

CMSFW Ensemble
Saturday, 10 October 2026 — Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2026

Piano Trio in F Minor, Op. 65

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

1882 was not a good year for Antonín Dvořák, who was grappling with artistic and personal conflict at this time. In late autumn he encountered considerable difficulties in the production of his first major opera, *Dimitrij*, Op. 64 (1881-82). He was under some pressure to compose another opera, this time in German. By so doing, he would almost certainly ensure his commercial success and international reputation. But Dvořák, an ardent nationalist, felt that setting a German libretto would compromise his strong sense of pride in his Bohemian heritage. These issues preyed on him professionally, but an even more crushing personal blow fell in mid-December when his mother died. His sense of profound loss inspired the dark F minor trio, which he composed in the early months of the following year. In many ways it was a major departure from the lighter-spirited works that had contributed so much to his growing popularity.

The F minor trio is contemporary with the fine Symphony No. 7 in D minor, Op. 70, which is considered by many to be Dvořák's finest orchestral work. Most Dvořák scholars agree that with the trio and the symphony, Dvořák made an enormous leap in the overall quality of his compositions, entering a new period of remarkable growth. John Clapham calls Op. 65:

. . . a work which reveals for the first time the self-criticism, the intensity and depth of feeling and the dramatic power of which he was capable. . . . This magnificent Trio is the only chamber music work by Dvořák to which the term epic is applicable.

Dvořák's first statement is an elaborate theme, rhythmically intricate and very expressive. Both the unison opening statement and the tonality of F minor invite comparison to the Brahms Piano Quintet, Op. 34. With the entrance of the piano and a rapid drive to an initial climax, Dvořák establishes power, drama, and urgency. All are hallmarks of this conflict-ridden movement. Developed with skill, the *Allegro ma non troppo* astounds us with its emotional breadth. Right up to the coda, Dvořák continues to introduce new material from a seemingly endless fountain of melodic and rhythmic invention.

It is no accident that the scope and expansiveness of this trio reflect the strong imprint of Dvořák's mentor and friend Johannes Brahms. (He could have done a lot worse for a model!) Still, his themes have their own individual character, and the work must be considered original rather than derivative.

Dvořák's distinct style is clearest in the second and fourth movements, both of which reflect his Bohemian roots. The *Allegretto grazioso* employs a staccato figure as background to a Czech song. Decidedly un-scherzo-like, this movement is thoughtful rather than lighthearted. Its mystery and restraint are scant preparation for the dark strains of the *Poco adagio*, one of the most emotionally charged movements Dvořák ever composed.

For the finale, Dvorak turns again to the music of his homeland. The *Allegro con brio* is unmistakably a *furiant*, a fast Bohemian peasant dance that alternates measures in triple and duple time. *Furiants* are closely related to the eastern European folk rhythms we associate with the music of Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály. Dvorak adapts the lurching meter changes, casting his Czech dance in triple meter but alternating two groups of three with three groups of two beats. The effect is a cross between syncopation and hemiola, constantly seizing our attention with unexpected rhythmic emphases. *Furiants* figure prominently in Dvorak's chamber music. This one is a fine example, providing a lively release from the tension generated by the earlier movements.

Piano Trio No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 101

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

During the steamy Viennese summers, Brahms's custom was to escape to the beautiful alpine countryside. The Swiss town of Thun drew him for three consecutive summers, from 1886 through 1888. During the first of these idyllic holidays, he rented a villa in Hofstetten, a resort town near Lake Thun. There he composed a stream of chamber music in a mere six weeks: his second cello sonata (Op. 99), second violin sonata (Op. 100), and the piano trio on this afternoon's program, his third essay in that genre.

All three works reflect a preoccupation with sonata form and an increased concern with compressing ideas. The opening *Allegro energico* is only half the length of the analogous movement in

Brahms's first Trio, Op. 8 — and, at barely seven minutes, the shortest first movement in *any* of his chamber works.

