

PROGRAM NOTES

Isidore String Quartet with Jeremy Denk, piano

Webern: *Langsamer Satz*

IN BRIEF

BORN: December 3, 1883, Vienna, Austria

DIED: September 15, 1945, Mittersill, Austria

FIRST PERFORMANCE: May 27, 1962, Seattle, Washington, University of Washington String Quartet

MOST RECENT FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC PERFORMANCE: Tonight marks the first performance of this work on our series.

DURATION: 8 minutes

Few of us know Webern's music. Not to be confused with the German 19th-century romantic Carl Maria von Weber, the Viennese native Anton Webern was a disciple and star pupil of Arnold Schoenberg, inventor of the twelve-tone system. Webern became a master of compression and expressivity, writing twelve-tone pieces of utmost brevity. His complete published works fit on just three compact discs – and that includes his orchestrations of music by Bach and Schubert.

After his death, however, a cache of unpublished manuscripts was discovered among his effects. He composed these between 1899 and 1908; nearly all date from before he met Schoenberg in the autumn of 1904. These early compositions, including *Langsamer Satz*, show how firmly anchored Webern was in the Viennese tradition. Their post-romantic harmonic language reveals the influence of Wagner, Strauss, and Brahms.

Langsamer Satz means “slow movement.” Webern's original is a single movement for string quartet. He wrote it on the heels of an idyllic holiday with his cousin Wilhelmine Mörtl. They had fallen in love in 1902 and would marry in 1911. In spring 1905 the pair took a trip to Waldwinkel, a lovely area of countryside about 60 miles west of Vienna. Webern, who adored the outdoors, was 21 and head over heels in love. His diaries are filled with extravagant descriptions, even on rainy days.

My heart was jubilant. I spent wonderful hours during the afternoon. When night fell, the skies shed bitter tears, but I wandered with her along a road. A coat protected the two of us. Our love rose to infinite heights and filled the universe! Two souls were enraptured.

(Then, the next day:)

We wandered through forests. It was a fairyland! High tree trunks all around us, a green luminescence in between, and here and there floods of gold on the green moss. The forest symphony resounded.

He composed *Langsamer Satz* in June. It is, quite simply, love music: love of nature, love of Wilhelmine. It is also the work of a 21-year-old composer still finding his way. Writer James Beale calls it “disarmingly conventional . . . almost sugary.” Biographer Hans Moldenhauer is more generous: “The music is pervaded by a sweet poignancy; serene happiness rises to triumphant ecstasy in the coda.” Most striking are the textural ideas. Webern was a lifelong contrapuntist and the independence of his voices adds to the interest of this movement.

Schumann: Piano Quintet in E-flat major, Op. 44

IN BRIEF

BORN: June 8, 1810, Zwickau, Germany

DIED: July 29, 1856, Endenich, Bonn, Germany

DEDICATION: Clara Schumann

MOST RECENT FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC PERFORMANCE: November 11, 2009; Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio with the Miami String Quartet

DURATION: 30 minutes

Robert and Clara Schumann were married in September 1840, the day before Clara's 21st birthday. The ceremony took place after almost four years of prolonged hostility and opposition from Clara's father, the prominent piano pedagogue Friedrich Wieck. Still, Schumann was elated about his marriage. His ebullience gave rise to a stream of compositional energy, as if there were no end to the music within him.

Today, Schumann's bipolar nature is well known. His manic/depressive disorder manifested itself in composition by an obsessive focus on one particular type of writing for a prolonged period. In the late 1830s, he had composed almost exclusively for solo piano. The year 1840 brought forth an outpouring of lieder, including the important song cycles *Dichterliebe* and *Frauenliebe und Leben*. 1841 was a year of orchestral works.

In 1842 Schumann turned his attention to chamber music, producing the three string quartets, Op. 41, this evening's Piano Quintet Op. 44, and the Piano Quartet Op. 47, also in E-flat. Schumann was treading a new path for himself with these works. This was the composer of brilliant vignettes inspired by literary masterpieces and the writings of Jean-Paul Richter; the composer of *Carnaval* and *Faschingsschwank aus Wien*, of *Kreisleriana* and the *Davidbündlertänze*. Schumann, the miniaturist *par excellence*, turned from the extra-musical associations which had dominated the music of his youth, and instead immersed himself in the study of counterpoint, particularly fugue, and the composition of absolute music, that is, music that is without story or subject, and exists only for the beauty of sound and structure. The first results of his new absorption were the three string quartets. They proved to be his only essay in the genre, but he profited from his fresh experience with them to combine the quartet ensemble with piano in his next chamber work, the Piano Quintet.

Schumann cannot be said to have "invented" the piano quintet as Mozart did the piano quartet. The 18th-century Italian Luigi Boccherini (1743-1805) wrote a dozen works for the same instrumentation. They are little known today, and were almost certainly unknown to Schumann, whose expansion to the combination of piano plus string quartet was logical considering his recent completion of the Op. 41 quartets. He was eager to return to composing for the piano, the instrument he knew and loved best – and it was Clara's instrument. At the same time, he was still filled with ideas for the string quartet. By combining the two, he brought his own musical imagination to the varied sonorities of five players.

Clara was, of course, the pianist for whom Schumann wrote the work. She played its premiere, and incorporated it into her repertoire immediately, thereby contributing to its popularity. The Piano Quintet rapidly became one of Schumann's best-known compositions. Schumann's friend Mendelssohn played the second performance and had an early hand in the reworking of the scherzo.

