CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF FORT WORTH PRESENTS
"Curtis on Tour" Ben Bellman with Curtis Alumni and Students
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Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2023

Sextet from *Capriccio*
Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Richard Strauss's reputation rests principally on his operas and orchestral tone poems. We do not think of him as a composer of chamber music. He did write a fine violin sonata (Op.18, 1887) that is rarely played. He also left a handful of other early instrumental compositions, but most of them predate even *Aus Italien,* Op.16 (1886), the earliest of his symphonic poems, and have thus been largely overlooked by performers and audiences alike.

The Sextet that opens this afternoon's program is thus an exceptional work on several levels. It enriches the string sextet literature, yet it was not conceived as chamber music in the traditional sense. Instead, it serves as a prelude (Strauss called it *Einleitung*, or introduction) to his last opera, *Capriccio,* Op.85 (1942), which has become Strauss's most popular post-*Rosenkavalier* stage work. The dramatic action is adapted from a one-act comedy by Giovanni Battista Casti, a contemporary and rival of Lorenzo da Ponte. Casti's play, *Prima la musica e poi le parole* ["First the music, then the words"] takes place in 1770, near Paris. The plot revolves around a widowed Countess who has two passionate suitors: Flamand, a composer, and Olivier, a poet. Strauss and his librettist, the conductor Clemens Krauss (1893-1954), used the love triangle as a pretext for addressing the larger artistic and aesthetic issue of music vs. words.

Capriccio was a product of wartime Germany, and the war gave rise to the most striking tale associated with the Sextet. By the time Hitler rose to power, Strauss maintained residences

in both Vienna and Garmisch, in the Bavarian alps. Strauss's daughter-in-law Alice was Jewish. Shortly after Hitler's *Anschluss*, the entire Strauss family relocated to Garmisch full time. There, Alice and her children were harassed by the Nazis and ostracized by the community. When Baldur von Schirach became the Nazi *Gauleiter* [area commander] of Vienna, he wished to reëstablish the Austrian capital as a European cultural center. He sent a representative to call on Strauss in Garmisch, to negotiate terms under which Strauss might return to Vienna. The eventual agreement was that Strauss would cooperate with Schirach's cultural ambitions, provided that Schirach would ensure that Strauss's entire family might return to Vienna and remain there free of Nazi interference. Strauss additionally promised that he and his wife Pauline would curb their tongues with regard to anti-Nazi remarks. Several months before the premiere of *Capriccio*, Strauss permitted a private performance of the instrumental *Einleitung* to take place in Schirach's home. The string players were from the Vienna Philharmonic. The performance was a way for Strauss to express his gratitude to the *Gauleiter* for the special treatment accorded his family.

The subtitle of *Capriccio* is "A conversation piece for music," and in that sense the intimate prelude establishes the salon atmosphere of the opera it introduces. Strauss scored the opera for a large orchestra that includes five members of the clarinet family and 32 violins. Most critics have assumed that by reserving his prelude for the intimate string sextet ensemble, Strauss was asserting his own perspective on the music vs. words debate that dominates the opera. Some suggest that the Sextet is the composer Flamand's love offering to the Countess, his latest composition whose performances serves as a plot device to introduce the action. In any case, the Sextet is one of the few segments of *Capriccio* that can be successfully excerpted from the opera.

Although this instrumental prologue is integral to the shape of the opera, it functions quite satisfactorily as music for its own sake, independent of the music drama.

Piano Sonata, Op. 1 (1906-1908)

Alban Berg (1885-1935)

Arranged for string sextet by Heime Müller (b.1970)

Berg's only published work for piano solo was also his farewell to apprenticeship. A large single movement composed between summer 1907 and 1908, the Sonata was a true greeting for the new century: at once a summation of post-Wagnerian chromaticism carried to its furthest exponent and a door opening toward all of Berg's music to follow.

By restricting the piece to one movement, Berg was breaking with tradition. His most noteworthy precedent was the great Liszt Sonata in B minor, but the two works are quite different. Liszt merged several movements, each conforming somewhat with traditional expectations, into a connected entity. By means of thematic transformation (and a spectacular fugue) he unified his Sonata, raising it from virtuoso showpiece to compositional masterwork. In the process, he made a tremendous contribution to the literature.

Berg, on the other hand, fully intended to compose three movements. His careful adherence to the normal outline of sonata form bespeaks both reverence for and understanding of tradition. Exposition, development, a formal recapitulation complete with second subject transposed, and coda submit readily to careful analysis and relaxed auditing.

Why then did he not continue with, say, a theme and variations as slow movement, and perhaps a rondo to conclude? According to his biographers Willi Reich and Karen Monson, Berg presented his teacher Arnold Schoenberg with the manuscript and explained that he had planned to continue the Sonata with more movements, but that inspiration had failed him. Schoenberg's advice was to leave the piece as is; he had clearly already written everything he had to say.

Although the Piano Sonata is very early--Berg was barely 22 when he completed it--it shows unusual control. The harmonic idiom has been described by Mosco Carner as "post-*Tristan*esque," and indeed the music is fraught with expressionist chromaticism of an unsettling nature. In his first three measures, Berg presents most of the melodic, harmonic, and intervallic material he will develop in the course of the movement. Tritones [augmented fourths and diminished fifths, the most tense and dissonant intervals] figure prominently, and only with difficulty does he achieve a simple cadence in B-minor, establishing the home tonality. Like the Prelude to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, Berg's sonata stretches the boundaries of traditional harmony, constantly pulling to another key, never quite yielding to the anchor of musical *terra firma*. As Karen Monson has written:

> Berg's [Sonata] wants to move on, gives a feeling of dramatic unrest, tackles problems and fights battles too large to be won or lost in the course of a sonata movement.

Pianistically, the Sonata is quite idiomatic and extremely difficult. It lies well in the hands, and requires enormous musical sensitivity, much in the same way as the late piano pieces of Johannes Brahms. Berg marked the score very carefully for interpretive nuances and constant tempo changes. One requires an instinctive sense of *rubato* and considerable emotional volatility

to play it well. The Sonata is rewarding music to study and perform. Among the twentieth-century keyboard masterworks, the piece has become a rather unlikely dark-horse favorite of pianists.

Ironically, Berg was initially unable to find a publisher for his Sonata, and had it printed at his own expense in Berlin in 1910 after it had been rejected. Pianist Etta Werndorf played the premiere in Vienna's Ehrbar Hall on 24 April, 1911.

Twentieth-century musical scholar Eric Salzman has written of this Sonata:

> The real structure of the piece--like that of the related String Quartet, Op. 3--is a complex of unresolved motions deriving from an inner web of motives and motivic intervals which never seem to articulate or be articulated by the on-going harmonic flux. In a sense, these were the problems and contradictions with which Berg was to wrestle all his life; in the end, he was able to deal with them by recognizing the contradiction and building his music on the very concept of conflict and opposition.

Certainly the lyricism and depth of feeling this Sonata communicates hint at the enormous range of Berg's talent, which would come to full bloom in his orchestral works and operas.

Heime Müller was second violinist it the Artemis Quartet for 16 years. He holds faculty positions at the Musikhochschule Lübeck and the Escuela Superior de Musica Reina Sofia in Madrid. Müller is a respected pedagogue who has given master classes in violin and chamber music throughout Europe. His transcription of the Berg Sonata clarifies the polyphonic interaction within Berg’s piano score, emphasizing the work’s post-romantic expression.

***Illuminating Arches* (2023) for string sextet**

Alyssa Weinberg (b.1988)

WORLD PREMIERE

Though she is only in her mid-30s, Alyssa Weinberg has established herself as an impressive figure in new music. In addition to this afternoon's world premiere this season, Long Beach Opera will present the premiere of her monodrama *Isola* in the 2023-24 season. Weinberg's *time to stretch* was recently premiered in Paris by Benjamin Millipied and the Paris Dance Project. Major orchestras including the Chicago Symphony and the Minnesota Orchestra have programmed her music. Weinberg teaches at Peabody Conservatory, Mannes School of Music, and Juilliard's Pre-College division. She holds a PhD in composition from Princeton, in addition to degrees from Vanderbilt, Manhattan School of Music, and the Curtis Institute of Music. Curtis commissioned *Illuminating Arches* for Curtis on Tour.

Weinberg's music takes its impetus from multiple sources. She often collaborates on multi-disciplinary productions. Some of her works address issues as disparate as mental health, loneliness, motherhood, migration, and climate change. For *Illuminating Arches*, she found inspiration in the magnificence of nature, as her composer's note explains.

> *Illuminating Arches* was inspired by a recent hiking trip in Arches National Park. I arrived an hour before sunrise, hiking into our first location in total darkness, and sat back and watched as the colors started to change and the park surrounding us slowly revealed itself. I wrote the following reflection in my notebook later that afternoon, which served as the guiding template for the structure of the work:
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> *Beginning within the Double Arch, climbing up to nestle ourselves within its curves, the grooves of the earth, we looked out onto the park as dark slowly turned to light, blue to yellow to red. Blinding. Illuminating the space that contained us. Not being able to see the depth or hue or scope or curvature of the arch, our perch, until hiking back out and across to the Windows, watching the glow of the sun get ever more intense, the shadows dancing, shapeshifting, warming. Chasing the sun.*

Weinberg's score includes detailed performance instructions. *Illuminating Arches* draws on a Bartókian cornucopia of string techniques – and then some. In addition to pizzicato, harmonics, and ricochet, she calls for microtones, *sul ponticello* [bowing near the bridge], *molto sul ponticello* [as close to the bridge as possible], half-harmonics *sul ponticello,* improvised harmonics (with the added instruction "based on previous patterns, get wild"), multiple glissandi, sliding pitches, and "white noise" achieved by bowing directly on the bridge. The result is an uncanny approximation of the sounds one hears in the desert: a symphony of mesmerizing textures reflecting the great outdoors.

Sextet in G major, Op.36, "Agathe"

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

The years from 1857 and 1860 are 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 his two 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 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 the 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 Josef Gänsbacher: "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.