

Chamber Music Unbound presents:

**The FELICI PIANO TRIO with guest
AMBROISE AUBRUN, violin/viola**

April 16 & 17, 2022

Cerro Coso College, Mammoth Lakes & Bishop

Program

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Piano Quartet in E-Flat Major, opus 87

Allegro con fuoco

Lento

Allegro moderato, grazioso

Finale: Allegro ma non troppo

-INTERMISSION -

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Quartet in G Minor, opus 25

Allegro

Intermezzo: Allegro (ma non troppo)

Andante con moto

Rondo alla Zingarese: Presto

Some of the characteristics that have contributed to making Dvořák the most successful composer of chamber music in the second half of the 19th century have little to do with his intrinsic musicality, or with the ultimate refinement of his craft as a mature composer. Indeed they have nothing much to do with music in the first place. The characteristics that mark Dvořák's work around every corner are reflections of his amiable personality, which was defined by an deeply conciliatory outlook on life, and an uncanny ability to mediate even the most opposing perspectives without as much as a trace of partisanship or bitterness.

It may well be that Dvořák was a born diplomat, but his biography certainly suggests that the composer's individuality was shaped along the way, by the people and events that accompany the story of his life.

The late recognition Dvořák received as a composer of international stature, must have taught him patience and persistence. He was, after all, already 37 years old when, finally, and upon urgent recommendation of Johannes Brahms, he became associated with the influential publishing firm of Fritz Simrock in Leipzig.

Dvořák has composed a whole bunch of things....In any case, he is a highly talented human being. And, by the way, poor! I ask you to please consider this!...

(Johannes Brahms to Fritz Simrock, 1877)

Dvořák's gratitude to Brahms and their reciprocal admiration were the starting point of a lifelong friendship which remained unclouded by their rather diverse perspectives on religion. Dvořák's Catholicism and Brahms'

agnosticism did not clash; they had too much respect for each other, as musicians and as people. Kindred spirits, both composers often found themselves “between the chairs” in matters political and artistic in their respective environments, but took great comfort in the sympathy they felt for each other’s work and mutual personal esteem. Though still late in life, the devout Dvořák said about his friend, admiringly, if rather incredulously: “What a human being, what a soul – and he doesn’t believe in anything, doesn’t believe in anything!”

Although he was a deeply patriotic person, a leading figure in the creation of a national Czech style of music, Dvořák never considered himself a political person. Even after Simrock repeatedly declined to publish his compositions with Czech titles alongside the German ones, Dvořák found conciliatory words: “But what do we care about politics? Let’s be glad that we may dedicate ourselves to the service of beautiful art.” Not surprisingly, his compositions, while giving expression to the uniqueness of his beloved Czech people, appeal, then as now, to music lovers all over the world.

The congenial person he was, Dvořák remained throughout his life strongly drawn to writing chamber music and completed almost 40 chamber works for diverse instrument combinations. Like Mozart, he was a viola player, keenly aware of the importance of interesting part writing for the middle voices in the orchestra or string ensemble. This results in a great deal of variety and vitality in his textures, as well as a continuous, lively dialogue between the parts.

The *Piano Quartet opus 87* was composed for his publisher Simrock, who had been quick to notice an ever widening market for chamber music with piano (the publications of Brahms’ three piano quartets had been a great commercial success for the firm). “As I expected, it [the quartet] came easily and the melodies just surged upon me, thank God,” Dvořák reported on the genesis of the opus 87. It is indeed a work of great vigor, of sprightly character, of abundant fluency and originality.

What is striking about the first movement *Allegro con fuoco* is its highly ambiguous tonality and the almost provocative pitching of the piano versus the strings, its concerto-like independence, resembling the texture of Mozart’s *G-Minor Piano Quartet K 478*. The three string players’ dramatic unison statement immediately opens the doors to grand harmonic adventures, which Dvořák aptly explores over the cycle of the four movements. The dramatic tension steadily increases in the introductory paragraph, until the eruption of the first soaring melody, which finally establishes our home key of E-flat Major. A movement of wide textural variety, of great rhythmical, harmonic and melodic interest, unfolds

The ensuing *Lento* basks in the luxurious sonorities that are the result of the unusual key of G-flat Major. The expansive opening cello solo sets a magical mood right from the beginning, accompanied by the harp-like sounds of the plucked upper strings and the gently arpeggiated chords of the piano. A brief dramatic outburst in C-sharp by the violin interrupts the contemplative mood, but is quickly assuaged by a “simple” (“semplice”) piano melody in D-flat Major that is rendered very sensual by the syncopated rhythms in the strings.

