

# Program Notes

## PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

### Theme and Variations

#### ALAN SHULMAN

Born: 1915

Died: 2002

Composed: 1940

- Theme
- Variation I
- Variation II
- Variation III
- Variation IV
- Variation V
- Variation VI
- Variation VII

Alan Schulman came from a family of extraordinary musicians. Born in Baltimore, he studied first at the Peabody Conservatory, then at Juilliard, and from there went on to private study of cello with Emanuel Feuermann and composition with Paul Hindemith. In 1937 Schulman and his violinist brother David became charter members of the NBC Symphony Orchestra, which was being formed specifically for Arturo Toscanini; at that time Schulman, age 22, was the youngest cellist in the orchestra. Schulman made his musical career in many ways. As a cellist he was a member of the Kreiner, Stuyvesant, and Haydn String Quartets, he worked as an arranger, he taught (among his students was Nelson Riddle, who became one of the greatest of arrangers), and he also wrote popular songs. He composed in many different forms, and his music was performed by such conductors as Cantelli, Mitropoulos, Bernstein, Barbirolli, and Dorati and by such soloists as Jascha Heifetz and Leonard Rose.

Schulman composed his Theme and Variations in 1940, when he was 25, and it was first performed by violist Emanuel Vardi at a concert that Toscanini attended. The music was an instant success (it remains Schulman's most popular composition), and he quickly arranged

it for viola with accompaniment of either full or chamber orchestra. It is heard at this concert in its original version for viola and piano.

The viola immediately announces the work's very attractive fundamental theme. Marked *Andante moderato*, this poised melody is built on constantly shifting meters (3/4, 2/4, 4/4), and it is not so much an individual "theme" as it is a song-like structure built around repeated phrases that can be varied in many ways. Schulman then offers seven variations that are very nicely written for the viola—these generally remain within the rich middle and lower registers of that instrument. The variations alternate melodic, meditative versions with more quick-paced and extroverted appearances; along the way, Schulman offers a brief cadenza for the unaccompanied violist.

The Theme and Variations has become a part of the viola repertory, and those interested in this music should know that it is available in many recordings.

### Rhapsody No. 2 for solo viola

#### JESSIE MONTGOMERY

Born: 1981

Composed: 2020

The daughter of theater and musical artists, Jessie Montgomery learned to play the violin as a child and earned her bachelors degree in violin performance from Juilliard and her masters in composition from New York University. She is one of the featured composers of the New York Philharmonic's Project 19, in which nineteen women composers have been commissioned to write a work in celebration of the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave American women the right to vote. Montgomery is currently the Curtis School of Music's Composer-in-Residence and is a doctoral candidate in music composition at Princeton.

Montgomery's Rhapsody No. 2 for Solo Viola is one of a series of rhapsodies she has written for solo instruments, and she has explained her intention in writing these pieces:

The collection of six solo works pays homage to the tradition of J.S. Bach's solo violin sonatas and partitas, his suites for solo cello and the six solo violin sonatas of Eugène Ysaÿe. In paying tribute to this archetypal tradition, I have chosen to elaborate by writing for a variety of solo voices across instrument families—violin, viola, flute, bassoon, and double bass—so that the final rhapsody in the cycle is a five-part chamber work for all of the instruments in the collection. This piece represents my excitement for collaboration, as each solo work is written in collaboration with the premiere performer, and my love for chamber music as a staple in my current output. (Jessie Montgomery)

Montgomery's Rhapsody No. 2 is her own transcription for viola of her Rhapsody No. 2 for Solo Violin, originally composed 2020. On her website, the composer has noted that "This virtuosic piece was commissioned by and written for composer and violinist Michi Wiancko on the album *Planetary Candidate* and is inspired in part by Béla Bartók."

The Rhapsody No. 2 is in a general ternary form. The opening section, marked *Quick*, is based on a steady rush of sixteenth-notes; this section has some of the ebullient, exciting energy of the final movement of Bach's Sonata No. 1 in G minor for Unaccompanied Violin, also built on a cascading rush of sixteenth-notes. The middle section is slow and played almost entirely in double-stops; the Rhapsody gradually returns to its opening tempo and is rounded off with a brief recall of the opening section.

## Theme from Schindler's List

### JOHN WILLIAMS

Born: 1932

Composed: 1993

Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, which opened in December 1993, told the story of the German businessman Oskar Schindler, who used his position as head of an enamelware factory in Krakow to save thousands of Jews during the Holocaust. The film won a total of seven Academy Awards, and one of these was for Best Original Score, which had been composed by John Williams. The Spielberg-Williams collaboration is now over fifty years old (Williams has provided the scores for all but two of Spielberg's films), and *Schindler's List* proved one of their most successful efforts—it won the Academy Award for Best Picture and has been hailed as perhaps Spielberg's finest film.

