JANUARY 29, 2015
7:30 PM

PROGRAM

JOHANNES BRAHMS
Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in C minor, Op. 101
Allegro energico
Presto non assai
Andante grazioso
Allegro molto
James Ehnes violin / Andrés Díaz cello / Orion Weiss piano

FRANZ SCHUBERT
Sonata for Viola and Piano in A minor, D. 821 “Arpeggione”
Allegro moderato
Adagio
Allegretto
Che-Yen Chen viola / Anton Nel piano

INTERMISSION

CÉSAR FRANCK
Quintet for Piano and Strings in F minor
Molto moderato quasi lento—Allegro
Lento, con molto sentimento
Allegro non troppo, ma con fuoco
Karen Gomyo violin / Yosuke Kawasaki violin / Beth Guterman Chu viola / Wendy Sutter cello / William Wolfram piano
JOHANNES BRAHMS  
(1833–1897)  
Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in C minor,  
Op. 101 (1886)

Brahms spent the summer of 1886 soaking up the pleasures of the Swiss resort of Hofstetten. Typically, this kind of recuperative interlude left him sufficient time to focus on composition; in effect he was on a “working vacation.” Comfortably ensconced, he balanced work on three major pieces, his second sonatas respectively for violin and cello, both with piano, of course, and his final Piano Trio, Op. 101, cast in the historically dramatic key of C minor. Keeping his fingers active, he handled the piano role at the Trio’s premiere in 1887, joined by members of the Heckmann String Quartet.

As he matured as a composer, Brahms’ music underwent a process of remarkable concision. Largely gone were the leisurely and expansive movements of some of his early works, such as found in the oceanic scope of the Op. 5 Piano Sonata and the first version of the Op. 8 Piano Trio. He sought to pare the “fat” from his late scores, taking to heart a sentence he had underlined in a copy of a book in his library, Vischer’s Goethe’s Faust. “The artist should provide only the essentials, and eliminate everything inessential; in this way he will transform the real into the ideal.” Faintly Platonic, this remark resonated to Brahms’ evolving esthetics, and has special meaning for a work such as the Op. 101 Piano Trio. As with his slightly later Clarinet Quintet, a basic three-note thematic kernel informs all four movements, creating great musical wealth from a minimal (in size, not implication) thematic germ.

Otherworldly sonorities inhabit the ensuing Presto non assai. These ghostly thematic incantations also derive from the three-note figure, though the rhythm differs considerably from its earlier appearance. Plucked cello arpeggios set against quietly martial piano chords add further to the eerie atmosphere.

The meltingsly lovely and unabashedly expressive theme announced by the strings at the beginning of the Andante grazioso does, at last, give us a hint of the “autumnal,” and here too the heartfelt melody, so nobly intoned especially on the cello, is an outgrowth of the abovementioned motive, though with wider spaces between the notes. The theme is unusual in its atypical seven-beat length. Moments of sublime yearning darken and intensify meaning in this movement.

Energetic and Angst-filled, the concluding Allegro molto generates great thrust, borrowing the altered three-note germ for both of its primary themes. Brahms mixes and refashions new tunes from permutations of the theme’s already varied manifestations. Finally, Brahms bids goodbye to the storm and stress of C-minor, ending the piece in the major, enveloped in warmth.

FRANZ SCHUBERT  
(1797–1828)  
Sonata for Viola and Piano in A minor, D. 821 “Arpeggione” (1824)

Music has never been immune to advances in technology and the Romantic and Modern eras’ shared paradigm of progress. Among the dramatic successes was, of course, the rapid evolution of the modern grand piano from the dynamically limited fortepiano of Mozart’s time, an instrument whose feeble mechanism drew passionate criticism from Beethoven. In distinct contrast to the fate of the piano was that accorded the arpeggione (also known as a guitare d’amour), a hybrid of the guitar and the viola da gamba that was taken up by one Vincenz Schuster, who prevailed upon his friend Franz Schubert to compose something for him to perform. Like the guitar, the arpeggione had six
strings and was tuned like a guitar, from bottom to
top: E–A–D–G–B–E. Quickly falling into oblivion,
the *arpeggione* essentially became a footnote
in music history, but it did engender a work by
Schubert for that hapless instrument—the Sonata
in A minor, D. 821. Despite the shortcomings of the
*arpeggione*, the delightful duo has proved more
durable in alternate versions for cello and piano,
and as in this performance, for viola and piano.

