

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center
Romantic Perspectives
Program Notes

Scherzo, WoO 2, from “F-A-E” Sonata for Violin and Piano
Johannes Brahms

Born May 7, 1833, in Hamburg.
Died April 3, 1897, in Vienna.

Composed in 1853.

Duration: 6 minutes

At 22, Joseph Joachim (1831-1907) was well on his way to a long career as a concert violinist. He had debuted with the London Philharmonic at the age of 13, worked closely with Felix Mendelssohn and Franz Liszt in concertmaster positions in Leipzig and Weimar, and performed well-reviewed concerts all around Europe. He was, however, still a bachelor and still sporting the bittersweet motto “free but lonely,” or “Frei aber Einsam” in German.

On October 28, 1853, a team of Joachim’s musical compatriots gathered at the home of Clara and Robert Schumann. Robert, together with his student Albert Dietrich and a little known 20-year-old pianist and composer named Johannes Brahms, had assembled a musical gift for the violinist: a sonata based on the musical motif F-A-E, an acronym for his catchphrase. Dietrich wrote the first movement, Schumann the second and fourth, and Brahms contributed the third, scherzo movement. After reading the piece together with Clara Schumann on piano, Joachim was to guess who had written each part. The game proved fairly easy for the violinist, who was familiar with the nuances of each of his friends’ writing styles.

The *Scherzo* is indeed unmistakable as the work of Brahms. From early on in his compositional output, he gave this compact movement form, which usually follows a simple A-B-A scheme, a uniquely developmental character. This searching quality comes through clearly in the scherzo of the F-A-E sonata, where there are virtually no cadences, frequent modulations, and constant ambiguities of meter. You will be forgiven, as well, if you miss the F-A-E motto. It is woven into the accompaniment and almost impossible to hear in the shifting textures, though a scramble of the key notes can be picked out of a passionate violin line in the middle of the A section. A short trio presents a cleaner, lyrical character, but it is abruptly cut off by a return to the off-kilter scherzo. The closing coda brings back material from the trio, ending the movement with a triumphant chorale that feels strangely unearned, leaving the listener with a desire to hear more music.

Quartet in A minor for Piano, Violin, Viola, and Cello
Gustav Mahler

Born July 7, 1860, in Kalischt, Bohemia.
Died May 18, 1911, in Vienna.

Composed in 1876.

Premiered on July 10, 1876, at the Vienna Conservatory.

Duration: 12 minutes

As a student at the Vienna Conservatory, Gustav Mahler was like any antsy teenager. He flitted from one piece to another, struggling to get complete compositions down on paper. His close friend Natalie Bauer-

Lechner recalled him admitting “in those days, I couldn’t be bothered with all that—my mind was too restless and unstable. I skipped from one draft to another, and finished most of them merely in my head. But I knew every note of them, and could play them whenever they were wanted—until, one day, I found I’d forgotten them.” He was very critical of his own work while he was a student, especially of music that found success with teachers and competition juries, but he held one particular early piece in high esteem: “The best of them was a piano quartet...which proved a great success.” Mahler thought this quartet to have been lost, but the manuscript to the first movement and sketches of the second survived. It is his only extant piece of instrumental chamber music, and a small-scale window into the world of a man who would go on to create unprecedentedly massive symphonies and song cycles.

The quartet opens ominously, with slow triplets in the right hand of the piano suggesting the A minor tonality and the left hand of the piano presenting the piece’s principal motif: a rising minor sixth figure comprising the notes A-F-E. We hear this figure over and over again throughout the melancholy opening, which gradually builds towards a faster transitional section. This passage is a clever exercise in counterpoint, with the strings and right hand of the piano playing against one another in an off-Baroque fashion that points forward to the music of Dmitri Shostakovich. This interlude quickly resolves into a lyrical theme that occupies the remainder of the exposition. The development sets the initial A-F-E motif against that lyrical theme in various contortions and keys, building to a climactic section with dotted rhythms in the strings and virtuosic patter in the piano. After the recapitulation, a rhapsodic violin cadenza cues the end of the piece, which fades to a restrained close.

What might come next? Only 24 measures of the second, scherzo movement remain. They show the instruments winding together a stream of sextuplets that undergirds arpeggiated melodies, a distinctly Mahlerian texture that appears in many of his symphonies. In 1988, Alfred Schnittke wrote a completion of this second movement, starting from the notes that Mahler left in his sketch and then setting the winding ostinato against his own modernist harmonic language. One of the joys of incomplete works is that they open the door to completions, borrowings, homages: complex interactions between musical past and present. So Mahler’s youthful impatience left later artists a font of creativity, a further testament to the ways in which his piano quartet is a “great success.”

Quintet in A minor for Two Violins, Two Violas, and Cello, Op. 1

Antonín Dvořák

Born September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, Bohemia.

Died May 1, 1904, in Prague.

Composed in 1861.

Duration: 28 minutes

In 1857, the young Antonín Dvořák moved to Prague to begin his life as a musician in training at the Organ School. He had a hard time in his first months; classes were taught in German and he was not confident in the language, though he had studied it for some time. He had no disposable income and so he could not afford concert tickets or study scores, making it difficult for the aspiring composer to get to know standard repertoire.

He did manage to find work as a violist in various ensembles, which gave him the chance to encounter symphonic and opera repertoires. Additionally, he fortunately befriended fellow student Karel Bendl, who had a piano and extensive score collection and allowed Dvořák to use both freely. It may well have been study in his friend’s library that gave him an intimate knowledge of small ensemble works written by Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert, a knowledge that comes across in every movement of the composer’s Opus 1, the String Quintet in A minor. He completed this piece in 1861, two years after he graduated from the Organ School, but never heard it performed in an official setting.