For the principal theme of the movie, Williams composed a haunting melody scored for violin and orchestra. Williams wrote it specifically with Itzhak Perlman in mind, and it was Perlman who played the violin on the movie's soundtrack. That melody, nostalgic and achingly beautiful, captures perfectly the sense of what was lost in the Holocaust, and it has become one of Williams' most frequently performed concert works. Its three-part form is simplicity itself: solo violin sings the main theme, the brief center section is at a slightly quicker tempo, and the opening melody—now varied—returns to round the piece off. The music is heard at this concert in an arrangement for viola and piano.

# CONCERT

## Piano Trio in A minor, Op. 150

### AMY BEACH

Born: 1867

Died: 1944

Composed: 1938

- I. Allegro moderato
- II. Lento espressivo
- III. Allegro con brio

Amy Beach deserves to be remembered as more than just America's first successful woman composer, as she is often categorized. A child prodigy, she appeared as piano soloist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at 17 and began composing while still a girl. At age 18 she married the Boston surgeon H.H.A. Beach, who—though a cultivated man musically—did not want his wife performing in public. He did, however, encourage her to compose. Beach had no formal training as a composer (which in her day meant European training), and as a composer she was essentially self-taught. Nevertheless, over the next several decades she produced a sequence of successful large-scale works. Her Mass in E-flat (1890) was the first work by a woman composer presented by Boston's Haydn and Handel Society, and her "Gaelic" Symphony (1897) and Piano Concerto (1900) were performed to critical acclaim. Upon the death of her husband in 1910, Beach—then 43—resumed her career as a concert pianist, making a particularly successful series of tours through Europe. She composed prolifically throughout her life: though her list of opus numbers runs to 152, she actually wrote about 300 works. She was still active as pianist and composer at the time of her death in 1944 at 77.

In her later years Beach liked to spend her summers at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, and it was there during the summer of 1938 that she composed her Piano Trio in A minor. She was 71 years old, and it would be her final piece of chamber music. The Trio is an unusually concise work: its three movements

span a total of only fifteen minutes. The opening Allegro gets off to an active but subdued beginning on a series of deep piano runs. Beach marks these *murmurando e legatissimo* ("murmuring and bound tightly together"). Cello and violin enter with what at first seem thematic fragments, but these gradually coalesce into the first theme. The music reaches a moment of repose, and then violin and cello lay out the second idea in a section marked *Tranquillo*. The opening material returns and drives to a great climax marked *Maestoso* ("majestic") as the strings' melody is underpinned by hammered octaves from the piano. Its energy spent, the movement subsides to a shimmering conclusion.

The central movement of the Piano Trio, marked *Lento espressivo*, is in ABA form. Its outer sections are based on Beach's own 1897 setting of Heinrich Heine's poem *Allein*, a poem that had previously been set by such composers as Schubert, Clara Schumann, Grieg, and Wolf. Violin and cello sing the long main melody of the song in 6/8, and eventually the music comes to an expectant pause. The central episode is of unusual interest because it is based on quite a different song-tune. Nearly twenty years earlier, Beach had become interested in building a work on native materials: she drew three tunes from Franz Boas' study of Inuit tribes and used them as the basis for her one-movement String Quartet. Now that interest returned, and she builds the central episode of the Piano Trio on another Inuit tune, here marked *Presto*. This tune dances nimbly along its 2/4 meter before the piano leads the movement back to its opening material. Beach rounds the movement off nicely with a quick reminiscence of the Inuit tune. After two fairly well-behaved movements, the concluding Allegro con brio brings a welcome measure of slashing energy. The music surges ahead propulsively, much of its energy coming from Beach's constantly syncopated rhythms. The movement builds to a grand climax, once again marked *Maestoso*, and drives to an equally grand conclusion.

The first performance of the Piano Trio took place on January 15, 1939 at the MacDowell Club in New York City. Beach was the pianist on that occasion.

## **Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Major, Op. 78**

### **JOHANNES BRAHMS**

Born: 1833

Died: 1897

Composed: 1878–1897

- I. *Vivace ma non troppo*
- II. *Adagio*
- III. *Allegro molto moderato*

Brahms spent three consecutive summers—1877–79—in the small town of Pörschach on the Wörthersee in southern Austria, where he could escape the heat of Vienna and enjoy a setting of unbelievable beauty. To a friend he wrote to marvel “how all the mountains round the blue lake are white with snow, while the trees are covered with delicate green.” In 1878, during his second summer at Pörschach, Brahms wrote for the violin. From that summer came the Violin Concerto, and he quickly began a sonata for violin and piano, though that would not be completed until he returned the following June. The dramatic concerto and the gentle sonata could not be more dissimilar, and it is tempting to think that Brahms may have used his fiery and extroverted ideas for the violin in the concerto, reserving the more lyric and intimate ones for the sonata.

