

PACIFICA QUARTET
ANTHONY MCGILL, CLARINET

SIMIN GANATRA, violin
AUSTIN HARTMAN, violin
MARK HOLLOWAY, viola
BRANDON VAMOS, cello

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK
(1841-1904)

**String Quartet No. 2 in F Major,
Op. 96 ("American")**
Allegro ma non troppo
Lento
Molto vivace — Trio
Finale. Vivace ma non troppo

BENJAMIN SHIRLEY
(b. 1964)

***High Sierra Sonata* (Colorado Premiere)**
Buttermilk Morning
Angry Secrets
Reflections on a Day

INTERMISSION

JOHANNES BRAHMS
(1833-1897)

**Quintet in B Minor for Clarinet
and Strings, Op. 115**
Allegro
Adagio
Andantino
Con moto

**PACIFICA QUARTET**

PACIFICA QUARTET

With a career spanning nearly three decades, the multiple Grammy Award-winning Pacifica Quartet has achieved international recognition as one of the finest chamber ensembles performing today. The Quartet is known for its virtuosity, exuberant performance style, and often-daring repertory choices. Having served as quartet-in-residence at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music for the past decade, the Quartet also leads the Center for Advanced Quartet Studies at the Aspen Music Festival and School, and was previously the quartet-in-residence at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 2021, the Pacifica Quartet received a second Grammy Award for *Contemporary Voices*, an exploration of music by three Pulitzer Prize-winning composers: Shulamit Ran, Jennifer Higdon, and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich.

Formed in 1994, the Pacifica Quartet quickly won chamber music's top competitions, including the 1998 Naumburg Chamber Music Award. In 2002 the ensemble was honored with Chamber Music America's Cleveland Quartet Award and an appointment to Lincoln Center's The Bowers Program (formerly CMS Two), and in 2006 was awarded a prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant. With its powerful energy and captivating, cohesive sound, the Pacifica has established itself as one of the finest quartets performing today.

Following the pandemic period, in addition to continuing to perform extensively from the quartet repertoire, the Pacifica Quartet prioritized collaboration with its esteemed group of friends and colleagues. Upcoming performances and recordings include projects with clarinetist Anthony McGill, guitarist Sharon Isbin, and pianist Marc-André Hamelin. In addition, the Quartet will collaborate with soprano Karen Slack for a performance at Carnegie Hall in a program featuring the world premiere of a new work by James Lee III.

The members of the Pacifica Quartet live in Bloomington, Indiana, where they serve as quartet-in-residence and

full-time faculty members at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music. Prior to their appointment, the Quartet was on the faculty of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign from 2003 to 2012, and also served as resident performing artist at the University of Chicago for seventeen years.

ANTHONY MCGILL, CLARINET

Hailed for his “trademark brilliance, penetrating sound and rich character” (*New York Times*), clarinetist Anthony McGill enjoys a dynamic international solo and chamber music career and is principal clarinet of the New York Philharmonic—the first African-American principal player in the organization’s history. He is the recipient of the 2020 Avery Fisher Prize, one of classical music’s most significant awards.

McGill appears as a soloist with top orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, Metropolitan Opera, and the Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, and Detroit Symphony Orchestras. He performed alongside Itzhak Perlman, Yo-Yo Ma, and Gabriela Montero at the inauguration of President Barack Obama, premiering a piece by John Williams. As a chamber musician, McGill collaborates with the Brentano, Daedalus, Guarneri, JACK, Miró, Pacifica, Shanghai, Takács, and Tokyo Quartets, and performs with leading artists including Emanuel Ax, Inon Barnatan, Gloria Chien, Yefim Bronfman, Gil Shaham, Midori, Mitsuko Uchida, and Lang Lang.

He serves on the faculty of The Juilliard School and is the Artistic Director for Juilliard’s Music Advancement Program. He holds the William R. and Hyunah Yu Brody Distinguished Chair at the Curtis Institute of Music. In 2020, McGill’s #TakeTwoKnees campaign protesting the death of George Floyd and historic racial injustice went viral.



