

Nevada Chamber Music Festival 2024

"String In the New Year"

Tuesday, December 31, 2024, 2:00 p.m.

Program notes by Chris Morrison

Giacomo Puccini: *Crisantemi*

(1890, 6 minutes)

Along with having composed some of the most popular and revolutionary operas of his time, it is less known that Giacomo Puccini also wrote a number of instrumental compositions, including several short pieces for string quartet. Perhaps the most performed of these is *Crisantemi*, or *Chrysanthemums*, which Puccini apparently composed in a single evening in response to the death a couple of weeks previously of his friend Prince Amadeo di Savoia, the Duke of Aosta (and one-time King of Spain). Chrysanthemums, a flower long associated with funerals in Italy, are said to represent heroism and loyalty in addition to mourning.

Puccini's elegy is based on two main melodies. The first is slow, expressive, and harmonically restless. Its arching phrases build over time, leading to a new, equally heartfelt aria played by the violin over a lilting accompaniment and underpinning from the cello. The opening idea recurs one final time before the elegy's end. Puccini reused both of the main themes three years later in Acts III and IV of his opera *Manon Lescaut*.

Carl Maria von Weber: Clarinet Quintet in B-flat major, Op. 34

(1811-15, 28 minutes)

Carl Maria von Weber was one of the most important composers of the early Romantic era. He was also one of the finest pianists of his day. His unusually large hands allowed him to emphasize virtuosity in his piano compositions, which influenced many later composers like Franz Liszt. Wind players are also grateful to Weber for his many compositions featuring the clarinet, French horn, and bassoon, many of which resulted from his auspicious visit to Munich in 1811, the first stop of a European concert tour. In Munich, Weber wrote a Concertino for Heinrich Bärmann, a clarinetist in the Munich court orchestra who was also a touring musician and one of the best-known clarinetists of his time. That Concertino proved so popular that Maximilian I, King of Bavaria, commissioned Weber to compose more works for Bärmann, including two full-length concertos. After the concertos, Weber also wrote the present Clarinet Quintet for Bärmann, who became a lifelong friend.

It is possible that Weber was aware of the Clarinet Quintet that Mozart had composed some twenty years earlier for his clarinetist friend Anton Stadler. But whereas in Mozart's work the clarinet and the four strings exist on more-or-less equal footing as a true chamber ensemble, in Weber's work the clarinet is very much at the forefront, in a sort of mini-concerto filled with virtuosity. In sonata-allegro form, the first movement starts quietly and gracefully, but soon

moves to more active music, alternating between playful and dramatic, in which the clarinet is allowed to shine. The following Fantasia is essentially a mellifluous, somewhat mournful aria for the clarinet in the minor. Then comes a Menuetto which in its energy actually comes closer to the Scherzo that was in those years gradually replacing the minuet in symphonies and chamber works. The work concludes with a brilliant Rondo, marked "giocoso" (playful), with a galloping rhythm and sparkling passages for the clarinetist.

Rebecca Clarke: *Morpheus*  
(1917, 7 minutes)

Composer and violist Rebecca Clarke was the first female member of the Queen's Hall Orchestra, and one of Britain's first female professional orchestral players. Subsequently she performed as a solo violist and in chamber ensembles. Her compositions, most centered on the viola, varied in volume, centering on the years before and after 1920, and the period 1939-42. In later times Clarke and her music were completely forgotten, at least until a 1976 radio broadcast on the occasion of her ninetieth birthday sparked a renewal of interest. Clarke herself gave the premiere of *Morpheus* in New York City in early 1918, as she was trying to establish herself in the United States. Self-conscious about the sexism with which her career had been met, she initially identified the composer of *Morpheus* as Anthony Trent. Clarke's piece is ethereal, gentle in tone, and makes use of whole-tone scales and harmonics, creating an atmosphere appropriate to Morpheus, a Greek god associated with sleep and dreams.

Antonín Dvořák: String Quintet in E-flat major, Op. 97  
(1893, 32 minutes)

In 1892, at the height of his popularity in Europe, Dvořák accepted the invitation of the philanthropist Jeanette Thurber to become director of the National Conservatory of Music of America in New York. Quickly finding himself overwhelmed by New York and homesick for his native Bohemia, Dvořák spent much of the following year's summer vacation with fellow Czech settlers in the small settlement of Spillville, Iowa. While he found the Iowa landscape a little strange – "Few people and a great deal of empty space," as he put it – Dvořák found great pleasure in his nearly daily contact with the Kickapoo Native American community there. In his first month in Spillville he composed the well-known String Quartet in F major, Op. 96, the "American," and within days had started work on the E-flat major Quintet – also sometimes called "American," and likewise completed in a matter of weeks. Both the Quartet and Quintet were premiered in Boston on New Year's Day, 1894 by the Kneisel Quartet, probably the best-known American string quartet of the day.

Like the "American" Quartet, the E-flat major String Quintet features transformations of Native American melodies along with more recognizably Czech elements – including much material based on the pentatonic scale, the five-note scale common to much of the world's folk music, including the songs of Dvořák's native Bohemia and the African-American songs he had

encountered in New York. It is said that the second theme of the Quintet's first movement is derived directly from one of the Native American melodies Dvořák heard in Spillville, and much of the melodic material of this movement relates to the pentatonic scale. The ostinato repeating figures of the second movement, while evocative of Bohemian folk music, may well also be related to Native American drumming. This spirited music is contrasted with a more mournful central section. The Larghetto third movement is a set of five variations on a wistful double theme, half in the major and half in the minor – interestingly enough, part of this melody was originally conceived as a setting of the familiar words "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" by S.F. Smith, which Dvořák had thought might become a new American National Anthem! After this relatively restrained music, the jaunty Finale, even with its lyrical interludes in the minor, brings the Quintet to an enthusiastic close.