CMSFW Ensemble with Gary Levinson and Friends
Saturday 13 September, 2025 - Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2025

Trio for Horn, Violin, and Piano, Op. 40

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Throughout his life, Brahms had an intense interest in the horn. Solos for the instrument abound in his orchestral music. Its rich, mellow, dark-hued timbre fascinated him among wind instruments, much as viola did in the string family. Because of Brahms's affinity for horn, a chamber work featuring it is not in and of itself singular. What makes the so-called Horn Trio, Op. 40 unique is that Brahms composed it for the *Waldhorn*, a simple hunting horn without valves. This primitive instrument could only produce pitches in the natural harmonic overtone series. Thus a composer writing for *Waldhorn* was restricted to a limited number of pitches: in ascending order, E-flat, B-flat, E-flat, G, B-flat, D-flat, E-flat, F, G, etc.

Although the *Waldhorn* was already becoming obsolete in Brahms's day, he adopted the instrument's limitations in the trio, allowing them to govern much of the music's form, key structure, and atmosphere. For example, all four movements are in E-flat; the slow movement shifts to E-flat minor but remains within the horn's tonal capacity. The pitches within the *Waldhorn's* purview gave it an unusual capacity for blending in its lower and middle ranges. Brahms capitalized on this advantage. The result, in addition to being an absolutely glorious piece of chamber music, is one of the most spiritually and atmospherically unified compositions in all of Brahms.

The first movement is Brahms's only departure from sonata form in his major instrumental compositions. Using an alternating form that is related to a rondo, the *Andante*'s structure is A-B-A-B-A. Its themes are broad and song-like, exploring the horn's noble and lyrical side. This tentative, introspective character returns for the third movement *Adagio mesto* (*mesto* means 'sad' or 'mournful'), which is the most emotionally charged movement in the trio. Brahms composed this work in May 1865, just a few months after his mother's death. Historians have traditionally viewed the slow movement as an expression of his grief. E-flat minor is a tragic key for any instrument or group of instruments. In the context of Brahms's personal circumstances at the time, it takes on an even darker hue.

Both the second and fourth movements are quite different in character. They are scherzi, emphasizing the horn's hunting heritage. The finale is also a full sonata form structure, lending weight and closure to the entire work without compromising the excitement and high spirits of the hunt.

Suite Based on American Folk Songs (1944)

Alan Shulman (1915-2002)

A distinguished cellist and composer, Alan Shulman began his studies at Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory, later studying in New York at The Juilliard School. In 1937, he joined the newly-formed NBC Symphony under the direction of Arturo Toscanini, continuing private

study of cello with Emanuel Feuermann and composition with Paul Hindemith. The following year, he and his brother Sylvan, a violinist, founded the Stuyvesant String Quartet, which became a leading interpreter and advocate for new music.

In 1943, the women's music fraternity Mu Phi Epsilon commissioned Shulman to write a woodwind quintet based on American folk songs. Shulman corresponded with the folklorist and ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax about source material. Lomax referred Shulman to *American Ballads and Songs* (1934) and *Our Singing Country* (1941), two anthologies compiled with his father, John A. Lomax. Traveling thousands of miles throughout rural America in the 1920s and 1930s, the Lomaxes had made thousands of field recordings. Their anthologies proved a rich trove, stimulating Shulman's creativity. After completing Folk Songs for Wind Quintet, he still had ideas for adapting the folk material. The result was his Suite Based on American Folk Songs, this time for violin and piano.

The six tunes Shulman selected all have deep roots in North American culture. Mr. Levinson and Ms. Park play the last three of the suite's movements. "Cod Liver 'Ile" is a cautionary tale, believed to have originated in Newfoundland. After being given cod liver oil as a medicine, a wife develops a craving for the substance, causing her husband no end of grief. Though quite short, Shulman's setting is highly virtuosic for both players. The legendary twentieth-century violinist Jascha Heifetz recorded this movement and played it as an encore in recitals.

