

The Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble

Tomo Keller (violin)
Harvey de Souza (violin)
Jennifer Godson (violin)
Martin Burgess (violin)

Robert Smissen (viola)
Fiona Bonds (viola)
Caroline Dale (cello)
Will Schofield (cello)

Chacony for Strings in G minor
(arr. Benjamin Britten, 1948, rev.1963)

Henry Purcell
1659-1695

String Sextet in Bb-Major, Op. 18

Johannes Brahms
1833-1897

Allegro ma non troppo
Andante ma moderato
Scherzo. Allegro molto - Trio. Animato
Rondo. Poco allegretto e grazioso

-intermission-

Octet in C, Op. 7 (1900)

George Enescu
(1881-1955)

Très modéré –
Très fougueux –
Lentement –
Moins vite, animé, mouvement de valse bien rythmée

Program credits: The Academy's work in the US is supported by Maria Cardamone and Paul Matthews together with the American Friends of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields.

The Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble appears by arrangement with David Rowe Artists,
www.davidroweartists.com

Chandos, Philips, Hyperion recordings

PROGRAM NOTES

HENRY PURCELL, arr. Benjamin Britten (1913-76)

Born in Westminster, London, England, September 10, 1659; died in Westminster, London, November 21, 1695
Chacony in G minor, Z. 730 (c1680 / 1948)

Henry Purcell was all but born to be an English Court musician. Both his father and uncle were members of the Chapel Royal. He was trained as a chorister there and by the time he was 20, Purcell was organist of Westminster Abbey, adding the Chapel Royal three years later. He also continued to sing, as both countertenor and bass. Thereafter, he produced the main part of his catalog to order: anthems, birthday odes, welcome songs and coronation music for the four monarchs he served. Music for the Restoration theater filled the last five years of a productive life and resulted in incidental music for about 50 plays.

Benjamin Britten was particularly absorbed with the music of his great English predecessor in the 1940s, in the years surrounding the 250th anniversary of Purcell's death. In addition to *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (based on a short hornpipe from Purcell's incidental music to a singularly gruesome tragedy), he made a performing edition of Purcell's songs, edited Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas* and other works, including the *Chacony in G minor*. He also wrote a *Chacony* of his own in the last movement of his Second String Quartet. Purcell's *Chacony*, (an antique English term for the Italian *ciacona* or French *chaconne*) is believed to be an early work, from around 1680, and is among the finest and the most frequently played of his instrumental music. Purcell wrote many chaconnes, traditionally triple-beat dance movements built over an unvarying bass pattern, with attractive variations woven above this foundation. His G minor *Chacony* could have been composed either as incidental or consort music. Its four instrumental lines, including basso continuo, invite a variety of interpretations, sometimes grave and stately, other times sprightly and dance-like. For his realization of Purcell's score, Benjamin Britten saw it as incidental music "most likely for a tragedy, judging by the serious and severe nature of the music." Either way, the eight-bar ground bass is full of interest and surprising turns throughout its sequence of 18 continuous variations, demonstrating, as Britten put it, "that mixture of clarity, brilliance, tenderness and strangeness which shines out in all Purcell's music."

— Program notes © 2022 Keith Horner. Comments welcomed: khnotes@sympatico.ca

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born in Hamburg, Germany, May 7, 1833; died in Vienna, Austria, April 3, 1897
String Sextet No. 1, in B-flat, Op. 18 (1859-60)

This is the first of Brahms's chamber works without piano and his first published work for strings. Although he was just 27 when he completed it in 1860, the polished, carefully crafted structure reflects the thorough grounding Brahms had given himself. Arriving there wasn't easy. The hyper-critical composer wrote (and destroyed) a reputed 20 string quartets before arriving at the one we now know as his first. This B-flat Sextet for two violins, two violas and two cellos was another carefully calculated step on the journey towards a successful string quartet. With few, if any, precedents and therefore free from what he referred to as 'the tramp of giants' (notably Beethoven), the ever-cautious Brahms wrote the Sextet after his two Serenades of the late 1850s. These pieces all share an optimism of outlook, an expansiveness of scale and a generally joyful spirit.

