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CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF FORT WORTH PRESENTS

“Levinson and Friends”

Andrew Litton, piano; Gary Levinson, violin; Katharina Litton, viola;

Edward Arron, cello; Eugene Levinson, bass

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**Sonata for Violin and Violoncello
Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)**

In 1928, at the behest of the Aeolian player piano company, Maurice Ravel dictated an autobiographical sketch to his friend and colleague Alexis Manuel Lévy Roland-Manuel. The document contains one revealing paragraph about the Duo Sonata.

The Sonata for Violin and Cello dates from 1920, when I settled in Montfort l’Amaury. I believe that this Sonata marks a turning point in the evolution of my career. In it, thinness of texture is pushed to the extreme. Harmonic charm is renounced, coupled with an increasingly conspicuous reaction in favor of melody.

Ravel did indeed begin the piece in 1920, but he labored on it for the better part of two years before it was complete, encountering considerable frustration along the way. The project originated as part of a tribute to Claude Debussy, who had died in March 1918. Ravel was one of a group of prominent composers and musicians approached by the musicologist and critic Henry Prunières, editor of the *Revue musicale*, to contribute a work to a special commemorative issue, *Tombeau de Claude Debussy*. Ravel’s contribution, composed in summer 1920, was a single movement Duo for violin and cello. Others involved in the project were a who’s who of music at the time, including Béla Bartók, Paul Dukas, Manuel de Falla, Eugene Goossens, Gian Francesco Malipiero, Albert Roussel, Erik Satie, Florent Schmitt and Igor Stravinsky.

Ravel heard his movement performed, along with his contemporaries’ new works, in January 1921, at a concert presented by the Société Musicale Indépendante. Impressed with Zoltán Kodály’s Duo for Violin and Cello, Op. 7 (1914), he had already determined to expand his own piece to a full-scale, multi-movement sonata. The process caused him considerable difficulty. “This devil of a Duo is giving me agony!” he wrote to Roland-Manuel on 22 September, 1921. By February 1922, he had finally completed the balance of the work. Then, still dissatisfied with the Scherzo, he rewrote that movement entirely. The violinist Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, who played the première of this work with cellist Maurice Maréchal on 6 April, 1922, recalled rehearsing the Scherzo:

. . .the rhythms and sonority of the *spiccati* [bouncing the bow lightly and rapidly]

on the string] must be uniform enough to pass easily from the violin to the cello. The cellist Maréchal and I went over it again and again till we were giddy. Ravel would not allow the tiniest discrepancy between the sounds of the two instruments, dissimilar though they are. So there were arguments. . . .

“It’s too complicated,” I said, in order to keep my end up. “The cello has to sound like a flute and the violin like a drum. It must be great fun writing such difficult stuff but no one’s going to play it except virtuosos.”

“Good!” he said, with a smile, “then I shan’t be assassinated by amateurs!”

Ravel worked closely with Jourdan-Morhange while composing the sonata, consulting her regularly for fingerings, bowings, and queries as to whether a specific passage was even playable on the violin. He was keenly interested in string technique, particularly bold new sonorities that were being explored by Bela Bartók in Hungary.

Listeners who associate Ravel primarily with the monumental crescendo of *Boléro* or the liquescent sonorities of *Daphnis et Chloé* may be surprised by the acerbic style of this Sonata. Ravel’s limitation of musical forces to two instruments forces an emphasis on individual lines — the horizontal element of music — rather than vertical, simultaneously sounded chords. The clarity of his texture makes it somewhat easier to hear the cyclic elements that recur in each movement and the exchange of material as each player asserts his independence. The scherzo is a minefield of technical difficulties, taxing the players with atavistic rhythms and multiple special effects that often verge on the percussive. Its rhythm zigzags between 3/8 and 2/8; its tonal coloring shifts from major to minor triads with an occasional jarring bitonal passage.