The first movement is an homage to Schubert. After a dramatic slow introduction, the first violin introduces a falling melody in A minor above a softly churning accompaniment that recalls Schubert's "Rosamunde" Quartet in texture and melodic outline. The exposition of this first movement involves three different themes and a complex play between relative major and minor key areas, a frequent feature of Schubertian sonata form. The viola opening of the second movement presents a sublime melody, which morphs naturally into a duet with the second violin. The unfolding of this Lento in F-major combines poignant chorale textures that bring to mind slow movements in Beethoven's middle and late string quartets with an ever-shifting, occasionally swinging rhythmic background that hints at the heartwarming dumkas of Dvořák's later chamber and symphonic works.

The cleanest quotation to be heard occurs in the third and final movement. The first, stately motif, A-E-F-E, is nearly identical in rhythm, scale degree, and character to the opening of Mozart's G minor Piano Quartet. The short response phrase, though, is something of Dvořák's invention. For the third phrase, again he quotes Mozart, and for the fourth, Dvořák's himself replies. The movement that springs out of this dialogue creates a deliberate push and pull between imitation and new creation that is emblematic of the whole quintet. The many novelties that Dvořák will bring to the chamber music canon—phenomenal melodic viola writing; brilliant, bird-like, high violin counterpoint; rhythmic and formal innovation—are put into relief against a backdrop of similarity to more familiar repertoire that he drew inspiration from.

Quintet in F minor for Piano, Two Violins, Viola, and Cello

César Franck

Born December 10, 1822, in Liège, Belgium.

Died November 8, 1890, in Paris.

Composed in 1879.

Premiered on January 17, 1880, in Paris by pianist Camille Saint-Saëns and the Marsick Quartet.

Duration: 35 minutes

Unity is a controversial topic in the study of music. So many elements potentially feed into a listener's perception that a given musical experience hangs together. Countless similarities and contrasts, both intended and unintended by the creators of a musical encounter, can contribute to making that encounter meaningful. The shared notes that pervade the movements of the F-A-E Sonata may indeed have helped to unite the disparate compositional contributions of Schumann, Brahms, and Dietrich for some listeners. The importance of those three notes in Mahler's Piano Quartet and Dvořák's A minor String Quintet might in turn be seen to lead the ear across the first three pieces on this concert program. The relevance and audibility of different types of musical similarities is a matter of heated musicological and scientific debate; and understanding the nuances of how to relate music both within and across works has been of importance to composers and performers for a very long time.

Establishing a discernible relationship between the separate movements of large-scale compositions was an aim of many of the late Romantics, including French-Belgian composer César Franck. He wrote his Piano Quintet in F minor in 1879 and according to lore, the passionate disposition of this piece was a result of his supposed affair with Augusta Holmès, one of his piano students. The over-the-top Romanticism of the quintet was pleasing to some: Édouard Lalo praised it as an "explosion." Explosiveness was met with more suspicion from Camille Saint-Saëns, who premiered the work and apparently left the sheet music on stage at the end of the concert, a sign of disdain. Despite its intensity, the piece has become one of Franck's most popular creations. In addition to the emotionally rich

landscape of the quintet, it is a prime example of an audible melodic continuity weaving its way across the separate chapters of a chamber work.

The confident violin descent down the F minor scale that opens the first movement, accompanied by held harmonies in the strings, establishes the fervent passion that generated such mixed reviews. But it is in the quiet response in the piano where we can hear hints of the piece's *idée fixe*: a wandering melodic idea centered on a minor third. When the slow introduction finally gives way to an Allegro by way of a piano cadenza, the alternating figures in the strings and piano work their way up to this third step by step. This ascent prefigures the melody that appears soon after in the piano, marked "tender but passionate" and hesitantly climbing its way up and up chromatically from a fixed position. The piano rendition is cut short by the intrusion of a hopeful violin arpeggio, which gradually leads the ensemble back to a presentation of the same tune, heard with a playful, syncopated bass line. The remainder of the movement returns to this theme constantly, closely alternating it with all of Franck's other melodies. The key motif eventually leads an ascent to a truly demonic climax, which then abruptly fades away into extinction.

The funereal character that closes the first movement pervades the second, a haunting lullaby in A minor. A nostalgic interlude in the far-off key of D-flat major offers a glimpse of hope, aided by the occurrence of the main theme from the first movement in the piano. But this is short-lived; we are quickly brought down to earth with more music of unspeakable pain. The final movement starts with shimmering violin tremolos, ominous melodic fragments in the piano, and a general sense of uneasiness. There is at last a majestic, rising melody presented by all of the strings, but it is constantly modulating, unable to shake the restlessness of the opening. This *maestoso* theme multiplies but can't quite lead to a conclusion until a final appearance of the tune from the first movement in the violin. After a long crescendo that carefully blends the first and third movement melodies, the group unites in an exuberant drive to the close. It is almost as if Franck has pushed that recurring melody to the breaking point, used up its unifying potential, and the music simply has to end, no matter how abruptly. In the final bars, enraged unison Fs are hammered out by all of the players, slamming the brakes, and then exclaimed twice more after tense, breathless pauses.

Cellist, writer, and music researcher Nicky Swett is a PhD candidate and Gates Scholar at the University of Cambridge.