The first movement opens with a glorious melody from the first cello, producing an effect not unlike the glow of a warm bath in the dead of winter. But, like many seemingly spontaneous gestures throughout the work, this striking opening was the result of careful thought – the entire passage of ten measures was added *after* the première of the work. Throughout the sextet, the first cello frequently takes the lead while the second cello provides a bass line, emphasizing

the mellow, tenor register of the ensemble. This is just one of the similarities with the great C-major String Quintet of Schubert, to which work the B-flat Sextet is, in many ways, a successor.

The slow movement is a sequence of variations on a favorite theme from the Baroque known as *La folia*. Its three minor-key variations, two in the major and an extended coda, reflect Brahms's lifelong study of counterpoint and Baroque techniques. They also suggest that Bach's Chaconne was never very far from Brahms's mind. The Scherzo, with its exuberant trio, has the character of a rustic dance. It contrasts with an easy-going, expansive finale, which again opens with a resonant cello melody.

The première of the B-flat Sextet was given in Hanover by the augmented Joachim Quartet, with the composer present. Within the next few decades, new sextets were to come from the pens of Dvořák, Rimsky-Korsakov, Raff, Gade, Schoenberg and Tchaikovsky, building on the tradition initiated by Brahms's carefully planned, splendidly sonorous B-flat Sextet.

— Program notes © 2022 Keith Horner. Comments welcomed: khnotes@sympatico.ca

GEORGE ENESCU

Born in Liveni Vîrnav [now George Enescu], nr Dorohoi, Romania, August 19, 1881; died in Paris, May 3/4, 1955
Octet in C, Op. 7 (1900)

Composer, conductor, skilled pianist, brilliant violinist and teacher, George Enescu traveled the world as a celebrated musician. Casals, his musical partner, called him 'the greatest musical phenomenon since Mozart.' Menuhin, his student, referred to him as 'the greatest musician I have ever known.' His ubiquitous *Romanian Rhapsodies*, written when he was just 20, dogged his international career. Enescu, a highly cultured man who could fluently speak five languages, soon declared himself 'fed up' with them. They contributed to him being pigeon-holed as (in the words of his English biographer Noel Malcolm) "a sort of Balkan country bumpkin among composers, a provincial fellow with a small but charming talent for doing cimbalom imitations." Dismissed as a folklorist composer by some, Enescu confused others unable to comprehend his cultural and aesthetic mix of East and West, romanticism, impressionism, and modernism – characteristics that, these days, would be viewed as an asset to a composer. To add to the confusion, Enescu divided his time between his adopted city of Paris (where he also adapted the spelling of his name to Georges Enesco) and his native Romania (Bessarabia), where he founded many important institutions and enjoyed royal patronage. Today, approaching 75 years after his death, Enescu is beginning to emerge as a less shadowy figure, thanks to a few key performers and greater availability of his music.

"Polyphony," – many layers in music as opposed to just one – Enescu declared late in life, "is the essential principle of my musical language. I'm not a person for pretty successions of chords . . . A piece deserves to be called a musical *composition* only if it has a line, a melody, or, even better, several melodies superimposed on top of one another." Nowhere is this truer than in the Octet that Enescu wrote in 1900, at the age of 19. Rich in sonorous chords, multi-layered textures and sufficient transparency to give it momentum, the work declares a grand scale from the outset. (It lasts just under 40 minutes). The opening themes are dark and brooding. They have a Brahms-like feeling. "My early works were written in an almost slavish imitation of the immortal Johannes," Enescu admitted. The themes are also closely related: the tenderly melancholy second theme, first heard on viola, grows out of the opening melody. This carefully crafted opening movement dissolves into peace and tranquility in its closing pages.

The resonant, impassioned second movement (*Très fougueux – very fiery and ardent*) further develops the chromatic first theme of the previous movement. In fact, Enescu's plan for the overall structure of his youthful Octet is

extraordinarily ambitious. He designs all four movements as a single sonata form structure, with the second movement functioning as both the development of the opening movement and as an independent scherzo. Similarly, the third movement, a poetic nocturne, provides further development of the opening movement's melancholy second (viola) theme. It evolves, without break, into the finale. This is a free revisiting of the various inter-related themes we have heard before, all fused into a kind of exuberant and purposeful waltz, massively sonorous at its conclusion. "No engineer putting his first suspension bridge across a river can have agonized more than I did, as I gradually filled my manuscript paper with notes," Enescu reflected.

— *Program notes* © 2022 Keith Horner. *Comments welcome: khnotes@sympatico.ca*