A cello solo opens the slow movement, presently ceding its contemplative theme to the violin. An agitated middle section to this ternary movement, placed high in both instruments’ registers, provides contrast. Ravel dispels any sense of relaxation he may have established with a vibrant and nervous finale. Echoes of musical material from the first movement combine with new, folk-like themes that strengthen this work’s kinship to Kodály’s Duo and Bartók’s early string quartets. An intensely rhythmic cello figure at its beginning establishes drive and tension that Ravel sustains and increases throughout the movement. In its experimental techniques, adventuresome approach to melody and harmony, and economy of structure, the Sonata is a remarkable work.

Sonata in C-sharp minor, Op.3 for viola and piano Egon Kornauth (1891-1959)

Egon Kornauth was a composer, pianist, and later in life a conductor. He grew up also playing organ and cello, the latter well enough to perform in the Brno Theatre and symphony orchestra. A native of Olmütz [Olomouc, in northeast Czech Republic], he moved to Vienna in 1909. His composition teachers included Robert Fuchs, Franz Schreker, and Franz Schmitt; he also studied musicology with Guido Adler. As a pianist, Kornauth toured with the Vienna

Gesangverein in America, and served as a coach for the Vienna Staatsoper. He founded a piano trio that traveled internationally, including Indonesia and South America. Kornauth taught music theory in Vienna and, after the war, at the Salzburg Mozarteum.

Unlike many of his Austro-German contemporaries, Kornauth was not drawn to opera, though he did compose many *Lieder*. His most important contribution was in instrumental music, including a substantial body of chamber works. Essentially ignoring the modernist developments of the Second Viennese School, he retained a post-romantic harmonic vocabulary. Writing in traditional forms, he remained a staunch conservative in his music. His style has been called Brahmsian.

In the 1929 first edition of *Cobbett's Cyclopedia Survey of Chamber Music*, Rudolf Felber wrote, “[Kornauth’s] first chamber work, the sonata Op.3, at once attracted the attention of the musical world. It is full of life, but immature.” This listener disagrees. The sonata is an impressive, ambitious work that is both demanding and rewarding for both players. Equally important, it makes for engrossing listening.

The first movement, *Fest und bestimmt* [Strong and precise], establishes the equal partnership of the two players. Viola has the first theme; piano the second, in a close-to-textbook sonata form. Kornauth’s music is tender and yearning, chromatic but firmly tonal. This movement overflows with rhapsodic gestures and recitative-like passages for both players. It is the only one of the sonata’s movements that remains in the home key of C-sharp minor for its duration.

Piano opens the slow movement with mysterious, ominous octaves in the low register. From there, it unfolds with the somber pace of a passacaglia. Viola and piano intertwine closely, weaving ravishing harmonies in Kornauth’s heart-on-sleeve writing. Several unexpected key changes occur, wandering from the home key of F-sharp minor, but similar rhythmic motives help to unite this episodic structure. One episode shifts to D major and an extended solo passage for piano. Kornauth writes with sympathy for the viola’s rich alto and tenor registers; rarely does the piano intrude on this “sweet spot” for the string instrument. A final peroration concludes the movement in radiant F-sharp major.

Wild und stürmisch [Ferocious and stormy] is Kornauth’s directive for the finale. Set in 12/8 meter, it lends itself to a galloping pulse. More imitative than the previous two movements, the music keeps the duo in close conversation, introducing brief whole tone passages. Kornauth tends toward a Schumannesque repetitiveness; however, his dense textures, chromaticism, and frequent modulations keep it interesting. A surprising calm interlude toward the end leads to a big, broad coda.

**“Summertime” and “It Ain’t Necessarily So” from *Porgy and Bess*
George Gershwin (1898-1937)**

Arr. by Jascha Heifetz (1901-1987)

One of the great ironies of American music is that George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* was a failure when it was first performed at New York's Alvin Theatre in October 1935. The critics panned it and the production was unsuccessful commercially. Today, *Porgy and Bess* is widely regarded as Gershwin's masterpiece, and a half dozen of its songs have become part of the American canon. Indeed, "Summertime" is the quintessential American ballad. "It Ain't Necessarily So," by contrast, is a sacrilegious questioning of the Bible by a low-life drug dealer.

The legendary Lithuanian-born violinist Jascha Heifetz became good friends with George and Ira Gershwin in the 1930s. Heifetz had hoped that Gershwin would write a violin concerto for him, but the composer's premature death in 1937 precluded that possibility. Beginning in the late 1930s, Heifetz arranged about a half dozen Gershwin piano pieces and songs for violin and piano, including "Summertime" and "It Ain't Necessarily So." Both versions capitalize on the violin's expressive capacity. While respectful of the originals, Heifetz recomposes to accommodate his penchant for virtuosic display.

**Quintet in A major, Op.114 (D.667; "Trout")
Franz Schubert (1797-1828)**

One of the most beloved of all chamber works, the Trout Quintet is a legacy from one of the happiest summers in Schubert's troubled life. In 1817 Schubert was introduced to Johann Michael Vogl (1768-1840), one of the most prominent operatic bass/baritones in Vienna. Vogl was standoffish at first; however, obviously impressed with the young composer's talent, he struck up a friendship with Schubert that proved artistically fruitful to both men.

For the summer holidays of 1819, Vogl invited Schubert to accompany him to his home town of Steyr, a beautiful place in the Austrian alps about 150 kilometers west of Vienna. "The country around Steyr is unimaginably lovely," Franz wrote to his brother Ferdinand. More than nature's beauty stimulated him. He was lodging with a childhood friend, Albert Stadler, in the home of a man who had four young daughters--diversion enough to a 22-year-old male! Moreover, Steyr had a lively musical life, and the townspeople knew and admired Schubert's songs. He was welcomed and promptly swept up in the pleasures of the summer.

Steyr's music society was led by one Sylvester Paumgartner. A wealthy merchant who also played cello quite creditably, Paumgartner was quick to commission a quintet from the gifted Viennese visitor who had come for the summer. Another music-loving Steyr merchant, Josef von Koller, had a gifted daughter named Josephine who played both piano and double bass. Schubert wrote the lovely "Little A-major" Sonata, D.664 for her that summer. She is also the reason he included double bass in the scoring for the Trout Quintet. Instrumentalists among the locals determined Schubert's unusual scoring, which is hardly a conventional piano quintet as we know it.

Therein lies the secret to understanding the Trout--if such delicious, accessible music requires explanation. As Peter Gammond has so eloquently written:

In the end, we simply have to accept that Schubert was a musical split-personality. There was the serious and searching composer of the String Quintet and [the song cycle] *Winterreise*; and there was the true son of Vienna who found perpetual joy in melody and could nothold back the strain of pure lyricism. The 'Trout' Quintet is a flood of musical optimism and tunefulness, a profligate use of material that many would spread over a dozen works and it is in top inspirational gear all the time.

To this one might add the humbling reminder that the quintet is the work of a 22-year-old!

The Trout Quintet takes its nickname from the fourth of its five movements, a series of variations on Schubert's song "Die Forelle" ("The Trout"). Originally composed in 1817, the song became immensely popular, and Schubert wrote five versions of it in song form. Paumgartner, who commissioned the quintet, is reputed to have selected "Die Forelle" as the thematic subject for the 4th movement variations.

Many critics have faulted the Trout Quintet, decrying its use of the double bass as inappropriate to the intimate chamber music setting. Actually, Schubert's innovative instrumental combination has advantages. Double bass is less competitive with the piano's middle range, and provides greater contrast of sonority. By using the bass, Schubert succeeded in highlighting both the long, lyric lines of the upper strings and the decorative piano figuration. In the process, he also provided the string bass with its finest 19th-century chamber music role.