NOTES for 1 November 2015

D. Kern Holoman

So much to think about in this afternoon’s repertoire. We regret too often that there are only the four Brahms symphonies, since you can find more than ample compensation in chamber works, like these, of great ambition and substance. In a way you discover yourself closer to the essence of his artistic journey: probing forward from the formal models of Beethoven and especially Schumann, composing out the agonizing questions and answers of his psyche, establishing the harmony and counterpoint that went on to define post-Romanticism. (I’ve often thought that “before Brahms” and “after Brahms” are the only two categories we really need for understanding classical music.) Think, today, about how textures (solo, trio, quartet, sextet) foster musical character, about meters (lots of 3/4; lots of losing and refinding the beat), and about how delicious unexpected mutations of key can be. You have three outstanding theme-and-variations movements on this program, and two all-time favorites (the A-major Intermezzo and the Andante of the Quartet, with its opening cello solo). And you can, if you like, think about Clara Schumann all along, for she is woven, one way or another, into every selection.

Piano Trio No. 2 in C Major, op. 87

Composed 1880 (first movement) – July 1882. First performed (after private readings that autumn) 29 December 1882 in Frankfurt. Published Berlin: N. Simrock, December 1882. Duration 30 minutes.

The piano trio was a cornerstone of Viennese tradition. Haydn had composed more than 30 of them, Beethoven something like a dozen, Mendelssohn and Schumann three each. Meanwhile the rhetoric changed as the piano grew more powerful. In his second piano trio, composed some three decades after the first, Brahms offers a solution where unisons/octaves in the violin and cello are made to counterbalance the bolder sonorities from the piano. Each of the four movements opens, for instance, with a head-motive to that effect.

The first movement is a broad-gestured sonata form in 3/4 and C major, though the precise map is masked by ambiguity as to the moment of recapitulation; the stringendo and animato signal a coda that delays the necessary tonal arrival until the last four bars—the head motive again, this time from all three players. The curiously exotic theme of the Andante, in A minor, lasts 27 bars and is essentially through composed, lacking the repeats that articulate most
such movements. From this material Brahms derives five variations that evolve organically from the dirge-like beginning, shifting to A major for the next-to-last variation, as well as a turn to 6/8 which carries to the end. The minor-mode scherzo ensues, fleeting, perhaps diabolic, then embracing a slower, smoother trio in C major. The trio thus foreshadows material to come in the big last-movement sonata, “giocoso”—jocular—and long, again, on the octaves and unisons.

Intermezzo in A Major, op. 118, no. 2

*Composed* as one of Six Pieces for Piano, op. 118, summer 1893 in Bad Ischl (Salzkammergut, Austria), where Brahms regularly summered. There it was apparently *first performed* by the composer for the young pianist Ilona Eibenschütz (1872–1967), a student of Clara Schumann; Eibenschütz offered the first public performances in London in 1894. *Published* Berlin: N. Simrock, 1893; *dedicated* to Clara Schumann (1819–96). *Duration* about 6 minutes.

Listen above all, in this most loved of Brahms's last works for piano, to the inner voices (you'll probably know the tune already) and the introspection of the harmonic fabric: the turn to triplet left-hand figures, for instance, in the middle of the simple A-B-A structure, or the way the *pianissimo* response to the first eight bars complicates, spine-tinglingly, the musical argument. This sort of quiet revery is what Brahms envisaged “intermezzo” as meaning—“lullabies,” he said, “to my sorrows.” These last ones were for Clara Schumann, reaching (like Brahms) the end of life. He sped them to her as they were done, and she treasured them. Here, in the composer’s ability to “speak volumes with the sparest of gestures,” thought Michael Steinberg, “we find the essence of Brahms.”

Frau Schumann, incidentally, disapproved of Eibenschütz’s readings: “she goes too quickly over everything.” But for the 21-year-old “it was the most wonderful thing” to be the first to hear them and to sense how he played “as if he were improvising, with heart and soul, sometimes humming to himself, forgetting everything around him. His playing was altogether grand and noble.” If you have never heard her reminiscences of Brahms (in perfect English, recorded 1952), run, do not walk (as H. C. Robbins Landon used to say, often) to the Internet and have a listen.
Piano Quartet in C Minor, op. 60

Composed 1875. First performed 18 November 1875 in Vienna, with Brahms at the piano (also Joseph Hellmesberger, violin, and the famous virtuoso David Popper, cello). Published Berlin: N. Simrock 1875. Duration about 35 minutes.

Brahms had begun this work (in a different key, C-sharp minor) long before, in agony over Schumann’s illness and death and in conflict over the question of his future with Clara. He told his publisher and others that it was his “Werther Quartet,” alluding to Goethe’s novel where the protagonist, in love with a married woman, ends it all with a pistol to the head.