The Piano Quintet is one of Schumann's happiest inspirations in the realm of formally governed, abstract music. It shows a command of form and a discipline over his musical imagination that recurred infrequently in his remaining 14 years. The opening movement is a fine sonata-form structure, with both strong and lyrical themes. As one would expect, the piano plays a major role, functioning as a partner to the string quartet rather than as one of five individual components of the musical texture. Nevertheless, the keyboard does not overshadow the string players, whose parts are written effectively and idiomatically. The movement is noble and strong, characterized by aggressive foursquare phrases and a compelling vitality throughout. Schumann demonstrates his mastery of song-like writing in the lovely slow movement. He casts this march as a rondo, with strongly contrasting episodes interrupting its tentative main idea.

Schumann's scherzo is dazzling. This whirlwind bravura *tour de force* is constructed, remarkably, of ascending and descending scale passages. Both of its trios provide rhythmic contrast; the second contains the most challenging technical writing for strings in the work.

The finale is one of the most extraordinary movements in the entire chamber music literature. Schumann teases us with G minor before firmly grounding his musical material in the home tonality of E-flat major. In the first movement, he shows a gratifying command of form and musical matter throughout; the finale is a convincing sonata-rondo. But in this *Allegro ma non troppo* he saves his finest writing for last. In the splendid coda—another *fugato*—he not only concentrates his most technically secure contrapuntal writing but also incorporates the main theme of the first movement. This coda shows his hard-won mastery of counterpoint. Schumann weaves the musicians' parts expertly, bringing his quintet to a brilliant, unified, and satisfying close.

Brahms: Quintet for Piano and Strings in F minor, Op. 34

IN BRIEF

BORN: May 7, 1833, Hamburg, Germany

DIED: April 3, 1897, Vienna, Austria

FIRST PERFORMANCE: June 22, 1866, Leipzig, Germany

MOST RECENT FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC PERFORMANCE: February 18, 2009, Miró Quartet with Shai Wosner, piano

DURATION: 41 minutes

One of the darkest musical canvasses of Brahms's entire career, the Piano Quintet Op. 34 underwent several metamorphoses before it crystallized into its current form. The music dates from 1862, although it was not published until 1865. Originally Brahms intended it for string quintet. His friend and chamber music collaborator Joseph Joachim persuaded him that the string ensemble, even enlarged by the second cello, was insufficient to do justice to the work's musical climaxes and symphonic conception.

Switching to the keyboard, whose sound could achieve a more orchestral breadth, Brahms chose to rewrite the work as a sonata for two pianos; in this version it was performed in Vienna in April 1864, more than two years before the Quintet's première. (The two-piano version was published in 1871 as Op. 34a.) With two pianos at his disposal, Brahms achieved the power and clarity he sought, but he remained dissatisfied with the forfeiture of string color and timbre. He finally arrived at a synthesis of piano and strings. The result—in the version we hear—is a chamber music masterpiece that has been called the climax of his first maturity.

The overall impression this quintet creates is one of grandeur and monumental tragedy. Perhaps because it underwent such extensive reworking, it is filled with a profusion of melodic ideas. If the grand scale and impassioned mood of the quintet as a whole are Beethovenian, its melodic abundance, particularly in second themes and in the slow movement, is more Schubertian.

Brahms's opening movement is initially restrained and tragic. Piano, first violin and cello state the theme in stark unison before the full ensemble lashes forth with a series of angry, defiant musical utterances. These two contrasting ideas furnish much of the material that Brahms develops in the expansive *Allegro non troppo*. Along with a related motive that is introduced by a falling, sighing half-step, these musical ideas will recur in subtly altered form throughout the entire quintet.

The slow movement, in ABA form, shares the dreamy, lyrical quality of the analogous movement in the early Piano Sonata in F minor, Op. 5. The piano introduces Brahms's material in parallel thirds and sixths, with syncopated octave commentary from the strings. Hints of minor mode inflect the harmonies with an Eastern European flavor. Brahms is at his most

Schubertian in this lovely movement.

The scherzo is expansive and massive, with thunderous passages that call to mind the scherzo of the Beethoven Fifth Symphony. Brahms sets up a splendid contrast between the pizzicato pedal of the cello and the sinuous, syncopated meanderings of first violin and viola in unison. Their quiet opening statement switches meter briefly to introduce a rat-a-tat-tat reference, still *pianissimo*, to the first movement. Then the full ensemble explodes into the Beethoven allusion. The gentler side of Brahms's musical personality manifests itself in the Trio, whose melody draws on the heritage of folk music. Still, there is grandeur and majesty in these gestures.

A mysterious slow introduction—the only one in Brahms's chamber music—opens the finale. Marked *Poco sostenuto* (a bit sustained), that introduction is one of the sections for which strings were essential to deliver the desolate quality that Brahms desired. The balance of the finale is an abbreviated sonata/rondo. Brahms gathers momentum slowly, deceiving the listener with apparent switches of temperament, for there is much humor in this music to mitigate its darkness. Very likely the entire movement served as a structural model for the finale to his First Symphony (1876).

The quintet culminates in a magnificent, driving, oversized coda. Brahms recasts the main theme first in 6/8 time, then by syncopation, driving it toward its dramatic conclusion. Symphonic in its conception, the quintet is a masterpiece of the chamber music literature, providing a profound and memorable listening experience.

Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2026