For most of the nineteenth century, a shadow hung over German music, a shadow from which up-and-coming composers struggled to emerge. The shadow was that of Beethoven, whose dominance in virtually every genre of music was so complete that no composer could escape comparison to the departed master. In whatever field one wished to work – symphony, sonata, concerto, quartet – Beethoven had set the mark against which all others would be measured. To be willing to undergo such a trial, knowing that one could hardly best Beethoven at his own game, a composer had to be immensely confident.

Unfortunately, confidence was not a strong characteristic of the young Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897). Yet he still managed to thwart Beethoven’s specter by putting off symphonies and quartets until later in his career, by which time he had honed his skills through work in other genres not linked to Beethoven’s name. These compositions, spared from the shadow, were able to stand on their own merits, and through them, Brahms developed the confidence he would need to write a symphony.

One such early effort is Brahms’s String Sextet No. 1, scored for pairs of violins, violas, and cellos. Beethoven had composed many quartets, but not a single sextet. It was a genre known only to the lesser talents of Spohr and Boccherini, and, as of 1860, the twenty-seven-year-old Brahms, who opted for a sextet exactly because of its rarity. At the time, the young composer was spending his summer as music master of the royal court of Detmold, where his duties were sufficiently limited as to allow much opportunity for pleasant walks in the woods. Perhaps that mellow atmosphere contributed to the composition’s gentle charms.

Upon completing the piece Brahms sent it to his friend, the violinist Joseph Joachim, with a note reading, “I have been quite a long time over it and I do not suppose that this will have raised your expectations… but with God’s help, nothing is impossible.” Joachim, after playing through the piece with friends, expressed cautious optimism and arranged a premiere in Hanover on October 20, 1860. Brahms was present for the occasion, as was his dear friend Clara Schumann, who remarked of the piece, “It was even more beautiful than I had anticipated, and my expectations were already high.” Spared the burden of Beethoven’s ghost, the new sextet – and its young creator – scored a success.

Its radiant first movement offers a wealth of contrasting melodies, sometimes featuring one player or another, at other times, blending the entire ensemble together. The second movement, the only one specifying a truly slow tempo, brings a set of variations on a melody based upon Hungarian rhythms and sonorities; Brahms was no Hungarian, but had heard plenty of that country’s music, thanks to his Hungarian-born colleague, violinist Joseph Joachim. The short and spirited third movement leaves Hungary behind, turning instead to the high spirits of more generic folk music moods. For his finale Brahms at first sets aside expectation, choosing elegance and grace rather than the high drama that would more frequently close a multi-movement composition. Only in the final pages does bold expression take center stage, allowing the sextet to conclude with flash and fervor.

To begin, it is worth pointing out that a string octet is not simply a string quartet with two persons playing each of the four parts. Rather, it’s a work in which the composer has troubled himself or herself to craft eight different parts for these instruments, making sure that all eight fit together suitably within the rules of harmony and structure. Remove any one player and gaps appear in the music: as there is no duplication, everyone is equally important.

The most famous such work is undoubtedly that which Felix Mendelssohn (1809 – 1847) composed when he was just sixteen years old, and which will be heard on the last half of tonight’s program. By comparison, Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 – 1975) was a late starter: when he wrote his octet he was not quite nineteen and still enrolled at the recently renamed Petrograd Conservatory. There he was studying both piano and composition. This early
work reveals that there was also a measure of music history in the curriculum, for it reflects the long-established ideas of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 – 1750). Bach never wrote a string octet, and wouldn’t have known the term “scherzo” as it didn’t come into use until half a century after his death. However, many Bach keyboard works set a stately introduction before a more intricate main body of a composition, which is exactly what young Shostakovich does here.

The opening Prelude begins in solemn mien, as Bach would have opened one of his Preludes and Fugues. Shostakovich even builds up to some fugal passages, with the individual players pursuing quite different musical ideas simultaneously. He also makes space for an expansive violin solo floating over the restless action of the other melodic lines. For the second movement Scherzo, the busy contrapuntal techniques of the first movement recur, now with an even greater measure of nervous energy. As would become Shostakovich’s habit, that energy takes on a wry and sardonic flavor. For this composer, as for Beethoven before him, a scherzo was less about humor – literally, the Italian word means “joke” – than about juxtaposing ideas in such a manner as to catch an audience by surprise. These two little movements for strings only span about ten minutes, but young Shostakovich was already proving that he had what it took for a major career.

Last performed on our series: September 24, 2008 (Sejong)

**Mendelssohn: Octet for Strings in E-flat major, Op. 20**

Felix Mendelssohn (1809 – 1847) chose his parents well. Wealthy patrons of the arts in Berlin, they supported numerous activities throughout the city and brought much of that culture home to their family, giving dinners for musicians, composers, and philosophers, and hosting regular Sunday morning concerts in their living room. Their efforts brought young Felix into close contact with Rossini and Goethe, among others, but his intensive training did not stop with social exposure. The Mendelssohns also hired the best teachers for their talented son. He studied piano, violin, and composition, and his parents ensured that the pieces he produced would be performed in public. Stimulated by such attentions and surrounded by the culture of the continent, young Mendelssohn quickly polished his talents. At an age when most musicians today are still in school, he was conquering the concert stage.

The Octet for Strings dates from 1825 when the precocious young man was sixteen years old. The work is remarkable not only for the facility of its melodies and the gracious balance of its various parts, but also because here Mendelssohn proved himself a pioneer in producing a masterful work for the combination of two string quartets. Haydn never wrote such a work, nor did Mozart or Beethoven or Schubert. Louis Spohr did, but his double quartets, written in his mature years, show less mastery of form and instrument than this one early effort of a teenaged genius.

Mendelssohn dedicated the work to his friend, the violinist Eduard Rietz, on the occasion of Rietz’s twenty-third birthday. Historians presume that the Octet premiered at one of the Mendelssohn family home concerts, perhaps with Rietz and Mendelssohn amongst the performers. Alternately symphonic and intimate, the piece begins with a graceful Allegro that soars with the first violin then proceeds to a gently thoughtful second movement. The third movement Scherzo is all tip-toes and mystery, suggestive of the scherzo from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that Mendelssohn would compose in later years. The composer’s sister Fanny maintained that her brother had in mind a particular ghostly vision from the pages of Goethe’s *Faust*. The final movement begins with a bustling fugue, a technique learned from the young composer’s extensive studies of Bach, and concludes in a mood of utter exuberance.

The Octet has remained a favorite of audiences and string players alike. Even the composer himself regarded it highly. Late in his tragically abbreviated life, Mendelssohn described the Octet as "my favorite of all my compositions" and added, "I had a most wonderful time in the writing of it!" His advice to performers was that they should play in what he termed "symphonic orchestral style," by which he seemed to mean with close attention to the dynamic markings, so as to allow the various layers in the music to remain clear.

*Tonight marks the first performance of this work on our series.*

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