Photo: Todd Rosenberg Photography

ANTHONY MCGILL

NOTES

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK: STRING QUARTET NO. 2 IN F MAJOR, OP. 96 ("AMERICAN")

IN BRIEF

BORN: September 8, 1841, Nelahozeves, Czechia

DIED: May 1, 1904, Prague, Czechia

FIRST PERFORMANCE: January 1, 1894, Boston

MOST RECENT FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC

PERFORMANCE: October 7, 2015, Jerusalem Quartet

DURATION: 25 minutes

The “American” Quartet holds an analogous position among Dvořák’s chamber works to the “New World” Symphony in his orchestral music. Both are especially beloved by American audiences because of their origins in the United States.

Dvořák had been in New York City for a year, directing the National Conservatory, when he decided to take a summer holiday in 1893. Homesick for his native Bohemia but contractually bound to remain in the United States for another year, he chose a destination where he could at least speak his mother tongue. He traveled to the remote hamlet of Spillville, Iowa. After a season of big city hustle and bustle, this small farming community provided welcome relief. Spillville’s 400 Moravian immigrants welcomed their famous countryman with open arms.

The summer months in Iowa proved fruitful both personally and professionally. Dvořák’s children joined him for the sojourn, and he was extremely happy to have family around him and to be among other Czech speakers. Filled with energy, enthusiasm, and a host of melodic ideas, he began to sketch a new string quartet on June 8, 1893. Two days later, after apparently effortless work, he completed the sketch, marking on the manuscript, “Thanks be to God, I am satisfied, it went quickly.” On June 23 he finalized the full score.

Perhaps because it is suffused with the excitement and immediacy of the moment, the “American” has become

Dvořák's most popular string quartet, rivaled only by the A-major Piano Quintet among his chamber works. That said, it would be an injustice to Dvořák not to mention that he composed fourteen string quartets, which contain a wealth of wonderful music. Anyone who enjoys this quartet should seek out the other mature quartets, with their generous rewards.

The "American" is one of a group of works that Dvořák sent from the United States to Fritz Simrock, his German publisher. To expedite prompt issuance of the new compositions, Simrock asked Johannes Brahms to proofread the musical galleys. When he learned of Brahms's labor on his behalf, Dvořák was overwhelmed, writing to Simrock, "I can scarcely believe there is another composer in the world who would do as much." The story is heart-warming testimony to the depth of the friendship between Dvořák and Brahms, and the exceptionally high regard in which Brahms held his younger friend.

The music of the "American" quartet, like that of the "New World" symphony, has historically been associated with Negro spirituals and American folk song. In addition, its syncopations, dotted rhythms, and propensity for pentatonic scales all share roots in the folk music of Dvořák's native Bohemia. Bedřich Smetana's autobiographical quartet, "From My Life," also served as an important model for Dvořák's first movement. British commentator Richard Graves once described Op. 96 as being like eating blueberry pie and washing it down with slivovice.

Dvořák's genius in this work is his fusion of African-American, Native American, and Czech harmonies and rhythms. It doesn't take much imagination to hear Indian drums in the finale, and the quartet's melodies and vigorous rhythms may well prompt aural memories of folk songs we recall from our American youth. Nevertheless, Dvořák's own national spirit prevails, making this quartet Czech through and through.

BENJAMIN SHIRLEY:
HIGH SIERRA
SONATA

BORN: 1964, Berlin, Germany

FIRST PERFORMANCE: February 23, 2023, Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, Los Angeles, CA

MOST RECENT FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC

PERFORMANCE: Tonight marks the Colorado premiere of this work.

DURATION: 19 minutes

In September 2022, Ben Shirley told Drew Bracken of the *Newark Advocate*:

All I wanted to do was play music, so I wasn't exactly an overachiever in high school. Decades later, after having destroyed my life due to alcohol and drug addiction, I returned to school. Supported by the incredible people at the Midnight Mission, a homeless shelter in Los Angeles's notorious Skid Row where I wound up broke, dope-sick, and homeless in 2011, I enrolled at Los Angeles City College. I became a straight-A student and earned a certificate in music technology. Several years later, I applied to the prestigious San Francisco Conservatory of Music and was accepted, with a partial scholarship. I was in the inaugural class of the Technology & Applied Composition Program.

Now an established composer of concert, film, and television music, Ben Shirley is making up for a lot of lost time. He was on Tim Williams's orchestration teams for the CBS series *S.W.A.T.* and the 2019 action/comedy film *Hobbs & Shaw*. He is an alumnus of the Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music, and is in his

second year of its two-year “Composing Earth” program, which has been dedicated to the study of climate change. Last fall Shirley joined the board of the Newark-Granville Symphony Orchestra in his hometown of Newark, Ohio. His volunteer activities include reviewing grant proposals for the United Way of Licking County, Ohio, and he is a member of the Newark Rotary Club. He also remains active in a 12-step recovery program.

