

OPUS 3 ARTISTS
PRESENTS

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

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“Great Quintets”

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART Quintet in E-flat Major for Two Violins, Two Violas, and Cello, K. 614 (1791)

(1756-1791) Allegro di molto
Andante
Menuetto: Allegretto
Finale: Allegro
I. KAVAFIAN, A. KAVAFIAN, HOLLOWAY, NEUBAUER, CANELLAKIS

FELIX MENDELSSOHN Quintet in A Major for Two Violins, Two Violas, and Cello, Op. 18 (1826/rev. 1832)

(1809-1847) Allegro con moto
Intermezzo: Andante sostenuto
Scherzo: Allegro di molto
Allegro vivace
A. KAVAFIAN, I. KAVAFIAN, NEUBAUER, HOLLOWAY, CANELLAKIS

INTERMISSION

JOHANNES BRAHMS Quintet in B minor for Clarinet, Two Violins, Viola, and Cello, Op. 115 (1891)

(1833-1897) Allegro
Adagio
Andantino—Presto non assai, ma con sentimento
Con moto
SHIFRIN, A. KAVAFIAN, I. KAVAFIAN, NEUBAUER, CANELLAKIS

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Program Notes:

Quintet in E-flat major for Two Violins, Two Violas, and Cello, K. 614

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Born January 27, 1756 in Salzburg.

Died December 5, 1791 in Vienna.

Composed in 1791.

Duration: 24 minutes

The year 1790 was the least productive of Mozart's mature life. He was ill much of the time with symptoms of the kidney failure that would soon end his life, and the health of his wife, Constanze, was in serious decline from the burden of almost-constant pregnancy and grief over the death of daughter Anna Maria. (The fifth of the six children the couple produced during their nine-year marriage, Anna Maria survived only a few hours before dying in November of 1789.) Professionally, Mozart had nudged open the door to the imperial court with his appointment as Court Chamber Musician in December of 1787 (for which his only duty was to compose trifling dances for the royal balls), but continued to be frustrated in gaining the more lucrative and honored appointment that would allow him to compose the Emperor's operas. In addition, there was no longer sufficient demand in Vienna for him to sponsor his own concerts, and he was sliding into worryingly increasing debt. After putting the finishing touches on *Così fan tutte* in early January of 1790, Mozart's catalog for the next ten months shows only the two quartets dedicated to the King of Prussia (K. 589, 590) and orchestrations of Handel's *Alexander's Feast* (K. 591) and *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day* (K. 592), undertaken for performances by Baron van Swieten's Society of Noblemen to raise some quick cash. In October, Mozart pawned the family silver to underwrite a trip to Frankfurt to give some concerts as part of the festivities surrounding the coronation of Leopold II as Holy Roman Emperor with the hope of attracting enough aristocratic attention to land a good job. The venture was a failure — Mozart barely covered his costs.

When Mozart arrived home in Vienna from Frankfurt at the beginning of November 1790, it appeared that his fortunes might improve. He received a letter from one Robert May O'Reilly, an impresario of Italian opera in London, inviting him to spend six months in England beginning in January to compose and produce two operas for the fee of £300, at least double what he could expect to earn for the same work in Vienna, where, in any case, he had no such immediate prospects. The situation had been arranged for him by his friends the Irish tenor Michael Kelly and the English soprano Nancy Storace, who had participated in the premiere of *The Marriage of Figaro* in May of 1786 before returning home. Without explanation, Mozart refused the offer, as he did one from Johann Salomon in December, when that ambitious impresario tried to engage both Haydn and him for his series of London concerts. Haydn accepted Salomon's proposal and made a considerable fortune from the project. Mozart saw his older colleague off on December 12th; the two never met again. Perhaps Mozart was too ill to make the journey, or perhaps too discouraged from his Frankfurt debacle, or perhaps too worried about Constanze's most recent pregnancy (Franz Xaver Wolfgang was born on July 7, 1791). Whatever his reason, he stayed in Vienna, and, amazingly, began to compose again. The first fruit of his rejuvenated creativity was the Quintet in D major for Strings (K. 593), completed in December of 1790. The Piano Concerto No. 27 in B-flat major (K. 595) was finished on January 5, 1791, three weeks before Mozart's 35th birthday, and a second string quintet, in E-flat Major (K. 614), was entered into his catalog on April 12, 1791. *Ave verum corpus*, *The Magic Flute*, *La Clemenza di Tito*, the Clarinet Concerto, and the *Requiem* followed in quick order during the next eight months. On December 5th, Wolfgang Mozart died.

