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Program Notes for CMSFW November 17, 2018 Concert
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“Strings Rejoice”

String Quintet No.2 in G major, Op. 111
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

In spring 1890, Brahms traveled to Italy with his long-time friend Joseph Widmann, a Swiss poet, playwright, and critic who lived in Bern. As was his custom, he spent the summer in the mountains, this time in Ischl, which was his preferred holiday venue from 1889 on. There he composed the String Quintet, Op. 111, intimating to friends after its completion that it would be his last composition. Although only 57, Brahms was feeling his age, and the next project he commenced was the drafting of a last will and testament.

Shortly thereafter, he met Richard Mühlfeld, an excellent clarinetist in the Meiningen court orchestra. So impressed was Brahms by Mühlfeld's technique and musicianship that he set to work on a series of compositions with clarinet, including the Clarinet Trio, Op. 114, Clarinet Quintet, Op. 115, and the two Clarinet Sonatas, Op. 120. It is our good fortune that Mühlfeld inspired this flowering of chamber music, for as the String Quintet eloquently demonstrates, Brahms was clearly at the height of his powers. The knowledge that he initially thought of Opus 111 as a swan song cannot help but color our thoughts when we listen, however; nor can its shared opus number with Beethoven's final piano sonata be entirely coincidental.

When writing chamber music, Brahms was more comfortable when piano was part of the ensemble. He claimed to have abandoned and destroyed more than 20 string quartets before allowing his first two completed quartets to be published; they appeared in 1873 as Opus 51. Most critics consider the duo sonatas, piano trios, piano quartets, piano quintet, and the late clarinet works to be on a higher artistic level than Brahms's string quartets, although they are quick to qualify that at this level of genius, such discrimination is subjective. That stated, the two late string quintets -- Op. 88 in F (1882) and the work we hear -- are a revelation. Their richness of texture and continuity of mood lift them to a higher plane than any of the string quartets, yet they have immediacy, warmth, and drive. As Brahms's biographer Peter Latham has written, "Except in the assurance of the style there is nothing middle-aged in this music, which breathes the freshness of Vienna in springtime."

We know comparatively little about the circumstances of the second quintet. Brahms probably wrote it at the request of the great violinist Joseph Joachim, who sought a companion piece to the Op. 88 Quintet. Brahms plays no favorites with the violins, however. To the contrary, he offers an abundance of musical material for lower strings. The ebullient opening is a famous challenge for the cellist, who must sail forth fearlessly in order to project over the busy

tremolo activity of the upper four instruments. After this vigorous start, the lilting Viennese lyricism of the second theme makes for wonderful contrast.

Both of Brahms's inner movements are in minor mode. The slow movement is a dark d-minor *Adagio* with a passionate outburst in the middle. Using mournful chromatic sighs, Brahms slips in and out of different keys, leaving us with a feeling of tonal uncertainty. Is he questioning the certainty of life? He keeps us wondering in *Un poco Allegretto*, a nervous waltz in g-minor that echoes the subtle modulations of the slow movement.

The Quintet concludes with a brisk Eastern European dance. It has musical cousins in Brahms's Hungarian Dances and the early Piano Quartet in g-minor, Op. 25. The Czech influence of his friend and contemporary Antonin Dvořák, however, cannot be discounted, for Brahms knew and admired Dvořák's chamber music. The finale is noteworthy for its deceptive beginning, momentarily implying b-minor before establishing the tonality of G. It closes with a presto *csárdás*, a *tour de force* that elevates the gypsy fiddler from the folkloric to the sublime.

Sextet in G major, Op.36, "Agathe" **Johannes Brahms**

The period between 1857 and 1860 is generally referred to as Brahms's Detmold period, because he spent the last three months of those four years in service to the court of Prince Paul Friedrich Emil Leopold of Lippe-Detmold. The Detmold period was one of the few times Brahms entered into such an artistically confining situation. The advantage was that his teaching and conducting duties earned the young composer sufficient funds to permit him relative freedom for the balance of the year. He probably started work on both string sextets while in Detmold, though the primary work on the second did not take place until 1864.

Brahms had been only 23 when Robert Schumann died in 1856. His close friendship with Schumann's widow Clara continued and deepened after Schumann's death; Clara leaned on him heavily. Conventional wisdom holds that Brahms was deeply in love with her, and that the early B-flat Sextet, Op.18 was written with Clara in mind.

In 1858, however, Brahms became romantically involved with a young singer named Agathe von Siebold while in service to the court at Detmold. The romance took a toll on Brahms's relationship with Clara, causing considerable tension between them. In the end, Brahms backed out of the affair with Agathe, adamant that he could not be tied down, justifying his decision by insisting that he was not yet sufficiently well established as a composer. The breakup was awkward and particularly embarrassing to Agathe, whose friends had anticipated announcement of her engagement to Brahms at New Year's, 1859. Even Clara, when she learned of the rift, was angry with him for his indelicacy.

It is apparent that Agathe still lingered in his thoughts several years later, for Brahms immortalized her by embedding the letters of her name into the second sextet, which was finished in May 1865. The theme, A-G-A-D-H-E [H is the German musical spelling for B-natural], figures prominently in the first movement, and is the reason that this work is sometimes called the "Agathe Sextet." Brahms wrote to his friend Gansbacher: "Here I have freed myself

from my last love." Whether because of the failed love affair or in spite of it, the work is one of Brahms's most lushly romantic and lyrical compositions.

The first movement is built on a motive of two ascending fifths outlining the keys of G and E-flat. Brahms immediately establishes a harmonic ambivalence that invites heavy chromaticism. There is a gentleness of expression in this graceful movement, assisted by the steady ripple in the viola line, that makes for an overall sense of tranquillity.

The scherzo is an experiment in metric and textural variety. The steady g-minor intermezzo in duple time contrasts strongly with the vigorous trio, a Presto giocoso in 3/4. Delicate bowed chords in the Allegro non troppo A-section are set off by pizzicato accompaniment. Despite its nominal 2/4 meter, this section feels like triple time, using cross-rhythms to great effect. The Presto giocoso, on the other hand, breaks loose into the slow waltz of another Austrian *Ländler*. Its rustic character invites comparison to the country dance in Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony; indeed, this sextet may be thought of as Brahms's "pastoral" chamber work. After a conventional, abbreviated repeat of the A-section, a surprisingly brusque and dramatic coda concludes the movement.

Brahms never composed an opera, yet strains of the solo scenes of a mature Verdi heroine are audible in the theme to his third movement variations. Such unabashedly romantic images are fleeting, and change within each of the five variations and again in the coda. Brahms displays the most profound and subtle side of his musical character in this spiritual movement. Were it not so serene, it would virtually explode with richness of melody and plaintive chromaticism. The mood is considerably lighter in the finale, which returns to 9/8 triple meter for a rollicking good time. Adding strong fugal elements to sonata/rondo, Brahms closes the sextet with resolute good cheer.