discover that they already know much of this music, in particular the famous Fifth, but all three breathe the same captivating atmosphere, full of haunting tunes and fiery rhythms.

CONCERT

String Trio in G Major, Op. 9 No. 1
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Born: 1770
Died: 1827
Composed: 1797–1798

I. Adagio — Allegro con brio
II. Adagio ma non tanto e cantabile
III. Scherzo. Allegro
IV. Presto

"The best of my works," crowed the young Beethoven to his friend and patron Count Johann Georg von Browne in 1798. He was describing the set of string trios he had written over the previous two years, which he dedicated to Browne. He was probably right, for these three concise trios represent a clear advance over the chamber works and piano sonatas he had published to that date. The string trio (violin, viola, and cello) is a challenging form, for the composer must do without the second violin that completes the harmony in the string quartet. Beethoven responded to the challenge with works of power and individuality: all three trios have four movements, two have powerful scherzos, and throughout the set Beethoven experiments with form. Yet for all his pride in these string trios—and for all his success with them—Beethoven never returned to this form. By the time he published them, he was deeply engaged in writing his first cycle of string quartets, and in that form he discovered much greater expressive possibilities.

Of the set of string trios, the stormy Third—in C minor—has become the most famous, but the gentler First—in G Major—is just as striking, perhaps because it is crowned by a stunning slow movement. It is also the only one of the three with a slow introduction; this weighty Adagio sets up the rhythmic spring of the Allegro con brio, a sonata-form movement full of nobility of line and fluid ease of writing. Beethoven provides repeats of both exposition and development before a lively coda drives

the movement to its close. Along the way, alert listeners may recognize the thematic kernel that would become the near-obsessive main theme of the first movement of Beethoven's first string quartet: he was working on the set of quartets as he prepared these trios for publication.

The noble slow movement, carefully marked Adagio ma non tanto e cantabile, is based on two long-spanned melodies, both heartfelt in their intensity. Beethoven sets this movement in 3/4, but the actual pulse is 9/8, and within this he makes further metric subdivisions—this seemingly gentle movement grows more complex as it proceeds, and the young composer makes effective use of silence at some points, a mark of acute control.

The lively Scherzo has some unusual points of its own. Its brief but sturdy trio section does not lead to the expected da capo repeat; instead Beethoven writes out the return of the opening section and subtly varies it as he brings the movement to its close. The blistering Presto finale brings yet more surprises. It is in sonata form (rather than the expected rondo), and the opening theme falls into two parts: a perpetual-motion beginning gives way almost instantly to a melody so innocent that it sounds like a children's song. The true second theme, a soaring idea for violin and viola in octaves, is also developed, and Beethoven provides an exposition repeat. Full of brilliant passage-work and complex modulations, this movement requires the most skilled performers, and at the very end they are given a coda of breathtaking virtuosity.

String Quartet, Op. 11
SAMUEL BARBER

Born: 1910
Died: 1981
Composed: 1936

I. Molto allegro e appassionato
II. Molto adagio
III. Molto allegro come prima

Samuel Barber's only string quartet is fated to remain a sort of "phantom" piece—it will always be remembered as the work from which Barber's most famous music, the Adagio for Strings, was drawn. The 26-year-old Barber composed his String Quartet in B minor during the summer of 1936, which he spent in the Tyrol, and the quartet was premiered in Rome on December 14, 1936, by the Pro Arte Quartet. Barber arranged the quartet's slow movement for string orchestra, and when Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony gave the Adagio for Strings its first performance on November 5, 1938, the string quartet dropped into the shadows. The Adagio for Strings has become probably the most famous piece of American orchestral music ever composed, but today it is rarely heard in its original form.

Barber's String Quartet has a unique form: the Adagio, the middle movement, is framed by two fast outer movements. Both of these have the same marking—Molto allegro e appassionato—and both use the same thematic material. The quartet opens with a great unison outburst, and this opening contains the three-note kernel that underlies the outer movements; Barber stretches this figure many ways through the quartet, both as rhythm and theme-shape. Barber's harmonies in this movement depend on the intervals of the fourth, fifth, and sixth—so typical of American music from this period—and along the way come attractive subordinate themes. But in the background one always hears the opening three-note kernel dancing along or driving the music to a climax, and at the end of the movement the music vanishes on this rhythm.

The second movement is the familiar Adagio (here marked Molto adagio). Even before the quartet was played, Barber knew this movement would be a success; that summer he wrote to a friend: "I have just finished the slow movement of my quartet today—it is a knockout!" The solemn—and endlessly beautiful—melody passes from instrument to instrument until the music builds to a powerful climax and then fades away on a quiet final chord. Out of this chord, Barber immediately launches the finale, which springs to life on the three-note kernel from the opening movement. The last movement is quite short (barely two minutes), and Barber recapitulates his earlier material by telescoping it—several of the themes from the first movement now appear simultaneously. A very brief Presto coda drives the movement to a close on the three-note figure that has dominated the outer movements.

Piano Quartet in A minor, Op. 1

JOSEF SUK

Born: 1874
Died: 1935
Composed: 1891

I. Allegro appassionato
II. Adagio
III. Allegro con fuoco

Born in a rural Czech village, Josef Suk learned to play violin, piano, and organ as a boy and entered the Prague Conservatory at age 11. There he became Dvořák's favorite composition student, and he married Dvořák's daughter Otilie in 1898. While still at the Conservatory, Suk became the second violinist of the Czech Quartet, which over the next four decades would give more than 4000 concerts. Suk taught for many years at the Prague Conservatory, numbering Bohuslav Martinů and Fritz Reiner among his students, and his grandson was the violinist Josef Suk (1929-2011). Suk's music was admired by the aging Brahms, who helped arrange its publication, but the demands of teaching and performing with the quartet left little time for composing during Suk's later years. One late work deserves mention, though: at age 58, just three years before his death, Suk was awarded a prize for his march Toward a New Life, composed for the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles.

Suk composed his Piano Quartet in A minor in 1891, when he was 17 and still a student at the Prague Conservatory—it was in fact his graduation piece, and he published it as his Opus 1. It will come as no surprise that this youthful composition often sounds like the music of Dvořák, Suk's teacher and future father-in-law. The quartet remains impressive today for the sheer verve of the young composer's writing: this is big music—powerful, soaring, and full-throated. Suk marks the first movement Allegro appassionato, and it bursts to life with the three stringed instruments in octaves, soaring above the piano accompaniment. More lyric secondary material soon arrives, but the tone of this movement is dramatic, and it powers its way to an emphatic conclusion in A Major. In sharp contrast, the Adagio brings a world of calm. The cello sings the long main subject over pulsing piano accompaniment before a quicker central episode pushes the music forward gracefully. Its energy spent, this episode gives way to a long final section marked Recitativ. as the music trails off into silence. The Allegro con fuoco finale is indeed full of fire. It returns to the manner of the first movement, and Suk continually reminds his performers that their playing should be appassionato before he drives his Quartet in A minor to a conclusion of nearly symphonic proportions.

Hearing this powerful and assured music, it is easy to understand why the seventeen-year-old Suk was Dvořák's favorite student.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger.