

CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF FORT WORTH PRESENTS
"Powerhouses"
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Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2024

Ernst von Dohnányi (1877-1960)
Piano Quintet in C minor, Op.1

An Opus 1 is not a first work, but rather a first published composition. In the case of the first Dohnányi Piano Quintet, the piece was preceded by no fewer than 67 youthful works! Clearly he was no novice at putting pen to music paper when he tackled the C minor piano quintet. But it is not Dohnányi the composer who interests us primarily in this piece: it is Dohnányi the virtuoso pianist.

Written when he was barely 18, the quintet was designed with two primary aims: competition entry, and virtuoso vehicle for the young composer, who was embarking upon a promising career as a concert pianist. The piece was successful on both counts, garnering prizes for Dohnányi the composer and earning ovations in the concert hall.

According to Harold Schoenberg in *The Great Pianists*, "[Dohnányi's] playing had power and propulsion, and extraordinary finesse. Naturally he was a romantic pianist, just as his own compositions are in romantic style." The Quintet attracted the attention and approval of Johannes Brahms, who arranged for its Vienna premiere. Perhaps Brahms identified with the fiery young Hungarian, whose compositional and performing gifts echoed his own from a half-century before. There is no doubt that the older composer wielded a hefty musical influence on his young protégé. Dohnányi could hardly have chosen a more worthy model, and the Brahmsian touch is fascinating to perceive as it emerges and fades in this exciting piece.

Curiously, the first movement, an imposing sonata-form *Allegro*, calls to mind the lush harmonic language of Gabriel Fauré more than it does Brahms. Fauré's two piano quartets, Opp. 15 and 45, were published in 1884 and 1887; it is quite possible that Dohnányi heard or even played them. The pianist takes charge immediately in a role that is at once bold and authoritative. Dohnányi tends to use the strings in blocks, contrasting their grouped quartet texture against the denser fabric of the keyboard part.

Brahms's influence is more evident in the A minor Scherzo, whose insistent hemiolas [superimposition of two beats in the temporal space of three] are a startling echo of one of Brahms's favorite techniques. Dohnányi's chorale-like trio section provides a welcome contrast to its surging agitation. In a skillfully wrought coda, he merges chorale and scherzo.

Viola opens the F major slow movement, its warm and lyrical sound prompting the piano to relinquish the spotlight. One by one, the other strings join the viola in contrapuntal writing whose craft is belied by rich harmony and long melody: we do not notice the imitative entrances. While the piano does eventually resume a more prominent role as the *Adagio, quasi andante* builds to an emotional peak, this movement remains the quintet's most gratifying string writing.

The Finale is highly individual. An aggressive statement in 5/4 meter seizes our attention, reflecting Dohnányi's eastern European roots. He retains our focus by switching back and forth between 5/4 and 6/4 as he develops the material in a rondo fashion. Once again the keyboard

assumes a dominant role. Even during brief string solos – the cello introduces one noteworthy theme – the pianist is busy with heavy figuration, only breaking for an eight-measure string *fugato*. Toward the end of the movement, the first movement theme recurs in C major, providing the quintet with cyclic unity. Dohnányi closes with a spirited restatement of the 5/4 music, leaving in our memory the freshest of his ideas.

Quintet for Piano and Strings in F minor, Op.34 (1865)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

One of the darkest musical canvasses of Brahms's entire career, the Piano Quintet underwent several metamorphoses before it crystallized in its current form. The music dates from 1862, although it was not published until 1865. Originally Brahms intended it for string quintet. His friend and chamber music collaborator Joseph Joachim persuaded him that the string ensemble, even enlarged by the second cello, was insufficient to do justice to the work's musical climaxes and symphonic conception.

Switching to the keyboard, whose sound could achieve a more orchestral breadth, Brahms chose to rewrite the work as a sonata for two pianos; in this version it was performed in Vienna in April 1864, more than two years before the Quintet's première. (The two piano version was published in 1871 as Op.34a.) With two pianos at his disposal, Brahms achieved the power and clarity he sought, but he remained dissatisfied with the forfeiture of string color and timbre. He finally arrived at a synthesis of piano and strings. The result – in the version we hear – is a chamber music masterpiece that has been called the climax of his first maturity.

The overall impression this quintet creates is one of grandeur and monumental tragedy. Perhaps because it underwent such extensive reworking, it is filled with a profusion of melodic ideas. If the grand scale and impassioned mood of the quintet as a whole are Beethovenian, its melodic abundance, particularly in second themes and in the slow movement, is more Schubertian.

Brahms's opening movement is initially restrained and tragic. Piano, first violin and cello state the theme in stark unison before the full ensemble lashes forth with a series of angry, defiant musical utterances. These two contrasting ideas furnish much of the material that Brahms develops in the expansive *Allegro non troppo*. Along with a related motive that is introduced by a falling, sighing half-step, these musical ideas will recur in subtly altered form throughout the entire quintet.

The slow movement, in tripartite [ABA] form, shares the dreamy, lyrical quality of the analogous movement in the early Piano Sonata in F minor, Op.5. Piano introduces Brahms's material in parallel thirds and sixths, with syncopated octave commentary from the strings. Hints of minor mode inflect the harmonies with an Eastern European flavor. Brahms is at his most Schubertian in this lovely movement.

The scherzo is expansive and massive, with thunderous passages that call to mind the scherzo of the Beethoven Fifth Symphony. Brahms sets up a splendid contrast between the pizzicato pedal of the cello and the sinuous, syncopated meanderings of first violin and viola in unison. Their quiet opening statement switches meter briefly to introduce a rat-a-tat-tat reference,

still *pianissimo*, to the first movement. Then the full ensemble explodes into the Beethoven allusion. The gentler side of Brahms's musical personality manifests itself in the Trio, whose melody draws on the heritage of folk music. Still, there are grandeur and majesty in these gestures.

A mysterious slow introduction – the only one in Brahms's chamber music – opens the finale. Marked *Poco sostenuto* [A bit sustained], that introduction is one of the sections for which strings were essential to deliver the desolate quality that Brahms desired. The balance of the finale is an abbreviated sonata/rondo. Brahms gathers momentum slowly, deceiving the listener with apparent switches of temperament, for there is much humor in this music to mitigate its darkness. Very likely the entire movement served as a structural model for the finale to the First Symphony (1862-1876).

The quintet culminates in a magnificent, oversize coda that shifts into overdrive. Brahms recasts the main theme first in 6/8 time, then by syncopation, driving it toward its dramatic conclusion. Symphonic in its conception, the quintet is a masterpiece of the chamber music literature, providing a profound and memorable listening experience.