Ben is a veteran distance runner who has completed marathons in Ghana, Italy, Vietnam, Germany, and Israel. His running activities indirectly led to the composition of *High Sierra Sonata*, as his composer’s note explains:

In the summer of 2019, I was invited by a friend, Ryan Navales, to join him in serving as a volunteer at an aid station on the course of the Bishop High Sierra Ultramarathon. It marked my second trip to the Owens Valley to visit my friend, whom I’d met while we were both beginning the process of recovery from drug and alcohol addiction.

Way up in the Eastern Sierras, I soon learned that weather, much like life, can change on a dime. As the mountains wake up, it is clear, cool, and sparkling with life. But within minutes, it is sleeting, freezing, howling, and ultimately covered in snow. The sun returns, and the rain returns, and on it went, before relative calm set in at the end of our 12-hour shift. Every season came and went through the course of a single day, which couldn’t help but remind me of the seasons of life, and in some cases the seasons of emotions we all go through, in a day, a week, a month, or a year.

But irrespective of the circumstances beyond my control, there in the Eastern Sierras, the majestic beauty surrounding me, the camaraderie amongst volunteers, the perseverance of the runners, and a decade-long friendship rooted in a shared experience remained as rock solid as the mountains we stood on.

Shirley's Quintet for clarinet and strings is an ode to the majesty of those mountains and the caprices of their weather. Its three principal sections, which are performed without pause, are musical evocations of Shirley's experience in the High Sierras, unified by shared musical material in each segment. He writes for clarinet in A, which sounds a semitone lower than the usual B-flat instrument. The A clarinet has a particularly warm lower range, known as *chalumeau*. Shirley favors this range for the clarinet's unaccompanied soliloquies, which frame the outer movements. While there is ample shared material among the five players, the clarinet emerges as first among equals, often commenting on the strings. Its role is particularly interesting in the central "Angry Secrets" movement. When the clarinet enters it is agitated and a bit disoriented, as if flummoxed by a sudden squall. But it recaptures the sublime serenity of the opening "Buttermilk Morning" in the last section, "Reflections on a Day," whose dance-like *con spirito* section reinforces the exhilarating joy of being in the mountains.

Born in Berlin to a military family, Ben Shirley grew up in Berlin, San Francisco, and Texas, and graduated early from high school in El Paso. He settled in Los Angeles in 1990 and was signed to Epic Records as the bass player for the rock band U.P.O, and to Pacific Recordings as the bass player for Chingalera. Remarkably, he did not start composing until he turned his life around at the Midnight Mission. In light of his inspiring story, *High Sierra Sonata* takes on a transformative aura.

Shirley met Anthony McGill in 2018 when McGill was artist-in-residence with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. McGill and tenor Todd Strange performed Shirley's *Brother Burn* for clarinet and tenor. Shortly afterward, McGill performed at the Midnight Mission and suggested that Shirley compose a clarinet quintet for him. Within two months, that project pulled together and became the piece you hear tonight. "Anthony was the first person to actually take time with a piece of music I'd written and make it a piece of business," says Shirley. "The meeting with him changed everything for me. Anthony introduced me to Pacifica and they are equally wonderful people. [With *High Sierra Sonata*,] I was composing for a dear friend."

Friends of Chamber Music co-commissioned Shirley's *High Sierra Sonata* for the Pacifica Quartet and Anthony McGill in 2019. The piece was originally to have received its world premiere on Friends of Chamber Music's Chamber Series on September 9, 2020, but that performance was cancelled due to the COVID pandemic. This evening is the work's Colorado premiere. The co-commissioners are the Chamber Music Society of Detroit and the Interlochen Center for the Arts.

BORN: May 7, 1833, Hamburg, Germany

DIED: April 3, 1897, Vienna, Austria

FIRST PERFORMANCE: December 12, 1891, Berlin, Saal der Singakademie: Richard Mühlfeld (clarinet), Joachim-Quartett

MOST RECENT FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC

PERFORMANCE: October 15, 2014, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

DURATION: 37 minutes

JOHANNES
BRAHMS: QUINTET
IN B MINOR FOR
CLARINET AND
STRINGS, OP. 115

Johannes Brahms completed his fourth and final symphony in 1885, more than a decade before his death. After the Fourth Symphony, his thoughts seemed to

turn away from the grandiose toward the intimate and introspective. That is not to say his late music is without drama; rather, there is a greater proportion of poignancy to passion, expressed through individual music-making as opposed to large ensemble. In the four sets of *Klavierstücke* Opp. 116-119, for example, pianists have one of the richest troves in the entire keyboard literature and certainly a magnificent segment of the Brahms canon. A similar wealth of songs and chamber music stands out among the compositions from Brahms's late years.

Four of them involve the clarinet: the Trio in A Minor, Op.115, and tonight's Quintet, both composed in 1891, and the two Sonatas for Clarinet and Piano, Op. 120, composed in 1894. Clarinet was his preferred instrument among the orchestral woodwinds. His intense exploration of the clarinet's chamber possibilities resulted from a desire to write a piece for Richard Mühlfeld (1856-1907), whom he had first encountered in Meiningen at the time the Meiningen Court Orchestra performed the premiere of the Fourth Symphony in 1885. Mühlfeld had begun his career in 1873 as a violinist in this orchestra. As a youth he had also studied clarinet, and in 1879 he became principal clarinetist of the Meiningen Court Orchestra.

Mühlfeld played privately for Brahms in 1891. The composer, now nearly 60, had composed nothing in nearly a year. Delighted with Mühlfeld's wonderful sound and technique, he set to work immediately on the Trio and Quintet. Upon completing them, he wrote to Baroness von Heldburg of Saxe-Meiningen:

Your Mühlfeld is the greatest master of his instrument and I will not even think of having these works played anywhere else but at Meiningen.

The most obvious precedent for Brahms's Quintet is Mozart's immortal Quintet in A, K.581, written for

Anton Stadler. However, Carl Maria von Weber had also composed a Clarinet Quintet in E-flat, Op. 34 (1816) that Brahms doubtless knew as well. Indeed, many historians have noted that Mühlfeld inspired Brahms in much the same way that Stadler inspired Mozart and Heinrich Baermann fired Weber's imagination. Still, all three composers retained a distinctive, individual style and Brahms left his own intensely personal stamp on his Clarinet Quintet. Probably the greatest difference between his quintet and Mozart's is the way he combines the woodwind instrument with the strings. Whereas Mozart treats the clarinet in a *concertante* fashion, that is, with clarinet called on for some measure of soloistic display even though it is technically an equal part of the ensemble, Brahms integrates the clarinet more fully into the chamber texture. His use of the woodwind instrument's color is extremely subtle.

The Quintet is cyclic, which means that musical material appearing in the first movement is re-introduced and re-worked in subsequent movements. Sometimes this takes place via direct quotation; more often, it occurs after having undergone some transformation that leaves the original idea altered but recognizable. Brahms's metamorphosis is particularly subtle and understated, with the undulating sixteenth notes in parallel thirds and sixths that open the work serving as germinal material for virtually the entire composition. By structuring the Quintet in this way, Brahms essentially makes all four movements into an extended set of variations, with an emphasis on the Finale, the only formal set of variations in the piece, and there merged with aspects of rondo form.

One aspect of the Quintet's individuality is an ambiguity between B minor, the home tonality, and its relative major, D major, which is clearly implied in the opening measures. This tonal uncertainty is inherent to the questioning nature of the music, a thoughtful demeanor that serves as another hallmark. Like so many other compositions from

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violin



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Brahms's final years, this is not so much music of gesture and drama, but its focus is on nuances of instrumental color and motivic development. The composer's biographer Karl Geiringer, who considered the Quintet one of Brahms's most beautiful pieces of chamber music, saw it as retrospective:

Pictures of the past, pleasures and sorrows,
longing and hope, pass before the elderly
master, who expresses them once again in
delicately restrained and melancholy tones.

The character of the clarinet is, of course, integral to the entire work. For those lucky enough to be discovering this piece for the first time, just watching and listening to the interaction among the five players is an engrossing experience. Listeners to whom Op. 115 is an old friend reap a different reward, that of the ever-present freshness and magic that attend great music.

Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2023

UPCOMING CONCERTS

IMANI WINDS

TUE, MAY 9 | 6:00 PM | Nocturne Jazz and Supper Club

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