

1 CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF FORT WORTH PRESENTS
“No Barriers” with Levinson, Klotz, Aznavoorian, and Weiss
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Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2023

**Elegie, Op. 23 [“Under the Impression of Zeyer’s Vyšehrad”] for Piano Trio
Josef Suk (1874-1935)**

The son of a schoolteacher and choirmaster, Josef Suk studied piano, violin and organ with his father, pursuing his formal musical education at Prague Conservatory. He undertook composition while at the Conservatory, and composed his Opus 1, a Piano Quartet, as a graduation piece. An excellent violinist, Suk was keenly interested in chamber music. He remained at the conservatory for an extra year to pursue additional study in chamber music with cellist Hanuš Wihan and in composition with Antonín Dvořák. He became Dvořák’s favorite protégé, and married the great composer’s daughter Otilie in 1898.

Suk spent the most celebrated years of his career as violinist in the Czech Quartet, earning a distinguished reputation as a modern Czech composer as well. He retained his passion for playing chamber music, but oddly wrote relatively little of it. As a composer, he is best known for his orchestral works, and most of the pieces for small ensemble are early and experimental. The *Elegie* is a good example. It originated as a piece for violin, cello, string quartet, harmonium (!) and harp in 1902. Probably recognizing the difficulty of assembling such a diverse group of instruments, Suk arranged it the same year for piano trio.

The *Elegie* bears the subtitle *Pod dojmem Zeyerova Vyšehrad* [“Under the Influence of Zeyer’s *Vyšehrad*”]. Julius Zeyer (1841-1901) was a writer, librettist, and personal friend of Dvořák. In 1880 he wrote an epic poem called *Vyšehrad*. that was one of his most influential

works. *Vyšehrad* is a rock overlooking the river Vltava (aka the Moldau), not far from Prague. Tradition holds that the ancient Bohemian kings made their home there. The title may be familiar to lovers of Bedřich Smetana's music; the first section of *Ma Vlast* is also entitled *Vyšehrad*.

Suk's *Elegie* is a heart-on-the-sleeve movement that emphasizes the strings' capacity for resonance in its opening statement. A dramatic central section retains the melodic emphasis in the violin and cello, with stormy textural background provided by the piano. The interruption is brief, however, and ultimately the glorious post-romantic effusion of the opening prevails.

Piano Quartet in C minor, Op.15

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Gabriel Fauré was both the embodiment of French romanticism and, paradoxically, a contributor to the breakdown of traditional tonality. In a career that spanned more than half a century, he wrote music that embraced 19th-century passion and lyricism, while adopting an expanded musical vocabulary that drew on whole tone harmonies and unusual modulations.

Fauré's highly personal, instantly identifiable language is remarkable in light of the Wagnerian influence that dominated French music in the late 19th century. Even though he was well acquainted with Wagner's operas, Fauré was preoccupied with creating something new. He studied the music of the past and present with the express purpose of avoiding imitation. That stated, if one seeks a model for the C minor Piano Quartet, one finds it not in Wagner but rather in Schumann.

Fauré spent seven years under the tutelage of Louis Niedermeyer at the Ecole Niedermeyer in Paris, pursuing a curriculum dominated by church music. Upon Niedermeyer's death in 1861, sixteen-year-old Fauré continued piano study with Camille Saint-Saëns, who was by then among the most famous musicians in France. Soon the lessons expanded to include composition as well as piano.

He began his professional career as a church organist in Rennes and retained a reputation as a fine keyboard player for the duration of his life. His music has become popular with the general public in large part through his chamber music with piano.

For three months in 1877, Fauré was engaged to Marianne Viardot, daughter of the celebrated mezzo-soprano Pauline Garcia-Viardot. When Marianne severed the liaison in October 1877, the composer was heartbroken. His lifelong friends, Camille and Marie Clerc, helped him to regain emotional stability. During this turbulent time he produced his first two masterpieces, the Violin Sonata in A, Op. 13 and the Piano Quartet, Op.15. In a touching letter written in 1919, Marie Clerc reminded him that the quartet's opening idea had occurred to him at her home, "on the little balcony at Ste.-Adresse." He worked on the piece from summer 1876 through 1879.

At this point he lacked self-confidence, one reason that these earlier works gestated for so long. Four years after completing the quartet's first version, he discarded the finale, composing an entirely new one – thereby forcing a delay in publication until 1884. Inasmuch as he destroyed his original finale, we do not have the luxury of comparing his first inspiration to his

more mature labors.

The opening Allegro molto moderato is bold, masculine, and forceful. A unison string theme supported by offbeat piano chords sets the tone for the movement and, indeed, for much of the quartet. Fauré recognized that the strings had a superior singing quality for his rich themes. Only rarely does he give the melody to the piano. Instead, he uses the keyboard to spin a web of textures from arpeggios, chords, and running scales, often in counterpoint to the strings. Fauré's structure is a clear sonata form, with contrasting first and second themes. Viola introduces the latter, followed in imitative succession by the other strings. Delicious, unexpected modulations provide transition between theme groups and propel much of Fauré's development section. The syncopated chords of the first measures return at the end in a *pianissimo* coda.

The scherzo is noteworthy for its barely contained energy and schizophrenic switches between 6/8 and 2/4 meter, as the wild dance runs its course. Its central trio section surprises with a shimmering chorale for muted strings.