The noted Mozart authority Eric Blom wrote, "Perhaps the E-flat major Quintet is the most superb of all [the string quintets]. It has probably the highest sum-total of great invention plus great workmanship, and the two are most miraculously balanced." Though written at a period of intense emotional turmoil, the quintet exhibits qualities also abundant in *The Magic Flute*: optimistic spirit, rich sonority, grandeur through contrapuntal texture, touching lyricism, and jovial, folk-like melodies. The quintet opens with a bold theme comprising repeated notes and trills, which serve as the motivic kernel from which much of the movement grows. The violins provide kittenish

commentaries upon this opening proposal before borrowing it for themselves as the material for the transition to the second theme, a melody of greater melodic variety and leaping intervals. The initial subject soon returns to close the exposition. Much of the development section is concerned with the trill gesture from the main theme. The recapitulation traverses the principal subject at some length, but barely mentions the second theme before a trill-laden coda rounds out the movement.

The *Andante* is a set of fantasy-variations on the lovely theme presented at the outset, which recalls Belmonte's aria "Wenn der Freude Tränen fließen" from *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. Musicologist Alfred Einstein wrote that this movement "represents a pinnacle of achievement in the combination of *concertante* and chamber-music elements — brilliance, workmanship, repose, and joy in creation all together."

The *Menuetto*, built on the descending scalar configuration posited by the violins at the outset, is an exuberant affair, a musical kinsman to the German Dances that Mozart was then supplying for the court balls. The central trio, with its sinuous violin melody touched with melancholy sounded above a bagpipe-like drone in the cello, provides stark contrast to the surrounding Menuetto.

"From everything that we know about Mozart," wrote Melvin Berger, "the finale is an excellent reflection of his personality — boisterous, zesty, full of life, and bubbling with mischievous humor." The movement, a sparkling rondo, is illuminated by the quicksilver scales and flashing figurations shared by all of the participants.

Quintet in A major for Two Violins, Two Violas, and Cello, Op. 18

Felix Mendelssohn

Born February 3, 1809 in Hamburg.

Died November 4, 1847 in Leipzig.

Composed in 1826, revised 1832.

Duration: 30 minutes

Mendelssohn's spectacular apprenticeship as pianist, violinist, and composer from 1820 to 1825 (ages 11 to 16) saw the creation of at least 80 works — operas, operettas, string quartets, chamber pieces, concertos, motets, symphonies for strings — most of which were written for and performed on the Sunday concerts planned, rehearsed, and performed by young Felix at the family's elegant mansion in Berlin. By 1825, however, Mendelssohn was on the verge of emerging from his artistic youth into his creative maturity. The previous year, he had composed a Symphony in C Minor, his first to include a full wind section, that he retrospectively anointed as his "No. 1" upon its publication in 1834, thereby consigning the dozen early string symphonies to his childhood *oeuvre*. In March 1825, his father, one of Germany's leading bankers, showed him off in Paris, where Felix impressed Cherubini, Rossini, Meyerbeer, Halévy, and other luminaries of French music with his prodigious talent. When he returned home, Mendelssohn, then 16, composed the Octet for Strings, perhaps the greatest piece of music ever written by one so young. The incomparable *Midsummer Night's Dream Overture* followed the next year. Another of the creations of Mendelssohn's early maturity was the String Quintet in A Major. It was written in 1826, the year in which he enrolled at Berlin University, where his teachers included the philosopher Friedrich Hegel, an old friend of the family.

The A Major Quintet opens with a graceful violin theme, reminiscent of a minuet, that is couched in the finely crafted texture with which Mendelssohn was fond of showing off his contrapuntal skill in his early works. The transition, too, indulges in much contrapuntal dialogue before the movement arrives at its formal second theme, a staccato phrase presented by the ensemble. The development section is skillfully woven from the main theme. The recapitulation is abbreviated by the omission of the transition passage.

The *Intermezzo*, in which the violin is given an almost the *concertante* importance, is fervent in its expression. The movement's sonata form is built from two motives: a hymnal melody presented in chordal fashion immediately at the beginning, and a wide-ranging arpeggiated theme for the violin accompanied by quick, three-note pulses in the lower instruments.

The *Scherzo* displays Mendelssohn's peerless mastery of this idiom. "This movement is remarkable, almost on the order of the *Midsummer Night's Dream Scherzo*," wrote Harold Schonberg, the distinguished late critic emeritus of *The New York Times*, "and a kind of music unheard-of at the time. It buzzes along in its elfin manner, light as bees' wings, suddenly dissipating. Lovely."

The sonata-form finale, which continues the buoyant mood and figurations of the *Scherzo*, utilizes a mercurial melody announced at the outset and a *cantabile* violin strain suspended above an insistent viola background. The sparkling brilliance of the music is maintained throughout, and the quintet concludes with a breathtaking display of nimble ensemble virtuosity.

Quintet in B minor for Clarinet, Two Violins, Viola, and Cello, Op. 115

Johannes Brahms

Born May 7, 1833 in Hamburg.

Died April 3, 1897 in Vienna.

Composed in 1891.

Premiered on November 24, 1891 in Meiningen, by Richard Mühlfeld and the Joachim Quartet.

Duration: 38 minutes

Among Brahms' close friends and musical colleagues during his later years was the celebrated pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow, who played Brahms' music widely and made it a mainstay in the repertory of the superb court orchestra at Meiningen during his tenure there as music director from 1880 to 1885. Soon after arriving at Meiningen, Bülow invited Brahms to be received by the music-loving Duke Georg and his consort, Baroness von Heldburg, and Brahms was provided with a fine apartment and encouraged to visit the court whenever he wished. (The only obligation upon the comfort-loving composer was to don the much-despised full dress for dinner.) Brahms returned frequently and happily to Meiningen to hear his works played by the orchestra and to take part in chamber ensembles. At a concert in March 1891, he heard a performance of Weber's F minor Clarinet Concerto by the orchestra's principal player of that instrument, Richard Mühlfeld, and he was overwhelmed. "It is impossible to play the clarinet better than Herr Mühlfeld does here," he wrote to Clara. "He is absolutely the best I know." So strong was the impact of the experience that Brahms was shaken out of a year-long creative lethargy, and the Trio for Clarinet, Cello, and Piano (Op. 114) and the Quintet for Clarinet and Strings (Op. 115) were composed for Mühlfeld without difficulty between May and July 1891 at the Austrian resort town of Bad Ischl, near Salzburg. Three years later Brahms was inspired again to write for Mühlfeld, and he produced the two Sonatas for Clarinet and Piano (Op. 120). Both the trio and the quintet were first heard at a private recital at Meiningen on November 24, 1891 presented by Brahms (as pianist), Mühlfeld, and the members of the Joachim Quartet. The same forces gave the public premieres of both works in Berlin on December 12th.

The Clarinet Quintet's mood is expressive and autumnal, with many a hint of bittersweet nostalgia, a quality to which the darkly limpid sonority of the clarinet is perfectly suited. The opening movement follows the traditional sonata plan, with the closely woven thematic development characteristic of all Brahms' large instrumental works. The main theme, given by the violins in mellow thirds, contains the motivic seeds from which the entire movement grows. Even the swaying second theme, initiated by the clarinet, derives from this opening melody.

The *Adagio* is built in three large paragraphs. The first is based on a tender melody of touching simplicity uttered by the clarinet. The central section is an impetuous strain in sweeping figurations seemingly derived from the fiery

improvisations of an inspired Gypsy clarinetist. The *Adagio* melody returns to round out the movement. Brahms performed an interesting formal experiment in the third movement.

Beginning with a sedate *Andantino*, the music soon changes mood and meter to become an ingenious combination of scherzo and rondo that is closed by a fleeting reminiscence of the movement's first melody. The finale is a theme with five variations, the last of which recalls the opening melody of the first movement to draw together the principal thematic strands of this masterful quintet.

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