Brahms achieved that compression, in part, by not repeating the exposition. (He declines to repeat it in the finale as well, which is also in sonata form.) In his maturity, Brahms generally chose to develop ideas further, and his restatement of material in recapitulation, as often as not, incorporates some element of variation. The powerful first movement is relentless in its drama; even the lyrical second theme does not fully relax. Dotted rhythms figure prominently in the development and the coda.

Opus 101's inner movements have elicited considerable commentary from biographers. Peter Latham describes the scherzo, marked *Presto non assai*, as "whispered softly with a faint undercurrent of anxiety." Donald Francis Tovey's description is more famous: "[It] hurries by like a frightened child." The piano's spare expository statement, all in octaves, emphasizes the scurrying, ghostly nature of the muted strings.

Brahms's slow movement, *Andante grazioso*, alternates a duet for strings with piano solo to introduce the musical material. It is remarkable for its time signatures. The score is marked 3/4 and 2/4, later switching to 9/8 and 6/8 for the middle section. He presents a measure in 3/4, then follows it with two measures in 2/4, resulting in irregular groups of seven beats. The pattern is consistent but not immutable throughout the movement; for example, in the faster middle section, measures of 9/8 alternate with single measures of 6/8. One Brahms scholar has suggested that the metric irregularity reflects the composer's acquaintance with Serbian folk song. Despite its rhythmic instability and unpredictable phrasing, this extraordinary movement leaves us with a feeling of gentle repose and inevitable logic.

The trio concludes with a terse and energetic finale, whose intense chromaticism is striking even for late Brahms. Equally striking is the rhythmic displacement, including accents where we do not expect them. Brahms thereby echoes the unsettled quality of the irregular phrases that are so prominent in the two inner movements. Our sense of stern drama remains unmitigated until the C major coda. In that respect, the legacy of Beethoven casts a lengthy shadow in this trio. Yet the language and spirit are never less than Brahms's own.

The premiere of the C minor trio took place on 20 December 1886 in Budapest. At this stage of

his career, Brahms did not play frequently in public; however, he made an exception for this occasion. His collaborators were two of Europe's most eminent musicians: the Hungarian violinist and composer Jenő Hubay and the Czech-born cellist and composer David Popper.

String Trio No. 1 in B-flat, D. 471
Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828)

The Schubert family loved to play chamber music together in the home. On Sundays and feast days, they would congregate for music-making. So gifted were they that they had an in-house string quartet, without need for reinforcements from family friends. Franz was the family violist; Papa Schubert and brothers Ferdinand and Ignaz balanced out the ensemble. This extraordinary domestic environment explains the large number of youthful string quartets Franz Schubert composed, *eighteen* of which predate his twenty-first birthday.

Presumably the string trio interested him less. After all, if four players were available, why not include everyone? Perhaps there were a couple of nights when Papa Schubert was ill or otherwise unable to play, though, because two string trios survive. Both are in B-flat major and were written within a year of one another; D. 471 was composed in September 1816. Schubert was still in his teens but already employed as a schoolmaster and chafing at the restraints placed on him by his academic responsibilities.

The trio we hear this afternoon is incomplete. Not all of its component movements have survived. A fragment of an *Andante* in E-flat major exists, but the "little" B-flat Trio is generally performed as this single, sprightly movement. In its original guise, it was probably for two violins and cello, as opposed to violin, viola, and cello, as it is performed today. His models were clearly Mozart and Haydn, and this B-flat *Allegro* has a decidedly eighteenth-century cast to it. Themes are simple, folk-like, and melodic. Schubert sets them forth in clean, foursquare phrases. He uses triplets for rhythmic variety and occasional sextuplets for a dramatic flourish. Chromaticism appears discreetly, and modulations only hint at the daring journeys Schubert would make later in his career. Any clouds that appear in this landscape are the small fluffy variety, against a background of brilliant sunshine and clear blue skies.