The third movement *Allegro moderato, grazioso*, starts out as a gentle, unaffected little dance, a Viennese waltz, maybe. The “folksy” melodic thirds between the violin and the viola give it a warm and cheery air, as they engage in a graceful back-and-forth with the cello and the piano, before the latter, quite abruptly turns “eastwards...” The piano’s melody with its sudden shift to G minor strikes us as exotic, but also rhythmically explores the duality of the $\frac{3}{4}$ time which it re-interprets as a $\frac{6}{8}$ pattern. A bold move to the bright key of B Major brings about a frolicking and slightly raucous middle section before the opening melody returns, this time shared by the viola and cello.

In an almost reconciliatory gesture, the *Finale* opens with a unison of the entire quartet, as if to confirm that the differences from the first movement have been put aside. The highly unusual key of E-flat minor, and Dvořák’s colorful harmonies, the lively rhythms and the jovial atmosphere are contrasted with a wistful second theme that is introduced by the viola, the composer’s own instrument; his personal voice.

One of the great masterworks of the chamber music repertoire, Dvořák's *Piano Quartet opus 87* offers, upon close listening, insights into the soul of a great diplomat. Dvořák developed his art to such a degree of perfection that it allowed him to always remain true to himself, while integrating the differences he observed in his social and cultural environs, creating most delightful music of lasting value.

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"Speak little, but true; too much talk is dangerous" is one of the over hundred proverbs young Brahms began jotting down, starting in 1855, in a little notebook which he preambled with his own: *"Good maxims, wise lessons one must practice, not just hear!"* The 22 year-old, in a state of emotional turmoil, was looking for universal and time-proven wisdom. Riding out a creative dry spell, Brahms had thrown himself into the study of the scores of old masters. In his ever so thorough manner, he ventured as far back as the Renaissance, laboring over the unforgiving musical discipline of counterpoint "in which a composer fashions a melody and its echo in other voices to form effective harmony" (Jan Swafford: *Johannes Brahms, A Biography*).

In order to work more systematically and diligently, Brahms proposed to exchange weekly elaborate composition exercises with his best friend, the violinist and composer Joseph Joachim. The goal was to gain mastery and ultimate control in weaving a musical fabric out of notes; technical perfection was then to generate expressive beauty. When, on one occasion, Joachim sent Brahms a production of a seven-voice double canon which superimposes motives representing "Gisela" (the name of a recently lost love of Joachim's, rendered in pitch names) and "F-A-E" (*Frei Aber Einsam – Free But Lonely*), Brahms laconic comment was that "much is implied here!"

Around the time that he finally conquered his dry spell, with the finished draft of the D Minor Piano Concerto in May 1857, Brahms secured the position of pianist and choir director in the small duchy of Detmold, which desired his residence for just three months - but paid the bills for the entire year! During July and August, he stayed with the recently widowed Clara Schumann and some of her younger children on the Rhine, visiting ancient castle ruins and enjoying long hikes along the river.

Upon his return to Hamburg, he gradually found himself gaining the respect of the musical establishment of his home town, and by July, 1858, Brahms was finally beginning to put behind him the years of emotional turmoil and distress that had followed his initial contact with Robert and Clara Schumann in 1853: the revered master's unreserved endorsement of the very young Brahms as the long awaited "Messiah of Music" that had honored yet frightened the barely twenty-year-old; then Schumann's tragic sickness and confinement which caused Clara's dependence on loyal friend Brahms as her pillar of strength in those difficult years; Brahms' gradual realization that his respect and friendship had transformed into passionate love for Clara and the torturous state of mind in which he decided to leave her side in the fall of 1856 to return to his hometown Hamburg.

In the summer of 1858 he finally shook off some of the ballast of the past five years. In spite of the failure of his piano concerto on occasion of its public premiere, and a botched engagement to a lovely young lady with a "voice like an Amati violin" (Agathe von Siebold as described by Joseph Joachim), Brahms emerged in 1859 with new confidence in his creative prowess, scoring successes as pianist and composer and enjoying himself tremendously as conductor of a newly formed women's choir in his home town. The usually modest and highly self-critical young man reported to Clara in a rather uncharacteristically boastful tone, "I am becoming something of a cult in Hamburg. But I don't think that can do any harm. In any case I am writing with ever more zest, and there are signs in me which suggest that in time I may produce heavenly things!"

One of those "heavenly things" already in the works was our *Piano Quartet opus 25*, begun in 1857 and first performed to immediate and lasting success in November of 1861 in Hamburg. The distinguished performers included pianist Clara Schumann and violinist Joseph Joachim, and it is of little surprise that the score is full of references, some hidden some obvious, to Brahms' experiences of the past few years. The young composer's

respect for and devotion to his friends found their way into his score, particularly into the second movement, *Intermezzo*, and the last movement, the lively *Rondo alla Zingarese (Rondo in Gypsy Style)*.

The first movement *Allegro* is characterized by its explicitly dramatic quality; a solemn, almost chorale-like beginning is soon followed by passionate outbursts of emotion. The movement literally overflows with inspired musical ideas, and the texture, as well as the dialogue between the instruments, is very animated. But Joachim, upon receiving the score from Brahms for criticism, was puzzled by the *Allegro's* non-compliance with the standard formal outlines expected in a sonata form movement. Not quite sure what to make of it, admitting to his friend that he felt he needed to hear the piece (not just study the score) and “get used to it” a little more, Joachim asked if he could show it to Clara, too... Clara, like Joachim, perceived the formal outlines of the traditional exposition, development and recapitulation sections, which are somewhat obscured, “as a miscalculation rather than a willful device” (Jan Swafford) on behalf of the young composer.

In retrospect, though, in the context of the works that were to follow, we almost take the mastery that Brahms displays in this truly monumental movement for granted: his apt and idiomatic management of the large form that resulted from his studies of Schubert's extended sonata forms, his incredibly skilled contrapuntal writing and his intuitive command of the combination of string colors with those of the piano. In the end, the drama of the first movement remains unresolved, turning back to the opening chorale melody with a sense of resignation. So very typical for the early Romantic period, its abrupt juxtapositions express the unfulfilled longings of the human spirit, which finds itself in constant conflict with the inescapable realities of daily life.

The second movement owes its *Intermezzo* title to Clara who thought Brahms' conventional *Scherzo* ill-fitting, and rightly so. The hushed *Intermezzo* moves along with a uniquely mysterious sonority as a result of the muting (dampening of the vibrations) of the violin. It aptly evokes the realm of fantasy, the imagined worlds of the Romantic story teller, and the subdued lyricism hides a little private secret: the *Intermezzo's* main musical idea is a transposed version of Robert Schumann's so-called “CLARA-speaks” theme. Did Clara notice? Did Joseph Joachim? Nobody commented, but I think they must have understood that “much was implied here” in the sense of “speak little, but true”...

The next movement, an expansive *Andante*, starts out with an impassioned and optimistic version of the opening movement's first theme, but then seems to gradually ebb into a funeral march, when quite suddenly this march is injected with new life and unexpectedly turns to the optimistic key of C Major, with a distinctly Eastern European tinge to its melody. A “we-shall-overcome” ethos permeates this movement, ultimately achieving the transcendence of personal sorrow.

If the march theme anticipates some of the exuberance awaiting us in the Gypsy finale, the appeal of the final *Presto* lies in its lively rhythmic character which evokes the Hungarian “verbunkos”, a hugely popular style of dance music at the time. No wonder that the patriotic Joseph Joachim (himself the composer of a “Hungarian Concerto”) was so fond of this movement as it vividly captures the full-blooded temperament of his native people, foot stomping, dazzling virtuosity and all. “You beat me on my own turf” he readily and generously admits to Brahms.

And yet, imbedded in the midst of the unrestrained dance, we find episodes of heart-warming and heart-wrenching lyricism. What are these, if not devoted little love songs, reminders of Brahms' passionate attachment to Clara, which had by now evolved into lifelong friendship? The “Queen of the Piano”, as she was known in 19th century Europe, gets a final pianistic moment of glory in the form of a dazzling cadenza. Reminiscent of a Bach organ “Toccatà”, this cadenza suavely proceeds to display the young composer's supreme counterpoint skills, not unnoticed by Clara who proudly mentions the concluding “Fugue” in a letter to daughter Marie. Some time ago, Brahms had studied some of Bach's organ repertoire with hopes for a joint concert tour with Clara. In the *Finale* of his quartet opus 25, he bids this dream farewell – not without a touch of irony, or shall we say, dry humor. ---Notes by Rebecca Hang

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