

# SUMMER FESTIVAL

WEDNESDAY, JULY 24, 2013

8:00 PM

SEATTLE  
CHAMBER  
MUSIC  
SOCIETY

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## PROGRAM

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DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH\*

*String Quartet No. 7, Op. 108*

Allegretto

Lento

Allegro—Allegretto

**James Ehnes** violin / **Amy Schwartz Moretti** violin / **Richard O'Neill** viola / **Robert deMaine** cello

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

*Sonata for Violin and Piano in F Major*

Allegro vivace

Adagio

Assai vivace

**Erin Keefe** violin / **Anna Polonsky** piano

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## INTERMISSION

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JOHANNES BRAHMS

*Quartet for Piano and Strings No. 2 in A Major, Op. 26*

Allegro non troppo

Poco adagio

Scherzo: Poco allegro

Finale: Allegro

**Alexander Velinzon** violin / **David Harding** viola / **Amit Peled** cello / **Orion Weiss** piano

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\*LIVE CONCERT RECORDING

## DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

(1906–1975)

### *String Quartet No. 7, Op. 108 (1960)*

Shostakovich composed his String Quartet No. 7, Op. 108 as a belated memorial for his first wife Nina, who died in 1954. Among the shortest of his 15 quartets, the compact and emotionally intense work is performed *attacca*, i.e., without pauses between the three movements. It is also cast in the key of F-sharp minor, traditionally a tonal center associated with pain and loss. (Mozart, for example, cast the despairing *Adagio* from his well-known Piano Concerto No. 23, K. 488 in that very key—the only time he did so in his enormous canon of instrumental music.) In this quartet Shostakovich employs a cyclic scheme in which themes from the opening movement reappear in the finale.

The opening *Allegretto* starts with an anxious theme that metamorphoses into a three-note figure that could be likened to “fate knocking at the door.” Signature trademarks of Shostakovich abound, including dark irony and his version of the kind of grotesquerie—especially in the pizzicato-laden second theme—that he absorbed from Mahler, whose music strongly influenced him throughout his chamber and symphonic works. The movement ends with a slower variant of the three-note rapping figure.

If the opening movement’s irony suggests ambivalence there is no minimizing the inconsolable sadness of the ensuing *Lento*’s desolate commentary on loss. Here the second violin presents a falling four-note theme, spare and searching. It is soon partnered by the first violin, floating an octave above the second violin’s quiet anguish. Soon the first violin drops out and is supplanted by the deeper sonority of the viola in a restatement of the movement’s opening phrases. The *Lento* is remarkable for its concise expression of the myriad emotions associated with loss. It ends quietly but not peacefully, as if returning to consciousness after a bad night’s sleep.

The concluding *Allegro* breaks the spell of inner grieving in a fierce and unrelenting bout of fearful manic energy. Note the rising shape of the main theme, clearly an inversion of the *Allegretto*’s downward

spiraling opening passages. Soon a Bach-inspired fugue intensifies the fiery obsessive quality implicit in the beginning notes of both the first and last movements, eventually heightened by a waltz in F-sharp minor—a veritable “dance of death.” A series of plucked notes precedes the closing bowed chord in F-sharp Major. Is this a peaceful resignation or whistling in the dark?

## FELIX MENDELSSOHN

(1809–1847)

### *Sonata for Violin and Piano in F Major (1838)*

Accomplished both as a pianist and violinist Mendelssohn wrote fluently for both instruments and left posterity three sonatas for that particular combination. He composed the Sonata in F Major in 1838 (there is an earlier one in the same key from 1820) at the very point in his life that he began work on his famed Violin Concerto in E minor. As with that venerable warhorse—a thoroughbred to be sure—Mendelssohn had in mind the sound and style of his friend Ferdinand David, concertmaster of the composer’s Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. As is well known the Concerto’s gestation lasted for some seven years before completion and premiere. Though he completed the Sonata in less time he declined to publish it. It was not until 1953, in fact, that the late violinist/conductor/pedagogue Yehudi Menuhin discovered and published the hitherto unknown piece.

