July 27, 2025

CONCERT

Cello Sonata No. 2 in F Major, Op. 99
JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born: 1833
Died: 1897
Composed: 1886

I. Allegro vivace
II. Adagio affettuoso
III. Allegro passionato — Trio
IV. Allegro molto

Brahms was frequently inspired to write for a particular instrument by a particular virtuoso player. He wrote much of his violin music with Joseph Joachim in mind, and late in life he wrote a series of works for clarinet after being impressed with the playing of Richard Mühlfeld. It was his association with the Austrian cellist Robert Hausmann (1852–1909) that led to the composition of Brahms' second and final cello sonata. Brahms heard Hausmann perform his Cello Sonata in E minor in Vienna in March 1885 and was so taken with Hausmann's playing that he wanted to write a new work specifically for him. But Brahms, who was still in the process of composing his Fourth Symphony, could not begin such a work immediately. It was not until 1886, when Brahms spent the summer at Hofstetten on Lake Thun in Switzerland, that he could finally get to work on the sonata.

When he returned to Vienna in the fall, he brought the manuscript with him, and he and Hausmann gave the work several private hearings before it had its first public performance in Vienna on November 24, 1886. Brahms himself was a virtuoso pianist, but he had the unfortunate habit of grunting and snorting as he played. His friend Elizabeth von Herzogenberg referred gently to this when she wrote of her enthusiasm for the sonata:

> "So far I have been most thrilled by the first movement. It is so masterly in its compression, so torrentlike in its progress, so terse in the development, while the extension of the first subject on its return comes as the greatest surprise. I don't need to tell you how we enjoyed the soft, melodious Adagio, particularly the exquisite return to F sharp Major, which sounds so beautiful. I should like to hear you play the essentially vigorous Scherzo. Indeed, I always hear you snorting and puffing away at it—for no one else will ever play it just to my mind. It must be agitated without being hurried, legato in spite of its unrest and impetus."

Those who claim that Brahms never wrote true chamber music have some of their most convincing evidence in this cello sonata, for this is music conceived on a grand scale—muscular, passionate, striving. The first movement is marked Allegro vivace, and from its first moments one senses music straining to break through the limits imposed by just two instruments. If the tremolandi beginning suggests the scope of symphonic music, the rising-and-falling shape of the cello's opening theme recalls the rising-and-falling shape of the opening movement of the composer's just-completed Fourth Symphony. The first movement is in sonata form, and the vigorous opening theme is heard in various guises throughout the movement. Its quiet and stately reappearance in the piano just before the coda is a masterstroke.

Brahms specifies that the Adagio be played affettuoso—"with affection"—yet for all its melting songfulness, this is a serious movement, and yet full of surprises. Brahms moves to the distant key of F-sharp Major for this movement and then to the equally unexpected F minor for the second subject. He uses pizzicato, a sound not typical of his string writing, for extended periods and sometimes has the piano mirror that sound with its accompaniment. He also builds his themes on something close to echo effects, with one instrument seeming to trail the other's statement. It is very beautiful, imaginative writing. With the third movement, Allegro passionato, the music returns to the mood of the first, beginning and ending with a great rush of energy. Between the scherzo sections comes a haunting trio featuring some of Brahms' most sensitive writing for the cello. In the felicitous words of American composer Daniel Gregory Mason, "throughout this movement there are few of those places, unhappily frequent in most music for the cello, that sound so difficult that you wish, with Dr. Johnson, they were impossible."

Program Notes

The Allegro molto is the shortest movement of the sonata, and after the driving power of the first and third movements, the finale seems almost lightweight, an afterthought to the sound and fury that have preceded it. Its main theme, possibly of folk origin, rocks along happily throughout and—in another of Brahms' many successful small touches in this sonata—is played pizzicato just before the final cadence.

Program note by Eric Bromberger

Poems from Angel Island

(Co-Commission by the SCMS Commissioning Club)

ETHAN SOLEDAD

Born: 1999
Composed: 2025

I. From Endless Sorrows, Tears and Blood Streak
II. Random Thoughts, Deep at Night
III. Cages of Jade

Commissioned by the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, Chamber Music Northwest and Seattle Chamber Music Society.

San Francisco Bay's Angel Island acted as an immigration station for mostly Chinese immigrants in the beginning of the 20th century during the Chinese Exclusion Act. Many of those coming through would pose as "paper sons or daughters," forging documents to make it seem like they were related to someone already a citizen of the US. The US was aware of this and as such implemented an intense interrogation process to find out if they were telling the truth. Those held at the station would spend weeks, months, and even years on the island before being released or sent back to their origins. Hundreds of poems are inscribed on the walls telling of their feelings of anxiety, fear, boredom, and despair in the terrible living conditions and grueling questioning by the immigration officers.

Upon reading the poem inspiring the first movement, I had a very vivid image in my mind of a bird trying to escape from its cage and being yanked down violently each time. Just as the poem says, "After leaping into prison, I cannot come out," the piece opens with the listener being thrust into the fray, evoking a sense of panic and anxiety in the quickly shifting textures. The movement comes to a climax with the cello playing against the other strings and the piano, creating a sense of conflict and violence before slowly fading out into nothing.

The second movement evokes the quiet emotions felt by those on the island, as so eloquently expressed by the poet There's a sense of loneliness, despair, grief and homesickness as the poet perhaps regrets coming to a foreign land. Through this movement, in addition to portraying the imagery of the poem, I wanted to portray the emotions left unsaid- a sense of hopelessness that may arise from the question "will I ever be released?"

The third movement immediately follows the second without pause, beginning with an extensive violin cadenza. I similarly wanted to portray a sense that the poet has lost all hope before finally being told that they're going to be released into the US. What follows is a dramatic shift in the harmonic language. The violin solo continues, first echoed by the strings before being joined at the unison by the piano. This represents the poet "rejoicing" ..rim their fellow villagers and the Asian American community as a whole coming together to thm--e in spite of the violence, racism, trauma and other hardships they've faced. The piece ends with a short lullaby evoking the textures of the first movement, representing that this piece of history- one that is relatable to any immigrant population in the world- is one to live with and to learn from.

Program note by Ethan Soledad

Piano Trio in A minor, Op. 50
PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born: 1840
Died: 1893
Composed: 1881-1882

I. Pezzo elegiaco. Moderato assai — Allegro giusto
II. Tema con variazioni. Andante con moto — Variazioni finale e coda

Nikolai Rubinstein, brother of the pianist Anton Rubinstein, had hired Tchaikovsky to teach composition at the Moscow Conservatory and later encouraged him as a composer, conducting and championing his music. When Nikolai died at the age of 46 on March 23, 1881, Tchaikovsky resolved to write a work in his memory, but it was difficult for him to choose the form for such a piece. Nikolai had been a pianist, but a piano concerto did not seem a proper memorial piece. Tchaikovsky disliked the combination of piano and strings in chamber music but eventually overcame this aversion to write the Trio in A minor as the memorial to Rubinstein; it was the only time Tchaikovsky used a piano in his chamber music. He began work on the trio in December 1881 while living in Rome and completed the score on February 9, 1882. The manuscript is inscribed: "In memory of a Great Artist."

A particular memory came back to Tchaikovsky as he worked on this music. In 1873, after the premiere of Tchaikovsky's The Snow Maiden (which had been conducted by Rubinstein), faculty members from the Moscow Conservatory had gone on a picnic in the sunny, blossom-covered countryside. Here they were surrounded by curious peasants, and the gregarious Rubinstein quickly made friends and had the peasants singing and dancing. As he set to work on the trio, Tchaikovsky remembered how much Rubinstein had liked one of these songs.

The trio as completed has a very unusual form: it is in two massive movements that last a total of almost 50 minutes. The first movement in particular has proven baffling to critics, who have been unable to decide whether it is in sonata or rondo form. It is built on two sharply contrasted themes: the cello's somber opening melody—which Tchaikovsky marks molto espressivo—and a vigorous falling theme for solo piano, marked Allegro giusto. Tchaikovsky alternates these themes through this dramatic movement, which closes with a quiet restatement of the cello's opening theme, now played in octaves by the piano.

The second movement is a huge set of variations. The theme of these variations is the peasant melody Rubinstein had liked so much on the picnic in 1873, and Tchaikovsky puts this simple tune through eleven very different variations. Particularly striking are the fifth variation, in which the piano's high notes seem to echo the sound of sleigh bells; the sixth, a waltz introduced by the cello; the eighth, a powerful fugue; and the tenth, a mazurka introduced by the piano. So individual and dramatic are these variations that several critics instantly assumed that each must depict an incident from Rubinstein's life and set about guessing what each variation was "about." Tchaikovsky was dumbfounded when this was reported to him; to a friend he wrote: "How amusing! To compose music without the slightest desire to represent something and suddenly to discover that it represents this or that, it is what Molière's Bourgeois Gentilhomme must have felt when he learnt that he had been speaking in prose all his life."

The trio concludes with a final variation so huge that many have considered it a separate movement. It comes to a somber end: Tchaikovsky marks the final page Lugubre ("lugubrious"), and over a funeral march in the piano come fragments of the cello's theme from the very beginning of the first movement, now marked piangendo: "weeping." This theme gradually dissolves, and the piano marches into silence.

Program note by Eric Bromberger