

WINTER FESTIVAL



JANUARY 19, 2013

7:30 PM

SEATTLE
CHAMBER
MUSIC
SOCIETY

PROGRAM

ROBERT SCHUMANN

Märchenbilder ("Fairytale Pictures") for Viola and Piano, Op. 113

Nicht schnell ("Not fast")

Lebhaft ("lively")

Rasch ("quick")

Langsam, mit melancholischem Ausdruck ("Slowly, with melancholy expression")

Toby Appel *viola* / **Max Levinson** *piano*

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Elegy for Solo Viola

Toby Appel *viola*

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Sonata for Cello and Piano in A Major, Op. 69

Allegro ma non tanto

Scherzo: Allegro molto

Adagio cantabile—Allegro vivace

Julie Albers *cello* / **Jeewon Park** *piano*

INTERMISSION

STEVE REICH

Different Trains

America—Before the War

Europe—During the War

After the War

James Ehnes *violin* / **Emily Daggett Smith** *violin* /

Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt *viola* / **Jeremy Turner** *cello*

ROBERT SCHUMANN

(1810–1856)

Märchenbilder (“Fairytale Pictures”) for Viola and Piano, Op. 113 (1851)

In 1850 Robert Schumann and his wife, the near-legendary pianist Clara, moved to Düsseldorf, where Robert had secured the position of music director despite a checkered history as a conductor. Things went well through 1851, especially in his capacity as a composer. His third (*Rhenish*) symphony came into being, as did his cello concerto, third piano trio and two sonatas for violin and piano. Thereafter, his mental illness worsened, leading him to attempt suicide (by throwing himself into the Rhine) in 1854 followed by his eventual death in the asylum at Eindhoven. Visitors, including Brahms, as well as the medical staff, describe an increasingly remote and pathetic figure whose genius was undermined by increasing auditory hallucinations and other manifestations of psychosis.

Still, in 1850–51 the prognosis looked good. Some works from those two years have remained in the standard repertoire (especially the *Rhenish* and the cello concerto), manifesting richness of imagination, a healthy emotional range and sure compositional technique. The *Märchenbilder* for Viola and Piano, written essentially at the same time, has not enjoyed wide currency, yet it is filled with sweetness and charm as befit a musical work inspired by Schumann’s love of traditional fairytales.

The opening movement, *Nicht schnell*, intones a sad and flowing theme on the viola supported and echoed by the incisive piano part. The somber tune itself is hinted at throughout the entire piece.

Marked *Lebhaft*, the ensuing movement proceeds with vigor and strongly dotted rhythms that impart the spirit of the hunt. Two lyrical episodes intervene before Schumann brings the rondo-like movement to a brief but quietly emphatic close.

The third movement, *Rasch*, surges forward from the gate as the viola propels a fast-paced racing tune punctuated by thrusting figures on the piano. Relative calm briefly interrupts the galvanic pace before

reprising the opening section.

The *Märchenbilder* predates young Johannes Brahms’ first encounter with Schumann in 1853, so it is worth noting that the viola’s lyrical theme in the finale seems to have been “channeled” by a mature Brahms in the *Adagio* of his third violin/piano sonata—in the same key, too, D major. Schumann’s title for the movement, *Langsam, mit melancholischem Ausdruck* (“Slow, with melancholy expression”), aptly characterizes the warmhearted theme. Yet though the theme conveys a kind of wistfulness it also limns a portrait of childlike contentment, ending quietly and without stress.

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

(1913–1976)

Elegy for Solo Viola (1930)

With the death of the great 17th-century English composer Henry Purcell in 1695, British music almost seemed to accompany him to the grave. From that point onward for almost two centuries England’s favorite composers—Handel, Haydn and Mendelssohn—were transplants or visitors from German-speaking countries. In the waning years of the 19th century, things began to change with the emergence of Edward Elgar, followed by Ralph Vaughan Williams, William Walton and other 20th-century Brits. Britten assumed the mantle of compositional leadership from the above-mentioned British worthies. A major composer of operas, he also wrote convincingly in virtually all genres. An imaginative weaver of instrumental colors, and a Romantic who never abandoned tonality even when employing keenly expressive dissonance, Britten also drew deeply from English folk music, but also from the larder of Henry Purcell, with whom, in fact, he has also been favorably compared because of his genius for setting the balky English language.

Much of Britten’s music has fared well in public venues as well as in recordings. Some of his earliest music has only recently emerged from a long period of dormancy. Among this group is the composer’s *Elegy*, written at age 16 when his education at the Gresham School was ending. Although he later professed to miss the school, he had alienated his fellow students by writing an essay

strongly condemning what he termed “English blood sports.” Perhaps the anger directed at him prompted his initial loathing for the time there. More to the point, the young musician was a fine violist (as well as a terrific pianist and conductor) who wrote the unaccompanied *Elegy* with a thorough understanding of the instrument’s capabilities. The bitter, even anguished tenor of the *Elegy* may well have reflected his strongly antipathetic feelings at the time. The eminent violist Nobuko Imai gave its first performance in 1984 at the 37th Aldeburgh Festival, eight years after the composer’s death.

As if to not waste time Britten begins the *Elegy* with a searching and pained theme that moves up in ascending and descending lines that intensify feeling. The melody frequently traverses long intervals only to settle on unexpected notes that further the sense of anguish and loss. In the middle section, spare textures fill empty silences between pizzicatos. A more aggressive section follows, with a theme that begins with low chords followed by rising “raised hands” anguish. After a piercing climax high on the fingerboard, the music shifts to the viola’s lower regions, providing music that is still anguished but more internalized. The work ends quietly on a single tone.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

(1770–1827)

Sonata for Cello and Piano in A Major, Op. 69

Beethoven wrote five cello sonatas that cover the three stylistic periods generally used to define his evolving creative voice. He composed the two Op. 5 sonatas early in 1796 and dedicated them to Friedrich Wilhelm II, King of Prussia, an accomplished amateur cellist. Unlike his quartets and piano trios, Beethoven really had no Classical period precedents for writing for this combination of instruments. (J.S. Bach, of course, had composed works for cello and harpsichord that are often performed with a piano replacing the Baroque keyboard instrument.)

The third sonata, Op. 69, is the sole representative from his middle period. Completed in 1807 and published two years later, Beethoven dedicated the new work to a close friend, the gifted cellist Baron Ignaz von

Gleichenstein. Composed at the same time of the Fifth Symphony, the prevailing optimism of the Cello Sonata does not aspire to the kind of dramatic pain-to-triumph character of the so-called “Fate” Symphony or to other minor-key works that express the composer’s often-cited assertiveness in the face of great challenge. Yet in other aspects the A-major sonata epitomizes qualities found in such relatively synchronous works as the Violin Concerto, Fourth Symphony and Fourth Piano Concerto. In all these pieces the music abounds in melodic inspiration, unforced poetry and rhythms both sweeping and refreshingly quirky.

The expansive opening movement, *Allegro ma non tanto*, welcomes us with a theme of unforced serenity and sun-filled warmth, entrusted wholly to the cello for its initial presentation. Beethoven answers this engaging tune with a second motive constructed from basic triads and animated by scalar runs. A later theme, ripe in romantic effulgence, fills out the melodic content of the movement. Near its end, a unison statement of the opening theme, unadorned and unselfconsciously proud, reminds us of the work’s middle-period genesis: here is Beethoven asserting himself as a great artist without false modesty.

A delightful, tongue-in-cheek scherzo makes its points through a jocular, off-the-beat theme that seems more a rhythmic kernel than an actual melody. Though labeled “scherzo,” the club-sandwich-like layout of this movement has a rondo-like character. The primary section, played three times, is separated by a contrasting episode of a more inward and lyrical character. Beethoven doesn’t even label this music as a Trio, the “normal” middle section of a scherzo.

There is no question that the two-part finale begins in a manner to suggest a broadly flowing slow movement, perhaps even a set of variations. Cast in E major, the dominant key of the work’s overall A-major tonality, this brief if slowly paced opening paragraph serves as a launching pad for the duration of the movement. In this closing section, high spirits rule the day. The music leaps forward, its main theme as beautifully sculpted as that of the opening movement, to a brilliant and happy conclusion.

STEVE REICH

(b. 1936)

Different Trains (1988)

New York-born Steve Reich continues to occupy a position of high acclaim among American composers. In common with an entire generation of classical musicians Reich's background covers a wide swath of styles including rock, jazz, world music and Western classical music. He grew up in a home where music was largely confined within the boundaries of 19th-century Romanticism. Much of his actual study came from beyond the confines of collegiate experience. His undergraduate degree—from Cornell—was in philosophy.

Along with La Monte Young, Terry Riley and Philip Glass, Reich is credited with the development of minimalism, a style that has been characterized as a school of modern music utilizing only simple sonorities, rhythms and patterns with 'minimal' embellishment of basic orchestration, and abounding in intentionally repetitive figurations often creating a pulsing, even hypnotic, effect. Even composers falling into this style differ on whom to credit as the founder of minimalism.

Over the last three decades Reich has amassed a trophy case of awards. Composed for string quartet and tape, *Different Trains* won a Grammy in 1990 for "Best Contemporary Composition." Genesis for the three-movement work derived from journeys made by the composer to visit his parents, who had separated. Years after the War, Reich was struck by the sobering thought that if he had been in Europe rather than in our country, the train he was riding on might well have been transporting its unwilling passengers to a concentration camp—a thought shared by many Jews and Nazi "undesirables" born in America or those fortunate enough to have fled the Holocaust.

In a program note Reich wrote: "*Different Trains* introduced prerecorded speaking voices whose speech melody generated the melodic content of the piece. It

also introduced an element of 'music theater' into the string quartet literature."

Each movement opens with a theme usually presented by a single instrument—viola for women and cello for men—and a tape fragment containing a spoken phrase. Each theme undergoes elaboration and development in which the instruments play in concert with spoken phrases. To these "voices" are added recordings of actual train sounds, sirens and warning bells. The overall effect is compelling in its interwoven sonic tapestry. The spoken text that indelibly adds context to the music was excerpted from interviews with people in the United States and Europe that centered on the years before, during and after World War II.

The opening movement, *America—Before the War* contains reminiscences about travel by train in the United States spoken by Reich's governess Virginia as well as a Pullman porter, Lawrence Davis. Their comments are enhanced by a background of recorded American trains.

In the ensuing *Europe—During the War* three Holocaust survivors (noted by Reich as Paul, Rachel and Rachella) share their harrowing stories of life during the Holocaust, darkened and intensified by their train journeys to the camps. Fittingly, it is European trains whose sounds form the background in this movement, augmented by the aforementioned sirens. In contrast to the American sounds—long-held perfect intervals of fourths and fifths, the European train whistles punctuate the sonic landscape generally with sharp triadic shriek-like chords.

The concluding *After the War* movement uses the voices of the Holocaust survivors discussing their lives before the War, supplemented by further excerpts from Reich's governess and the Pullman porter. The sound of American trains is reprised from the opening movement.

Program Notes by Steven Lowe

STEVE REICH
Different Trains (1988)

Texts

Movement 1: America—Before the War

“from Chicago to New York” (Virginia Mitchell)
“one of the fastest trains”
“the crack train from New York” (Lawrence Davis)
“from New York to Los Angeles”
“different trains every time” (Virginia Mitchell)
“from Chicago to New York”
“in 1939”
“1939” (Lawrence Davis)
“1940”
“1941”
“1941 I guess it must’ve been” (Virginia Mitchell)

Movement 2: Europe—During the War

“1940” (Rachella)
“on my birthday”
“The Germans walked in”
“walked into Holland”
“Germans invaded Hungary” (Paul)
“I was in second grade”
“I had a teacher”
“a very tall man, his hair was completely plastered
smooth”
“He said: ‘Black Crows invaded our country many years
ago’” [i.e. Jews]
“and he pointed right at me”
“No more school” (Rachel)
“You must go away”
“and she said ‘Quick, go!’” (Rachella)
“and he said: ‘Don’t breathe!’”
“into those cattle wagons” (Rachella)
“for four days and four nights”
“and then we went through these strange - sounding
names”
“Polish names”
“Lots of cattle wagons there”
“They were loaded with people”
“They shaved us”
“They tattooed a number on our arm”
“Flames going up to the sky - it was smoking”

Movement 3: After the War

“and the war was over” (Paul)
“Are you sure?” (Rachella)
“The war is over”
“going to America”
“to Los Angeles”
“to New York”
“from New York to Los Angeles” (Mr. Davis)
“one of the fastest trains” (Virginia)
“but today, they’re all gone” (Mr. Davis)
“There was one girl, who had a beautiful voice” (Rachella)
“and they loved to listen to the singing, the Germans”
“and when she stopped singing they said, ‘More, more’
and they applauded”