The opening *Allegro vivace*—as long as the second and third movements combined—begins with a rousing and rhythmically insistent burst of energy first posited by the piano. The violin mirrors and elaborates the keyboard’s introductory passage. A shift to the minor presents contrasting melodic fragments of a comparatively lyrical and less forceful nature. Pre-echoes of the arpeggio figurations from the aforementioned Violin Concerto can be heard in the extended development section as well as in the recapitulation, which in traditional style reprises the main subject. Before ending the movement the music briefly departs from the Major but ends in a show of blazing energy.

The central *Adagio* movement in A Major also finds

the piano making the initial statement of the principal theme before inviting the violin to join in. Flowing nobly and serenely, the music provides a tender retreat from the assertive mien of the preceding *Allegro vivace* while allowing a few intermittent surges of ripe passion.

Mendelssohn's fleet-footed and enchanting "elfin" scherzos generally are tucked in the middle of his compositions but in this case it finds an appropriate home as the concluding *Assai vivace*. Scintillating rapid-fire scales and bracing hammered chords propel the music forward to a brilliant close.

## JOHANNES BRAHMS

(1833-1897)

### *Quartet for Piano and Strings No. 2 in A Major, Op. 26 (1857-62)*

Brahms' impressive roster of chamber works includes three quartets for piano and strings of which the first, that in G minor, Op. 25 has enjoyed widest currency. Its insistent drama, boundlessly inventive melodies and Hungarian dance finale have assured a continued presence. No less than Arnold Schoenberg orchestrated the work in an arrangement—even boasting a triangle—that has increasingly shown up in symphony concerts seemingly everywhere. Schoenberg was not drawn to provide an orchestral alternative to the Op. 26 Piano Quartet. Its very real beauties have remained somewhat under-appreciated in the bright glow of its immediate predecessor. Brahms worked on both of these piano quartets more or less at the same time. If the Op. 25 quartet *commands* one's attention, its A-Major work *entices* the listener through graceful lyricism and unforced romance.

If the Op. 25 piece conveys a sense of "masculine" assertiveness, such a trait is balanced by the "feminine" manner of Op. 26. Coincidence or otherwise, the latter piece was the uncommonly insightful Clara Schumann's personal favorite. The widow of Robert Schumann maintained a life-long relationship with Brahms, proffering wise and highly valued musical insights to the grateful composer about many of his works.

The opening *Allegro non troppo* starts with a symmetrical theme that avoids squareness through subtly disruptive silences on beats that would normally be heavily accented. Interplay of three-against-two rhythms, a Brahmsian signature, adds interest-provoking stress and in so doing actually enhances the expansive and lyrical mood.

Beginning and ending with muted strings, the following *Poco adagio* brings hushed nocturnal beauty that grows out of luxurious melodic material that recalls the intimate style of the German *Lied* that Brahms inherited from Schubert and Schumann. The flowing main theme is announced by the piano and enriched by the muted strings' delicately woven supportive lines. A series of threatening arpeggios starting low on the piano shatters the pacific nature of the opening moments, but is short-lived. Led by the strings a heart-string-tugging central section brims with intoxicating romance. This too runs its course, yielding to moments of quiet anxiety interrupted by passionate *forte* outbursts from the piano. In like manner, the music proceeds in alternate statements of beguiling tenderness and forthright Brahmsian gruffness.

Marked *Scherzo: Poco allegro*, the third movement starts off with a lyrical string theme answered by a bouncy, jovial rejoinder from the piano. Brahms, uncommonly knowledgeable about earlier music, nurtured a deep and inspiring love for Bach that shows itself in the comparatively stormy canonic Trio.

As in the Op. 25 Piano Quartet (and elsewhere in his canon) Brahms' unquenchable taste for Hungarian themes clearly defines the energetic, dancelike and folk-inspired *Finale: Allegro*. Contrasting episodes temporarily impede the headlong rush of energy but nothing really stops the music from barreling to a powerful *animato* conclusion where Brahms is calling on the four players to create a virtually symphonic ambience.

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*Program Notes by Steven Lowe*

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