

FEBRUARY 4, 2024

CONCERT

Phantasie Trio in C minor, H.79

FRANK BRIDGE

Born: 1879

Died: 1941

Composed: 1907

Frank Bridge appears fated, at least for American audiences, to be remembered as the teacher of Benjamin Britten, though Bridge was a remarkable musician and composer in his own right. He studied viola and composition at the Royal College of Music and then made his career as a violist, conductor, and composer: Bridge played viola in several string quartets and conducted in both England and the United States. As a composer, he made a gradual evolution from a conservative musician, heir to nineteenth-century English music, to an explorer, interested in new ideas and willing to experiment with a new harmonic language. Bridge became interested in Britten when the latter was still a boy and for three years gave him private composition lessons. Bridge was a demanding teacher, and his concern for craftsmanship, self-criticism, and economy of expression made a strong impression on the young Britten; Bridge's pacifism was also an influence on Britten's values.

The present piece has two different names—it is known as the Phantasie Trio No. 1 in C Minor and the Piano Trio No. 1—and the first of those names came about in a very specific way. In 1907 the chamber music enthusiast Walter Wilson Cobbett sponsored a competition open to British composers, who were asked to compose “a short Phantasy in the form of a piano trio.” A total of 67 composers entered that competition, and Bridge received the first prize of fifty pounds for a work he titled Phantasie Trio in C Minor (it acquired the alternate name Piano Trio No. 1 when Bridge went on to write another trio). The first public performance took place in London on April 27, 1909.

It was Cobbett himself who insisted on the word “phantasy” in the title of the pieces for his competition. When he was accused by some of trying to undermine sonata form, he defended himself by denying that and saying that contestants in his competition “were asked simply to give free play to their imagination in the composition of one-movement works, to write as they liked—in any shape—so long as it was a shape.”

In 1906, the year Bridge before composed his Phantasie, Arnold Schoenberg had written his Chamber Symphony, which compressed the traditional four-movement symphony into a one-movement structure spanning only twenty minutes. Bridge could not have known Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony, which was not premiered until he was at work on the Phantasie, but he adopts some of Schoenberg's method in this music. Bridge casts the Phantasie as one extended sonata-form movement, beginning with the exposition of his material. But in place of the development, he writes a slow section which has a scherzo at its center, and he then rounds off the Phantasie with a recapitulation of the opening and coda that function as the “finale.” Bridge met the challenge of writing a “phantasy” not by denying sonata form but by re-imagining that form in much the way Schoenberg had in his Chamber Symphony.

Bridge sometimes sets the two stringed instruments against the piano in the Phantasie. The opening page—which functions as a sort of introductory flourish—does just that, and it also introduces material that will be used later. The “exposition” begins as violin and piano trade the beautiful opening theme above the piano's constant dotted, rocking rhythm, and these instruments also introduce the second subject. The “slow movement” arrives at the Andante con molto espressione, as the cello sings its long song, and the strings then exchange its phrases. The Allegro scherzoso bursts to life in the piano as the strings at first play only pizzicato; gradually this gives way to a return of the slow section, now marked Andante and led by the piano. The Allegro moderato returns to the music from the very beginning—both the introductory page and the long opening string theme—before a coda marked Con anima hurls the Phantasie to its grand conclusion on a full-throated C-major chord.

Violin Sonata No. 3 in D minor, Op. 108

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born: 1833

Died: 1897

Composed: 1886-1888

I. Allegro

II. Adagio

III. Un poco presto e con sentimento

IV. Presto agitato

Brahms spent the summer of 1886 at Lake Thun in Switzerland. He had just completed his Fourth Symphony, and now—in a house from which he had a view of the lake and a magnificent glacier—he turned to chamber music. That summer he completed three chamber works and began the Violin Sonata in D Minor, but he put the sonata aside while he wrote the Zigeunerlieder (“Gypsy Songs”) and Double Concerto for Violin and Cello, grumbling that writing for stringed instruments should be left to “someone who understands fiddles better than I do.” He returned to Lake Thun and completed his final violin sonata in the summer of 1888.

Despite Brahms’ customary self-deprecation, his writing for stringed instruments could be very convincing, and the Third Violin Sonata is brilliant music—not in the sense of being flashy but in the fusion of complex technique and passionate expression that marks Brahms’ finest music. The violin’s soaring, gypsy-like main theme at the opening of the Allegro is so haunting that it is easy to miss the remarkable piano accompaniment: far below, the piano’s quiet syncopated octaves move ominously forward, generating much of the music’s tension. Piano alone has the second theme, with the violin quickly picking it up and soaring into its highest register. The development of these two ideas is disciplined and ingenious: in the piano’s lowest register Brahms sets a pedal A and lets it pound a steady quarter-note pulse for nearly 50 unbroken measures—beneath the powerful thematic development, the pedal notes hammer a tonal center insistently into the listener’s ear. Its energy finally spent, this movement gradually dissolves on fragments of the violin’s opening melody.

The heartfelt Adagio consists of a long-spanned melody (built on short metric units—the meter is 3/8) that develops by repetition; the music rises in intensity until the double-stopped violin soars high above the piano, then falls back to end peacefully. Brahms titled the third movement Un poco presto e con sentimento, though

the particular sentiment he had in mind remains uncertain. In any case, this shadowy, quicksilver movement is based on echo effects as bits of theme are tossed between the two instruments. The movement comes to a shimmering close: piano arpeggios spill downward, and the music vanishes in two quick strokes.