"Johnny Stiles" is a lumbering song, possibly from Ontario. Each stanza of the melody

introduces a new key. At the end, Shulman writes dazzling violin embroidery. “What Shall I Do with a Drunken Sailor” is the best known folk song in the set. With roots as far back as the 1830s, it descends from the sea shanty tradition. As in the preceding movements, Shulman treats the tunes in free variation form, altering tonality, texture, and tempo with each reiteration of a stanza. He divides the melodic material between the two players. Sometimes he inserts a transitional passage of newly composed material, always stylistically consistent with what has preceded it.

***Rendezvous* for Clarinet and String Quartet**

Alan Shulman (1915-2002)

When Alan Shulman died twenty-three years ago, *The New York Times* called him “a music master as comfortable with jazz as with the classical idiom.” In London’s *The Independent,* Martin Anderson opened his obituary with a quotation from one of Shulman’s colleagues.

> “Alan had the greatest ear of any musician I ever came across. He had better than perfect pitch. I’ve simply never met anyone like him.” Thus the trumpeter Eddie Bailey on the composer and cellist Alan Shulman, whose music was embraced by classical musicians as prominent as Toscanini, Barbirolli and Cantelli but who was also happy producing light music that took his name, via NBC radio, into millions of American homes.

That lighter side is what we hear in *Rendezvous*.

In August 1946, Benny Goodman invited the Stuyvesant Quartet to play a movement of the Mozart Clarinet Quintet with him on a live radio broadcast. Shulman was vacationing in

Maine's Rangeley Lake area. In an era before interstate highways, he was reluctant make the long trip to New York for performance of a single movement. He proposed that Benny commission a new piece for clarinet and string quartet for the broadcast. Goodman agreed, and Shulman wrote *Rendezvous with Benny*, which they played instead of the Mozart. Goodman never played the work again, so Shulman subsequently removed his name from the title.

The piece opens with a sober string introduction with elements of both imitative texture and chorale then breaks into a lively jazz riff with the clarinet's entrance. A slower middle section merges the sedate string writing with popular inflections, until the clarinet accelerates to a recapitulation of the up-tempo music, closing on a *fortissimo* blues chord.

Rendezvous has had staying power. Clarinetists from Artie Shaw to Richard Stoltzman have performed and recorded it. The Stuyvesant Quartet's 1946 broadcast with Goodman was released on Bridge Records for the first time in 2005.

Sextet in C Major, Op. 37

Ernst von Dohnányi (1877-1960)

In 1935, the year that Dohnányi composed this unusual sextet, Paul Hindemith had just composed *Mathis der Maler*, Stravinsky had completed *Persephone*, Bartók was at work on his Fifth String Quartet, and Arnold Schoenberg was embarking on his Violin Concerto, Op. 36.

Thus Colin Mason's decree in "European Chamber Music Since 1929" that Dohnányi "broke no new ground" in his sextet is certainly justifiable. The piece is traditional, tonal, overtly romantic, and could plausibly have been composed thirty years prior. But other works contemporary with the sextet include Franz Lehár's *Giuditta*, Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, and Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. Clearly, Dohnányi was not the only composer of his time looking back over his shoulder toward a bygone era and wholeheartedly embracing tonality.

This work is scored for piano, clarinet, horn, violin, viola, and violoncello. That distinct combination allows the composer a number of coloristic possibilities: piano quartet, string trio, woodwind duet, horn trio (the Brahmsian combination), or any of five instrumental solos accompanied by piano and the rest of the ensemble. Dohnányi explores them thoroughly, taking full advantage of the variety available to him. This sextet is subtly unified through its four movements, with the finale bringing back the sweeping main theme of the first movement. The most unusual characteristic is perhaps the dramatic funeral march of the slow movement, preceded by an intimate string trio-*cum*-piano with more than a passing connection to Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll*. The variations in the *Allegro con sentimento* are also a delight. They lead without pause to Dohnányi's sprightly finale, which unites elements of Hungarian dance tunes with Viennese café music of the 1930s.