The First Violin Sonata is one of those rare things in Brahms’ music, an instrumental piece based on extra-musical associations, in this case two songs Brahms had written in 1873: *Regenlied* (“Rain-Song”) and *Nachklang* (“Memories”). It is also unusual in that it is unified around a tiny rhythmic cell that appears in many guises throughout the sonata. This cell—a simple dotted figure—is heard at the very beginning of the *Vivace ma non troppo*. The piano opens the sonata with quietly-tolling chords, and the violin quickly enters with the gentle main theme: the violin’s first three notes, all D’s, form the cell that

will shape much of the sonata. There are several other themes in this sonata-form movement, but the music is remarkable for its consistent lyricism—Brahms avoids extroverted gestures and keeps the mood reflective, almost nostalgic. Solo piano introduces the main theme of the *Adagio*, and only gradually does the violin take up this melody. The emotional outbursts absent from the first movement appear here, and near the end of the movement the violin—in double-stops—gently restates the main theme. The rhythmic cell of the first movement appears in the *Adagio* as a quiet accompaniment figure.

The haunting finale, *Allegro molto moderato*, is a rondo in G minor, based on the violin’s opening melody. This opening is a direct quotation from Brahms’ song *Regenlied*, and the text of that song is very much a part of the spirit of this movement. In the song, a speaker looks out through a window as rain falls against it, stirring his memories: “Pour down, rain; awake in me the songs we used to sing in the doorway when it rained outside. Would I could listen again to you, hear that sweet splashing and dissolve my soul in the wonder of childhood.” Once again, the first three notes of the violin’s theme, all D’s, repeat the sonata’s rhythmic cell, which will be heard throughout this movement. Beneath the violin’s flowing melodic line, the piano keeps up a patter of sixteenth-notes, clearly the sound of rain tapping gently on the window, and this lulling sound continues through much of the movement (a generation or two ago, this sonata was in fact nicknamed the “Rain” Sonata). Brahms breaks the rondo with several contrasting episodes, and in a remarkable touch, one of these is the theme from the *Adagio*, which soon threatens to take over the end of the movement. At the coda, the music moves to G Major (marked *dolcissimo*), and Brahms weaves together the heartfelt *Adagio* theme with the main theme of the finale as this ravishing music soars to its gentle conclusion on the quiet patter of rain.

Many years later—in 1890—Brahms’ good friend Clara Schumann wrote to tell the composer

that she had just played the sonata with their mutual friend Joseph Joachim and that she had once more been astonished and moved by the final movement. Her concluding words capture perfectly the spirit of this radiant music: "I always wish that the last movement might accompany me on my journey from here to the next world."

## **String Quintet No. 1 in A Major, Op. 18**

### **FELIX MENDELSSOHN**

Born: 1809

Died: 1847

Composed: 1826

- I. Allegro con moto
- II. Intermezzo. Andante sostenuto
- III. Scherzo. Allegro di molto
- IV. Allegro vivace

The String Quintet in A Major is a product of Mendelssohn's extraordinarily precocious youth: he completed it in March 1826, shortly after his seventeenth birthday. The Quintet thus comes between the two masterpieces of Mendelssohn's youth, the Octet for Strings, composed the previous year, and the Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream, written the following year. Mendelssohn, who was an undergraduate at Berlin University when he wrote the Quintet, allowed the music to sit in manuscript for several years. And then came an event that changed the entire shape of this piece.

On January 23, 1832, Mendelssohn's friend Eduard Rietz died. Rietz was more than just a friend to the composer. Only seven years older than Mendelssohn, he had been the young man's violin teacher and had remained a close companion: it was for Rietz's 23rd birthday that Mendelssohn had composed the Octet. His sudden death at age 29 was a blow, and in the weeks after Rietz's death Mendelssohn went back to the manuscript of the Quintet and rewrote it. In its original form, the scherzo came second and was followed by a minuet. Now, in memory of Rietz, Mendelssohn composed a new slow movement, an Intermezzo; he made this the new second movement, dropped the minuet entirely, and moved the scherzo into its place.

And it was in this new form that the Quintet was published the following year.

This music shows all the virtues of the young Mendelssohn: an instinctive sense of form, graceful melodies, and light textures. The Quintet is also somewhat unusual in that the first three movements all end quietly. The extended first movement opens immediately with the main idea in the first violin; this figure will dominate the Allegro con moto, and though Mendelssohn does introduce secondary material, some of this does not return in the recapitulation. The development of the opening idea is quite animated: Mendelssohn marks it *con fuoco* and expands the sonority with rippling arpeggios before this music makes its way to the calm close.

The Intermezzo written in memory of Rietz is heartfelt and expressive rather than grieving. As might be expected in music composed as a memorial to a violinist, it features a prominent first violin part. The simple melody heard at the opening is treated throughout; though textures become more complex as the movement proceeds, the music never turns anguished and finally fades into silence on two pizzicato strokes.

The Scherzo is the most effective movement in the Quintet. We associate the scherzos of Mendelssohn's youth with the elfin fairyland he created in his incidental music for A Midsummer Night's Dream, but there is none of that here. Instead, this music is rigorously polyphonic: it opens with a gritty and very difficult fugue subject (first announced by the second viola), and Mendelssohn builds the entire movement around the contrapuntal treatment of the possibilities locked within this blistering theme. There is no trio section, and the Scherzo rushes along breathlessly to the very end, where it suddenly winks out before our eyes. The finale, marked Allegro vivace, is somewhat more conventional, riding constantly forward on its buoyant energy, good tunes, and swirling triplets.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger.