WINTER FESTIVAL

SEATTLE CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

JANUARY 24, 2015
7:30 PM

PROGRAM

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

Sonata for Violin and Continuo in D Major, HWV 371

Affetuoso
Allegro
Larghetto
Allegro

James Ehnes *violin* / **Luc Beauséjour** *harpsichord*

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

String Trio in E-flat Major, Op. 3

Allegro con brio
Andante
Menuetto
Adagio
Menuetto—Minore
Finale: Allegro

Erin Keefe *violin* / **Cynthia Phelps** *viola* / **Robert deMaine** *cello*

INTERMISSION

ERNST VON DOHNÁNYI

Quintet for Piano and Strings in C minor, Op. 1

Allegro
Scherzo
Adagio, quasi andante
Finale: Allegro animato

Arnaud Sussmann *violin* / **Amy Schwartz Moretti** *violin* / **Rebecca Albers** *viola* /
Efe Baltacıgil *cello* / **Anne-Marie McDermott** *piano*

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

(1685–1759)

Sonata for Violin and Continuo in D Major, HWV 371 (ca. 1750)

Though most of Handel's music lies in the realm of opera and oratorio, he managed to compose two sets each of inventive and highly varied *concerti grossi*. By far his most familiar instrumental works are his three suites of *Water Music and Music for the Royal Fireworks*. His 1741 oratorio, *Messiah*, is undoubtedly the best-known choral work in the English language. He also composed a number of works for solo harpsichord and various sonatas for violin, oboe and recorder. Musicologists have shown that many such pieces were spurious, but at least five sonatas for violin and harpsichord have withstood nearly three centuries of scrutiny and are considered authentic examples of Handel's creativity, including the Sonata in D Major, HWV 371. HWV 371 dates from around 1750, only nine years before his death; the work was not published during his lifetime.

The first movement *Affettuoso* opens with an ascending arpeggio on the violin over the keyboard's figured bass. The cantabile style and soft-spoken lyricism of the music beguiles the senses. Evidence shows that the very opening moments were initially set to paper as early as 1707. Handel, in common with most of his colleagues in the Baroque era frequently borrowed from previous music when writing new works.

A highly fugal and animated *Allegro* follows, brushing aside the sweet introspection of the first movement and replacing it with bracing good spirits. The violin presents the vigorous theme first, which is then repeated by the keyboard initially in middle register and then in the lower sonic region.

The world of opera—vast in Handel's canon—is conjured in the expressive *Larghetto* in B minor. One can readily imagine the violin's line sung by a grieving heroine.

Handel could scarcely end the sonata in a mood of such unhappy longing, and the concluding *Allegro* does not fail to return the music to resplendent and energetic D major. The violin part revels in virtuosity, ending the piece in a positive spirit.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

(1770–1827)

String Trio in E-flat Major, Op. 3 (ca. 1795; published 1796)

Around the onset of the Baroque era ca. 1600, composers adopted four-part harmony as the basic texture of the major and minor scales that replaced earlier Church modes. From that auspicious change in music history, choral music increasingly was written for the familiar SATB division of labor—soprano, alto, tenor and bass—and the same principle was applied to purely instrumental music. Given its time-proven usefulness by the middle of the 18th century, the universality of four-part writing led to the emerging string quartet as the dominant format in chamber music. Composers simply thought "naturally" in terms of four parts or "voices." Compared to the vast body of string quartets, which continues virtually unabated to this day, precious few pieces for string trio have emerged. As one might imagine, it's a bit of a challenge to fit four-part harmony into three stringed instruments, even with such devices as double- and triple-stopping. (With a keyboard, of course, such problems do not exist with ten independent fingers on tap.)

With the above in mind it is interesting that Beethoven took up the greater challenge of the string trio before he composed his landmark set of six string quartets, Op. 18. His String Trio in E-flat, Op. 3 was, in fact, his first piece written exclusively for strings. He was familiar with Mozart's E-flat Trio, K. 563, composed in 1788, which is a serious and complex work that belies its "Divertimento" nickname. When Beethoven began work on his four string trios (the Op. 3 and the threesome of Op. 9) he was already a student of Haydn but apparently worked out the challenge of writing for the string trio format on his own.

The first of the Op. 3's six movements sets forth with an extended *Allegro con brio* launched by a highly syncopated and emphatic opening theme. To be sure, Beethoven balances this brusque and remarkably symphonic statement with nods to courtly levity. Though an early work, the explorative composer was already moving into unexpected keys, to wit, he begins the recapitulation in the key of F minor before finally settling into the expected home key of E-flat Major.

A disarming *Andante* opens with a quirky and charming theme played by the violin with simple chordal support from the other instruments. As the movement proceeds, the viola and cello become more inventive and participatory and, in fact, the tenor of the music becomes increasingly energetic and varied in both dynamics and accent.

The ensuing *Menuetto* is also quirky and filled with short silences between the primary notes of the main theme. A flowing secondary tune with pizzicato cello informs the Trio section.

In A-flat major, the *Adagio* is a lovely cantabile respite where each instrument enjoys its time conveying the incipient romance of the thematic material. Soon the emotional tone darkens somewhat, though never to the point of compromising the lyric impulse.

The penultimate movement is another *Menuetto—Minore*, again in E-flat but with a Trio cast in C minor (the relative minor in musical jargon, i.e., same key signature as the tonic E-flat—three flats—but understandably darker in spirit). The "A" section boasts a graceful theme harmonized in horn-fifths (descending E-flat, B-flat and G natural). The C-minor Trio employs the lower strings as a drone, conveying a gypsy-like melody in the violin.

A highly contrapuntal *Finale: Allegro* brings the work to a close, no doubt reflecting Beethoven's study with Johann Albrechstberger (1736–1809) while Haydn was regaling London audiences with his freshly-minted symphonies. Having had to memorize Bach's Well-tempered Clavier before he reached adolescence while under the guidance of Christian Neefe, Beethoven was already quite proficient at writing imaginative fugues and the like.

ERNST VON DOHNÁNYI

(1877-1960)

Quintet for Piano and Strings in C minor, Op. 1 (1895)

Like his childhood friend Bartók, Dohnányi was a superb pianist whose debut in 1897 in Berlin helped launch what promised to be a career as a virtuoso, albeit one with allegiance to core musical values rather than showmanship. Unlike Bartók, Dohnányi's compositions are far more beholden to 19th-century German Romanticism than to Hungarian folk music. He spent much of his life in Budapest, fled to Austria in 1944, and ended up spending his final years in the United States. His immersion in American culture added to his evolving musical accent, imbuing it with hints of jazz and American folk music.

Dohnányi composed two piano quintets, both of which pay homage to those of Brahms and Schumann. We might naturally expect the *second* such opus, dating from 1914, to manifest the finesse and certainty of a gifted composer at the peak of his maturity. Yet the Op. 1 Quintet is an impressive and well-crafted work from his student years at the Academy of Music in Budapest, from which he graduated with honors in 1897.

The piano opens the first movement *Allegro* with a portentous dotted theme that is picked up and amplified by the strings. No doubt affecting Romanticism and unchecked passion reflect the bountiful confidence of youth, but that is, after all, not an unpardonable sin! The music quiets down and allows another theme, both tender and expansive, to initially balance and eventually to reinforce the overriding ardor of the entire movement. Even a casual hearing will help explain why Johannes Brahms thought so highly of the piece. Beyond the emotional appeal, the music has many felicitous moments of skilled counterpoint and a feeling for rich sonority; at times it sounds positively symphonic.

A *Scherzo* follows, an insistent and brusque dance punctuated by little packets of thrusting energy. The spirit of Schubert is tapped in the beguiling Trio, filtered no doubt through both Schumann and Brahms. Of special note, the repeat of the "A" section finds the young composer cleverly (and convincingly) uniting the oil-and-water moods of both *scherzo* and trio.

In "song" format, i.e., A—B—A, the following *Adagio, quasi andante* is a highly personal statement that cannot help but remind us of Schumann's Quintet. Unabashedly heart-rending, the music at times totters on the brink of sentimentality yet successfully avoids the trap of excessive self-revelation (or emotional self-aggrandizement). Even in its most intimate moments, the rich sonorities suggest the power of a larger ensemble.

In the *Finale: Allegro animato*, Dohnányi does draw upon Hungarian folk tradition in settling on a 5/4 meter, not normally found in "Western" music but one long known in Central- and Eastern-Europe. (Most famous example: the "waltz with a limp" from Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony) A highly energetic rondo with expansive intervening episodes between reiterations of the main rondo theme, includes a fugato section that reminds us not only of Brahms, but even old man Bach—the truest source of contrapuntal wizardry. Tying up the not-really-loose threads, Dohnányi posits a coda in which the first movement's grand theme ends the work in youthful triumph.

Program Notes by Steven Lowe