It opens sternly and starkly, the piano octaves announcing a two-note motive in strings, crying (they say) “Clara.” Its outgrowth in measure 5 outlines the most recognizable of the “Clara motives” used by Robert and understood by both Schumanns and Brahms as well. The second theme leads the movement into a series of variations, and in fact the recapitulation comes in the “wrong” key of G major, leaving any number of issues to be resolved later on in the work. Likewise the C-minor scherzo, placed as the second movement, is a hybrid, possibly refashioned from the forerunning work: there is no trio.

Then the wonderful Andante in E major, called by Menahem Pressler “the most beautiful declaration of love by any composer.” The deployment of the forces is especially delicate, as for instance when the violin joins the cello after the first strophe, or when the piano at last has its strophe, softly, espressivo, with delicate triplet pizzicati from the viola and violin. The Finale is characterized by long, arched solo lines over the perpetual motion of eighth notes from the piano. Note how the half-note second theme from the strings and timid response from the piano is reversed, at the end, into a thundering seven- and eight-fingered chords from the piano and crescendo triplets from the strings, thereby proclaiming the end at hand.
String Sextet No. 2 in G Major, op. 36

**Composed** September 1864 in Lichtental / Baden-Baden (Germany); finale added May 1865. **First performed** 11 October 1866, Boston, at a concert of the Mendelssohn Quintet Club; then 20 November 1866 in Zurich and 3 February 1867 in Vienna. Published Berlin: N. Simrock [April] 1866. **Duration** about 35 minutes.

Prepare yourself in advance for the long slow movement, Brahms at his best, with layer upon layer of dense counterpoint as the variations wend their way—no time for the attention to flag. Enjoy, too, the particular textures from the three pairs of instruments: violin, viola, cello.

First, though, the obligatory biographical detail. It was not merely that Brahms was spending the second of many summers in lodgings overlooking Clara Schumann’s summer residence in Baden-Baden, there (even though their overt romance was done) to keep an eye on her and the children and to prosper, compositionally, in that fertile surrounding. Meanwhile his involvement with a singer from Göttingen named Agathe von Siebold had reached the point of betrothal, then ended as he saw again how inconsistent the “fetters” of marriage were with his idea of a composer’s life. (She got the message and, wisely, fled.) Auras of both these women over above the sextet, with Agathe’s name woven into the first movement in the kind of musical acrostic so enjoyed by Schumann and his circle. “Here,” Brahms wrote, “I have freed myself from my last love.” He was just over 30.

The pair of rising fifths at the start—still another major-key movement in 3/4—constitute a kind of motto opening to which we will hear ongoing reference. The “Agathe tune” comes toward the end of the exposition in the first violin, answered in the second violin by a three-note pattern that may mean “farewell.” It is a long, sometimes puzzling movement, but prevailingly gracious and affirmative and with a finely reminiscent coda, one of the hallmarks of the Romantic soul. The scherzo, in second place, is vaguely unsettling owing to its duple meter; at the trio this becomes a triple-meter *Presto giocoso* in *style hongrois*.

Gradually the structure of the third movement reveals itself as variations on the theme, referencing the motto (now fourths, not fifths): you will be more certain as you begin to sense each variation repeating, five in total. It is both portrait and self portrait, saluting in its intellectual rigor, wistfulness, and—not least—arrival *molto dolce* in E major, a rich if melancholy life partnership. This sets up the animated, virtuosic finale, which will probably remind you of the Mendelssohn Octet.

—D. Kern Holoman
Harris Center
Three Stages at Folsom Lake College

Selected Chamber Music of Johannes Brahms (1833–97)

Sunday, November 1, 2015, 2:00 pm
Susan Lamb Cook, cello, with members of the Left Coast Chamber Ensemble: Anna Presler, violin, Kurt Rohde, viola, Leighton Fong, cello; and Chase Spruill, violin, James Een, viola. Andrei Baumann, piano.

- String Sextet No. 2 in G Major, op. 36
- Intermezzo in A Major, op. 118, no. 2
- Piano Trio No. 2 in C Major, op. 87
- Piano Quartet in C Minor, op. 60

Sunday, February 21, 2016, 2:00 pm
Susan Lamb Cook, cello; Gayle Blankenburg, piano; with Chase Spruill, violin and Pete Nowlen, French horn

- Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Major, op. 78
- Piano Trio No. 1 in B Major, op. 8
- Trio for Horn, Violin, and Piano in E-flat Major, op. 40

Sunday, May 22, 2016, 2:00 pm
Susan Lamb Cook, cello; Gayle Blankenburg, piano; with Franklyn D’Antonio, violin, James Een, viola, Carrie Hennessey, soprano

- Cello Sonata No. 1 in E Minor, op. 38
- Selected Lieder
- Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor, op. 25

Sunday, June 26, 2016, 2:00 pm
Susan Lamb Cook, cello; Gayle Blankenburg, piano; with Ian Jessee, violin

- Cello Sonata No. 2 in F Major, op. 99
- Violin Sonata No. 2 in A Major, op. 100
- Piano Trio No. 3 in C Minor, op. 101