Piano Quartet No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 60

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Imagine a man for whom nothing is left and who wishes to put an end to himself.

Brahms penned these gloomy words to Hermann Deiters in 1868, describing the first movement of his C minor piano quartet. At that point he had already wrestled with the piece — then a single-movement work-in-progress — for well over a decade. Six years later he was still struggling with the same recalcitrant, lugubrious movement. A letter to his friend Dr. Theodor Billroth dated 23 October 1874 refers to it as “. . . a curiosity — an illustration for the last chapter in the life of the man in the blue coat and yellow vest.”

The allusion is to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), the seminal work of the *Sturm und Drang* literary movement. The story concerns a sensitive, artistic young man torn by poetic fantasies and hopeless passions. In the final scene, dressed in a blue coat, a yellow vest, yellow hose, and top boots, Werther shoots himself with a pistol. *Werther* was particularly influential in the early Romantic era, even precipitating a wave of suicides. (It also spawned a men's fashion trend that stretched to Paris and London, as well as the German-speaking countries.) The novel remained popular throughout the nineteenth century.

In his piano quartet's first movement, Brahms clearly identified with Werther's depressed and despairing emotional state. *Werther* was still on his mind nearly a year later, when he wrote to his publisher Fritz Simrock, who was readying the Opus 60 quartet for publication. The letter, which is filled with Brahms's dark, self-deprecating humor, reports a good rehearsal of the quartet, then adds:

Whether you consider me enfeebled by age or narrow-minded, or hold the opposite opinion, I am only now finally learning a few things—this quartet is half old, half new—the whole creature is therefore good for nothing! Furthermore, you might display a picture on the title page. Namely a head—with a pistol pointing at it. Now you can form an idea of the music! I will send you my photograph for this purpose! You could also give it a blue frockcoat, yellow trousers, and riding boots, since you appear to like color prints. . . . I mustn't send the quartet to you in Bönigen—it turns the most beautiful blue sky foggy.

Despite its relatively high opus number and publication date of 1875, when Brahms was forty-two, the C minor Piano Quartet shares many characteristics with the works of Brahms's youth. As the letter quoted above implies (“half old, half new”), the quartet's origins are from the mid-1850s, a dreadful time when Robert Schumann was in the final stages of the illness that claimed his life in 1856. Brahms, then in his early twenties, was spending considerable time with Schumann's wife Clara, attempting to balance his sense of responsibility to the Schumann family, loyalty to his ailing mentor and friend Schumann, and his growing love for Clara. These conflicting emotions found expression in a torrent of anguished and troubled music, including parts of the First Symphony (also in C minor) and the First Piano Concerto. The first movement of this piano quartet is a representative example.

Brahms was an exacting critic of his own work. After setting the unsatisfactory quartet movement aside for a number of years, he subjected it to extensive revisions. All told, he worked on Opus 60 for twenty years, from 1855 to 1875. The remaining three movements were added during the 1860s, accounting for subtle differences in texture. Whereas the first movement is athletically dominated by the keyboard, for example, the strings assume a more equitable balance in the latter three movements. Brahms's final two movements are terse and compressed, making them more consistent with his mature instrumental style.

Among the quartet's unusual features is the lyrical second subject in the opening *Allegro non troppo*, where Brahms incorporates variation elements into a sonata-form. The scherzo smoothly interjects several meter switches between 6/8 and 9/8, and the slow movement is a glorious melodic foray for the cello in its higher register. Musicologist Ivor Keys has written of the closing *Allegro comodo*:

The finale is chiefly notable for the nearly perpetual motion of its pattering accompaniment. . . . The five-bar chorale-like phrases for the strings are almost the only occasions when the accompaniment stops. Towards the end these recur in C major, but the last pages, though marked *tranquillo*, still have a heavy admixture of the minor. The man with the blue jacket and yellow vest [another reference to Goethe's *Werther*] has the last word.