Rhythmic drive characterizes Fauré's music, even in his slow movements. Once he establishes a pattern, its reiteration provides continuity and momentum for the music. Violin, viola and cello assume more independent roles in the Adagio, now emphasizing the dark hues of C minor. Fauré's gift for rhythm permeates the piano figuration, which is as integral and essential to the texture as it was in the first movement. Here again, he favored the lush, sustained sound of strings for his themes.

Ironically, Fauré's finale has been criticized as the weakest movement in the quartet. Most musicians disagree, savoring its release from the heavy, quasi-Wagnerian feel of the first movement. Here, by contrast, Fauré's finale seems to embrace a Gallic sense of occasion, with more delicate and subtle interplay among the four musicians. Individual solos are fleeting rather than ponderous or declamatory. Textures are akin to crystallized water particles: etched, weightless, and sparkling.

Piano arpeggios and sweeping upward melodic ideas provide the finale with its surging energy. Fauré closes his quartet with a strong and masculine coda. It caps an exciting and dramatic quartet that remains Fauré's most frequently performed chamber composition.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Quartet No. 2 in A major, Op.26

Anyone familiar with the two Brahms String Sextets, Opp.18 and 36, will immediately sense a kinship between those gracious works and the Piano Quartet, Op.26. It's not that the music *sounds* alike, by means of shared themes or tonality. The relationship is one of spirit and spaciousness. They share a sense of reflection that does not prevent them from delivering passages of intense drama.

From the standpoint of expanse, the very length of each work tells the story: the quartet on this afternoon's program takes a generous three quarters of an hour in performance. Brevity was not Brahms's strong suit in his early works. The compression so evident in his mature chamber music had not yet taken hold. And therein lies much of the charm of the sextets and the

A major Piano Quartet. We have the feeling that Brahms has taken all the time he needs to say precisely what he wishes to, which, it turns out, is quite a bit, especially for a young man still in his twenties.

Chronologically, Op.26 comes between the sextets, which Brahms wrote in the late 1850s (Op.18) and in the mid-1860s (Op.36). This piano quartet is the lesser-known sibling of the famous G minor Quartet, Op.25, celebrated for its exciting Hungarian finale. Both works reflect Brahms's continuing reliance on the keyboard in order to express his more symphonic thoughts within a chamber idiom. Yet the breadth of his imagination and extent of his musical ideas manifest themselves through the striking difference in atmosphere and content between the two quartets. Where the G minor is dark and stormy, foreshadowing the tragic F minor Piano Quintet, Op. 34, the A major seems to celebrate the joys and intimacies of youth, love, and nature's beauty bursting forth in springtime.

Brahms may have begun work on the two quartets in the late 1850s, while he was in service to the princely court at Detmold, but he finished them close to his native Hamburg. The A major Quartet is dedicated to Elisabeth Rösing, a family friend. Brahms lodged with her for a while in the country suburb of Hamm, on the Alster River north of the city. In her quarters, he found the solitude and pleasant working conditions that were sometimes difficult to secure in his parents' cramped city residence. There he completed both Piano Quartets, and was proud enough of his accomplishment to take these two scores with him on his first trip to Vienna in September 1862. With the assistance of musical friends, notably Julius Epstein and Joseph Hellmesberger (first violinist of the prominent Hellmesberger Quartet), he began to make a name for himself in

the Austrian capital. Hellmesberger was particularly impressed with the A major Quartet, heralding Brahms as "Beethoven's heir." His performances and support did much to establish Brahms's reputation in the city that was to become his adopted home.

The Viennese critics preferred the A major to the G minor Quartet. Interestingly, so did Clara Schumann; perhaps she heard strains of her late husband Robert's influence in the finale. Astute musician that she was, more likely she sensed Brahms's growing mastery of chamber music, and observed how effectively he was employing the piano quartet to express his undeniably symphonic thoughts. If Brahms had not yet mastered the telescoping technique that was to make his mature compositions so pithy and economical, it was certainly not at the expense of formal command. Three of the four movements in this quartet are in admirably executed sonata form, indicating a preoccupation already fully developed at this early stage of his career.

The expansive first movement shows how strong was Brahms's indebtedness to Schubert. If the Quartet is among Brahms's most melodious and lyrical works, surely this movement is the richest fount of Schubertian melody; its length -- more than a quarter of an hour -- is but one reflection of how fertile was Brahms's thematic turf. The movement's distinguishing feature is the juxtaposition of two against three, a Brahmsian rhythmic tactic that he favored his entire life. It dominates the main theme of this *Allegro non troppo*, and is integral to the fabric of the entire movement. As Bernard Jacobson has noted, "nothing could be farther removed from squareness and stiffness than the gently rocking first bar of the A major Quartet."

The slow movement is a song without words, with echoes of Schumann and, surprisingly, Mendelssohn, a composer who figured less prominently than either Schumann or Schubert in Brahms's sphere of influence. Strings are muted for much of its duration, which is again nearly a quarter of an hour. The Scherzo that follows is inappropriately named. We hear music more closely related to a well-mannered Haydn minuet than to a brisk Beethovenian inner movement. Brahms's canonic passages are surely indebted to Haydn, strengthening the sense that this piano quartet intends a deep bow to the eighteenth century.

The finale is less Hungarian than its analogue in the G minor quartet, although some listeners may perceive some eastern European flavor to its syncopated, flirtatious rhythms. More persuasive is an identification of this delicious, folk-like *Allegro* with the cabaret society of fashionable Vienna. Brahms's melodies initially tempt us to dance, yet his expansive and carefully wrought treatment of those themes yields an enormous movement whose triumphant close is a thrill to hear.