By contrast, the Presto agitato finale hammers along a pounding 6/8 meter. The movement is aptly titled: this is agitated music, restless and driven. At moments it sounds frankly symphonic, as if the music demands the resources of a full symphony orchestra to project its furious character properly. Brahms marks the violin’s thematic entrance *passionato*, but he needn’t have bothered—that character is amply clear from the music itself. Even the noble second theme, first announced by the piano, does little to dispel the driven quality of this music. The complex development presents the performers with difficult problems of ensemble, and the very ending feels cataclysmic: the music slows, then suddenly rips forward to the cascading smashes of sound that bring this sonata to its powerful close.

3 Romances for Violin and Piano, Op. 22

CLARA SCHUMANN

Born: 1819

Died: 1896

Composed: 1853

I. Andante molto

II. Allegretto: Mit zartem Vortrage

III. Leidenschaftlich Schnell

In 1853 Robert and Clara Schumann welcomed into their home in Düsseldorf two young men who would go on to become giants of nineteenth-century German music: Johannes Brahms and Joseph Joachim. Brahms and Joachim would develop a lengthy (and frequently stormy) relation of their own, but they quickly became true friends of the Schumann family. Robert’s mental health was now in rapid deterioration, and they stood by during his decline and death in an asylum, visiting him frequently and helping Clara and the seven children. In turn, Clara remained close to both men over the remaining forty years of her life. Her long and intense friendship with Brahms is familiar, but she was also close to Joachim: she gave a number of duo-recitals with him after Robert’s death, and she was close enough to give the violinist financial and domestic advice as he approached his own marriage. Brahms and Joachim were among the most intense mourners at her death in 1896.

In 1853, during the first rush of the Schumann's friendship with Joachim, Clara wrote—specifically for him—the Three Romances for Violin and Piano. She did not compose a great deal. The demands of being wife, mother, and pianist left her little time, and in any case she was ambivalent about composing: in a diary entry at age 19 she wrote, “a woman must not desire to compose—not one has been able to do it, and why should I expect to?” In fact, these romances were virtually her final composition (her list of opus numbers runs only to 23): after Robert's death, she stopped composing altogether.

A romance is a type of music without strict formal meaning: that title simply suggests music of an expressive character. All three of these romances are in ternary form plus coda, and all end quietly. Though they were composed during the stress that accompanied Robert's decline, these pieces show absolutely no sign of that pain—they may be regarded as brief explorations of gentle moods. In the *Andante molto*, the violin soars easily over the piano accompaniment, though the music's characteristic quintuplet turn appears in both parts. The *Allegretto*, in G minor, is more intense, though Clara's instruction is “With tender performance.” Some have heard the influence of Mendelssohn in this music, which moves into G major for its center section, full of trills and grace notes; this romance winks out with quiet pizzicato strokes that return to G major in the last measure. The final romance, marked *Passionately fast*, is also the longest: the violin sings above a rippling piano accompaniment; when this section returns, the composer effectively varies the sound by making the piano accompaniment entirely staccato.

Joachim very much liked the Three Romances, and he and Clara performed them frequently. When she published the set in 1855, she had this inscription printed in the score: “Dedicated to Joseph Joachim with the greatest friendship.”

Piano Quartet No. 1 in C minor, Op. 15

GABRIEL FAURÉ

Born: 1845

Died: 1924

Composed: 1876-1879

I. *Allegro molto moderato*

II. *Scherzo. Allegro vivo*

III. *Adagio*

IV. *Allegro molto*

Fauré wrote the Piano Quartet in C Minor, one of the masterpieces of his early period, between 1876 and 1879, when he was in his early thirties. Despite the work's success, the composer was dissatisfied with the final movement and rewrote it in 1883, making it—as he said—“new from top to toe.” In its completed form, the quartet is an extraordinary achievement, both for the range of its expression and for Fauré's imaginative craftsmanship.

The *Allegro molto moderato* opens with a sturdy theme in the strings, with off-the-beat accompaniment from the piano. The vigor and drive of this opening continue throughout the movement, and its rhythm—heard almost continuously in the piano—unifies the entire movement; the gentle second subject, announced by the viola and marked *espressivo*, gracefully sets off the energy of the opening episode. In the development Fauré brings back the opening theme, now slowed down and played gently, and the wonder is that a theme which moments before had moved forward martially can be so transformed and made to sing lyrically. In the coda, this opening theme recurs quietly in the viola as the movement draws to its calm conclusion.

Fauré reverses the expected order of the interior movements and places the scherzo, marked *Allegro vivo*, second. The piano's opening idea rocks along cheerfully above pizzicato accompaniment in the strings; alert listeners will recognize it as a variant of the *espressivo* second theme of the first movement. The scherzo reaches a cadence, and then in another pleasing surprise Fauré replaces the expected trio section with a graceful chorale for muted strings.

Because of their many similarities, the final two movements should be considered together. The *Adagio* is built on the brief dotted phrase first heard in the cello: this rising figure will unify the final two movements. The lyric second episode, introduced by the violin, contains the same rhythm, and the opening theme of the finale—

Allegro molto—rushes along on this same rising, dotted theme-shape. The energetic finale seems to be in motion throughout. Even when the viola sings the second theme, marked dolce e espressivo, this graceful melody assumes the rising shape that characterizes the final two movements. It is a measure of Fauré's achievement in this music that so simple a figure can be made to yield such a range of expression. Buoyed along by its inexhaustible energy, the quartet rushes to its close.

Given this music's popularity today, it comes as a surprise to learn that Fauré had a great deal of trouble getting it published. No publisher wanted to take a chance on a little-known composer. The quartet was rejected by two of France's major publishing firms and was accepted by a third only on the condition that composer surrender all his rights to it. Desperate to have his work published, Fauré could do nothing but accept those terms. He never made a penny on this music.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger