

# WINTER FESTIVAL



JANUARY 20, 2013

3:00 PM

SEATTLE  
CHAMBER  
MUSIC  
SOCIETY

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## PROGRAM

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BÉLA BARTÓK

*Suite, Op. 14*

Allegro

Scherzo

Allegro molto

Sostenuto

**Jeewon Park** piano

BÉLA BARTÓK

*Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, Sz. 110*

Assai lento

Lento ma non troppo

Allegro non troppo

**Max Levinson** piano / **Jeewon Park** piano /

**Michael Werner** percussion / **Michael Crusoe** percussion

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## INTERMISSION

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JOHANNES BRAHMS

*Theme and Variations in D minor*

**Max Levinson** piano

JOHANNES BRAHMS

*Sextet for Strings in B-flat Major, Op. 18*

*Allegro ma non troppo*

*Andante, ma moderato*

*Scherzo: Allegro molto—Trio: Animato*

*Rondo: Poco allegretto e grazioso*

**Emily Daggett Smith** violin / **James Ehnes** violin / **Toby Appel** viola /

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

## BÉLA BARTÓK

(1881-1945)

### *Suite, Op. 14 (1916; revised 1918)*

One of the 20th-century's most influential composers and a pioneering ethnomusicologist, Béla Bartók also enjoyed a successful career as a pianist. Indeed, several recordings with his Hungarian compatriot violinist Joseph Szigeti remain durable reminders of their respective gifts as performers. Naturally Bartók composed many works for his chosen instrument, ranging from easy miniatures for young pianistic aspirants as well as music for accomplished practitioners of keyboard artistry.

Throughout his composing career Bartók made substantial use of musical ideas reflecting his intensive efforts to collect folk music from Central Europe as well as the African coast of the Mediterranean, with, of course, a special nod to his Hungarian birthright. Yet among his imposing canon of solo piano music, his much performed *Suite, Op. 14* is among but a handful of pieces eschewing folk-derived melodies per se, though rhythmic elements pop up in several places. Initially Bartók conceived the *Suite* as a five-movement composition but eventually jettisoned an *Andante*, which was not published until a decade following his death from leukemia in New York City.

In an interview in 1944 Bartók noted, "...The *Suite Op. 14* has no folk tunes. It is based entirely on original themes of my own invention. When this work was composed I had in mind the refining of piano technique, the changing of piano technique, into a more transparent style. A style more of bone and muscle opposing the heavy chordal style of the late, latter romantic period, that is, unessential ornaments like broken chords and other figures are omitted and it is more a simpler style."

As mentioned, no actual folk tunes populate the four-movement *Suite*, yet equivalent rhythmic gestures can be found, including a specific Rumanian "Ardeleanda" rhythm in the opening *Allegro*. Consummate eclectic that he was, in the first movement he employs the Lydian mode (essentially an F-Major scale with a B-natural instead of a B-flat) and a whole tone scale. With reference to this same movement the late Bartók

scholar Halsey Stevens noted that its dance character may have been influenced by Rumanian folk tunes the composer had only recently studied. Quirky and nimbly active, the sparsely scored music moves in delightful fits and starts.

The second movement, a highly driven *Scherzo* propelled by ongoing staccatos, pays homage to the Second Viennese School (Schoenberg, Berg and Webern) with the appearance of a 12-tone row. Even more than in the *Allegro* the hammered sonorities and largely linear textures demonstrate the 20th century's reinvention of the piano as a percussion instrument.

Bartók acknowledged a specifically Arabic influence in ensuing propulsive *Allegro molto* that came from music he had heard while exploring North African folk traditions in the Algerian oasis-city of Biskra in 1913. Rapid, swirling scalar fragments impel the music with great force.

The quiet concluding *Sostenuto*, according to Stevens, is "a sustained, sensitive piece in a hesitant rhythm." Inward and mildly dissonant, one can hear anticipations of Bartók's eventual mystery-enshrouded "night music" as well as the implicit lyricism of his valedictory years during the Second World War when he lived in the United States.

## BÉLA BARTÓK

### *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, Sz. 110 (1937)*

Two major changes in instrumental color and deployment during the modern era centered on the piano and the myriad devices covered by the term "percussion." In the 19th century the familiar piano balanced its legato smoothness with its projective percussive power. With Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Shostakovich and countless other modernists of all nationalities, the ability of the keyboard instrument to hammer home rhythmic impetus rose to the fore, clearly relegating legato lyricism to a secondary role. The greatly expanded percussion battery bore a cornucopia of possibilities, inspiring sonoric inventiveness on the part of both composers and the musicians who shape,

hammer and weave exotic sounds in the sometimes crowded section of the orchestra.

Enter Béla Bartók. The Hungarian composer/ethnomusicologist/pianist ranks high among the pioneering spirits who revolutionized both the piano and the armory of struck instruments. A prime example of his gift for intriguing sonority can be experienced in his Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, a work that straddles the boundaries of both chamber- and orchestral-music.

In 1939, Bartók received a commission from noted Swiss conductor Paul Sacher, director of the Basel chapter of the International Society for Contemporary Music. Bartók initially thought of writing a piece for solo piano and percussion but soon realized that he would need two pianos to balance the percussion battery. Thus was born the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, which received its premiere in 1938 with the composer and his wife Ditta Pásztory handling the duo-piano part. Shortly afterwards Bartók noted, “The whole thing sounds quite unusual, but the Basel people like it anyway, and it had tremendous success.” Because of the Sonata’s enthusiastic reception, Bartók arranged a concerto version in 1940.

The Sonata begins with an ominous *Assai lento* with quiet piano figurations posited against soft percussion. The quiet is quickly and shockingly broken by the sudden intrusion of loud cymbal crashes accented by trills and glissandi from the keyboards. A twisting, chromatic theme introduced by the pianos accelerates into a march-like episode, followed by an episode populated with short breathless keyboard phrases and balanced by a xylophone. A brilliant fugue featuring virtuosic writing for pianos ends the movement dramatically.

The ensuing *Lento, ma non troppo* withdraws into eerie quietude and is a brilliant example of the composer’s oft-noted “night music.”

The Finale, marked *Allegro non troppo* boldly shifts the mood in a cheerful Rondo built on two themes: a jovial opening gesture that briskly rises and falls on the keyboards, followed by a sardonic march that brings back the xylophone. An abrupt cadence tricks the ear into

thinking we’ve reached the end of the piece, but the music resumes, though in a less frenzied fashion than before the deceptive pause. Shortly before the real end, the music seems to fragment; vertical chords stretch into arpeggios. The work closes as it began, with soft drum beats.

## JOHANNES BRAHMS

(1833–1897)

### *Theme and Variations in D minor (1860)*

During the sad final years of Robert Schumann’s life in an asylum near Bonn, Brahms’ relationship with Schumann’s wife Clara, one of the century’s pre-eminent pianists, deepened and evolved into a lifelong friendship that lasted until her death in 1896. Clara’s support and understanding of Brahms’ music—he sought her sage advice on all manner of composition—was especially dear to the excessively self-critical Brahms. One of many expressions of his gratitude came in the guise of a solo piano recasting of the second movement of the Op. 18 Sextet for Strings (see below), proof of the composer’s ability to find new color and nuance in music written for a different performing entity. Brahms gave the unpublished Theme and Variations in D minor as a gift to Clara on the occasion of her birthday in 1860. Brahms was evidently quite fond of the piano version and performed it frequently. Note that Brahms provided piano arrangements of many of his orchestral and chamber works. His Variations on a Theme by Haydn, in fact, is heard often in its two-piano alternative to the popular orchestral version.

## JOHANNES BRAHMS

### *Sextet for Strings in B-flat Major, Op. 18 (1858–60)*

Brahms’ orchestral music—especially his four symphonies and four concertos—dominate their respective niches of the 19th-century orchestral repertoire. Yet much of his finest music resides in his substantial canon of chamber works. In addition to three string quartets, Brahms wrote three piano quartets, five trios of varying instrumentation, four quintets (also varying in scoring) and a pair of string sextets.

The sextet is a format with relatively few representatives in the repertoire. Beyond the pair by Brahms are Tchaikovsky's *Souvenir of Florence*, another by Dvořák, and Schoenberg's early *Verklaerte Nacht*. Both Tchaikovsky's and Schoenberg's sextets also exist in string orchestra arrangements where they have been able to capture a larger audience but are in no way inherently superior to their modestly scored originals. Indeed, they lose a degree of clarity and intimacy.

That said, it must be pointed out that both of Brahms' sextets have a nearly orchestral heft but still maintain the textural clarity of true chamber writing. Robert Schumann's insightful comment that Brahms' early sonatas were "veiled symphonies" could have equally applied to the Op. 18 Sextet. Orchestral music was on the younger composer's mind when he began working on this piece in 1858. At that moment he was simultaneously crafting the two serenades for orchestra, often seen as warm-ups for the psychologically daunting task of writing his first symphony. The overall emotional tenor of the Sextet was far lighter than his recently completed Piano Concerto No. 1, a powerful and turbulent work in which he expressed anger and grief in response to Schumann's death in 1856; by 1858 he had regained his equilibrium and was, in fact, in a hopeful and optimistic mood.

The Sextet opens with an expansive *Allegro ma non troppo* whose broadly flowing main theme recalls the equivalent melody that initiates the composer's Op. 8 Piano Trio—in both cases spun by a cello. Two subsidiary themes ensue: a brief and sad descending figure courtesy of the first violin, followed by a rocking tune from the entire ensemble gently prodded by pizzicatos. Additional variants of the primary melodic material infuse the movement, moving at times into the minor mode and thereby imparting a wistful quality enhanced by casting much of the music in the middle and lower registers. In the recapitulation Brahms revisits the opening material

before a brief coda.

Throughout his life Brahms had a special fondness for Hungarian folk and Gypsy melody, enhanced no doubt by his respectful friendship with Hungarian-born violinist and composer Joseph Joachim. One of many instances of this enchantment is found in the *Andante, ma moderato*, a stalwart Hungarian-inspired theme and six variations. Throughout the movement an emphatic rhythmic figure urges the music onward. Cast in D minor (except for the fourth variation) Brahms cannily alternates passages of inexorable forward motion with quiet understated moments of reflection. Elsewhere rapid and energetic scalar motion is balanced by the aforementioned fourth variation, a rich hymn-like episode followed by a sparsely scored emulation of a music box. The concluding variation returns to restatement of the opening theme, once again in D minor with its rhythmic underscoring.

A brisk *Scherzo: Allegro molto* brings a rousing dose of unhindered jauntiness replete with syncopated accents. The mid-movement *Trio: Animato* ups the bouncing pace further in an energetic gallop before returning to opening *Scherzo* music and a final zestful coda.

Brahms' classical period inclinations return in full swing in the concluding *Rondo: Poco Allegretto e grazioso*. One cannot fail to note the similar shape and demeanor of the graceful first and second themes to the work's opening music. After repeating this material at a higher pitch Brahms balances the quasi-Mozartean lightness of the primary material with a forceful episode from the violins and violas. The sectional construction of the finale provides time for dramatic outbursts that serve to reinforce the music's overall sweet lyricism. After a gentle pizzicato-laden interlude the pace accelerates to a hearty finish.

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*Program Notes by Steven Lowe*

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