Vienna in the 1820s was swept up in the contagion
of Italian opera, which is evident in the vocal
orientation of many of the themes in the Sonata.
Drawing inspiration from the passion for Italian
opera, the opening *Allegro moderato* can be
described as an extended aria for the viola-as-
singer, deftly accompanied by the piano’s harmonic
underpinning and jesting asides.

The second movement *Adagio* achieves a fine
balance between dark emotion and Viennese
*Gemütlichkeit*. Schubert had, by 1824 (the year
of composition for the *Arpeggione* sonata), already
come close to death from syphilis and its toxic
mercury treatment, and the potentially fatal
counterpart resonates in the occasional shards of
pain heard in this movement. Even so, a beguiling
sweetness prevails.

After a recitative-like and improvisatory introduction,
the concluding rondo marked *Allegretto* abounds in
virtuosic gestures and high spirits.

**CÉSAR FRANCK**
(1822–1890)

**Quintet for Piano and Strings in F minor**
(1879)

Unlike the preternaturally gifted Felix Mendelssohn,
who composed memorable works while in his
teens, Franck’s finest works emerged only in the
last two decades of his life. He established a fine
reputation not only as a pianist, but as a highly
esteemed organist and teacher. Ultimately it is
because of his legacy as a composer that he
remains in the conscious memory of classical
music enthusiasts. He was, in essence, a very
private and self-effacing person, preferring the quiet
world of teaching, organ playing and composition.

Although he had little love for Wagner and Liszt’s
“music of future,” Franck adopted the concept
of “cyclical” composition—essentially using
identical or related thematic material throughout
a piece of music—favored by the abovementioned
composers. Although some commentators
associate Franck’s use of chromatic harmony
with Wagner, others note Bach as the source, a
not unreasonable assumption given Franck’s
practical and intimate knowledge of Bach’s organ
works. And, of course, to his contemporaries he
was frequently called the “French Brahms” (even
though he was Belgian).

Cyclical composition can easily be traced
to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, but it really gained
tremendous currency through the works of Saint-
Saëns. By the time Franck composed his Piano
Quintet in 1879, Saint-Saëns was already moving
from youthful radicalism into an increasingly nasty
form of musical reaction. At the first performance
of Franck’s Quintet, the composer was pleased
by Saint-Saëns’ handling of the piano part, and
expressed his appreciation afterwards by offering
his older colleague the manuscript. To his
astonishment and hurt feelings, Saint-Saëns made
a sour face and walked away ungraciously.

Franck laid out the Quintet in three movements.
The first movement, *Molto moderato quasi lento—
Allegro*, begins with a slow and restive introduction
that foretells the drama and passion of the lengthy
*Allegro*. The second subject of this movement, a
tender “motto” theme suggestive of Romantic
longing, recurs throughout the entire work in
keeping with the composer’s cyclic style.

The *Lento* middle movement, in “song” form
(A–B–A), employs a pensive theme that provides
needed contrast with the storminess of what has
preceded it.

The finale, *Allegro non troppo, ma con fuoco*,
marks a return to heightened passion, beginning
with strong tremolo-laden strings to set a feverish mood. The primary tune, a bold and rhythmically exciting variant of the recurring “motto” theme, impels the music onward.

One of Franck’s biographers, Léon Vallas, suggested that the sweeping passion of the Piano Quintet reflected the composer’s feelings for Augusta Holmes, one of his pupils. There’s nothing like love—unrequited or fulfilled—that inspires artists to intense expression. Giving ironic weight to Valla’s interpretation of the music in question was Mme. Franck’s reaction to the Quintet: she absolutely hated it! Not that she was objective, of course...

Program Notes by Steven Lowe