

Nevada Chamber Music Festival 2024

"Brahms & Beyond"

Monday, December 30, 2024, 7:30 p.m.

Program notes by Chris Morrison

Johannes Brahms: Clarinet Sonata in E-flat major, Op. 120 No. 2
(1894, 22 minutes)

It is a fascinating coincidence that both Mozart and Brahms, late in their lives, encountered great clarinetists that inspired them to create some of their most beautiful music. In the case of Brahms, it was Richard Mühlfeld (1856-1907), principal clarinetist in the Meiningen Court Orchestra that had premiered several of Brahms's works, including the Symphony No. 4 in 1885. Brahms developed great affection for Mühlfeld, sometimes referring to him as "Fräulein Klarinette" or "Fräulein Nachtigall" (Nightingale) because of the delicate quality of his sound. By late 1890, after the completion of his String Quintet No. 2, Brahms felt that he had retired from composing. But in March 1891, he spent a week at the Meiningen court attending an arts and music festival at which Mühlfeld performed, and he was struck once again by the beauty of his playing. Inspired, by November, Brahms had completed the Clarinet Trio, Op. 114 and the Clarinet Quintet, Op. 115, and three years later came the two Op. 120 Clarinet Sonatas, both written in July of 1894. Mühlfeld and Brahms presented the first performance of the Sonatas on January 11, 1895 in Vienna. Brahms also arranged the Sonatas for viola or violin, and both of those arrangements are heard now and then.

The Sonata in E-flat major begins with a movement marked *Allegro amabile*, and the music certainly fits the *amabile* adjective – amiable, pleasant, sweet. Brahms directs the performers to play "in a charming, gracious" manner. There are some more powerful outbursts, but for the most part the music is glowing and songlike. In theory, the movement is in sonata-allegro form, but Brahms seems not to worry much about such formal aspects in this music, where the development of the main ideas takes on the form of a conversation between the two instruments. The middle movement is a gently swaying Scherzo, with its own fiery moments, including some virtuoso writing for the piano. Its central section is hymn-like and elegiac. For the final movement, Brahms creates a theme and variations based on a gracious and restrained main theme. The five variations that follow range from elegant (the first) to decorative (the second and third) to peaceful (the fourth). For the final variation, the music turns stormy, moving from *Andante* to *Allegro* and from the major to the minor for the work's exciting final moments.

Franz Josef Haydn: String Quartet in D minor, Op. 76, No. 2 "Quinten"
(1797, 20 minutes)

Franz Josef Haydn is often referred to as the father of the string quartet. In the 1760s he was among the first to compose such works, and the nearly 70 quartets he ultimately produced

became models for subsequent composers. By the late 1790s Haydn had practically abandoned chamber music to concentrate on symphonies and oratorios. The string quartet, however, was an exception, and in 1797 he produced the six Op. 76 quartets on a commission from Count Joseph Erdödy, whose name is often attached to the collection. On receiving a copy of the Op. 76 scores, in 1797 the great music historian Charles Burney sent Haydn a letter saying that he had "never received more pleasure from instrumental music: they are full of invention, fire, good taste, and new effects."

The Quartet in D minor, Op. 76 No. 2 has taken on the nickname "Quinten," or sometimes "The Fifths," due to the frequent appearances of the interval of the fifth. This is especially true of the first movement, where falling fifths dramatically begin the work, and both rising and falling fifths mark much of this powerful music. The slow movement is a calm serenade, highlighting the first violin, which elaborates on the opening, gently rocking melody. The Minuet features imitative exchanges between the upper and lower strings; its vaguely disturbing aura has given this movement the nickname "Witches' Minuet." By contrast, the final movement is energetic and abrupt.

Claude Debussy: *Première rhapsodie*
(1909-10, 8 minutes)

In 1909, Gabriel Fauré, then serving as the director of the Paris Conservatoire, named Debussy, who had studied at the Conservatoire, to its board of directors. One of Debussy's first duties was to compose two works for the following year's clarinet examinations, as test pieces for the Conservatoire's clarinet students. Initially composed for clarinet and piano and later orchestrated, the *Première rhapsodie* (First Rhapsody) was dedicated to the Conservatoire's clarinet professor Prosper Mimart, and given its first performances as part of the examinations on July 14, 1910. Mimart then performed the piece himself on January 16, 1911.

As the title implies, the *Première rhapsodie* is free in form, with a peaceful, flowing opening section and subsequent alternating of slow and fast music. It's also, not surprisingly for a examination piece, challenging for a clarinetist with its variety of technical difficulties, tests of breath control and endurance, and fast, subtle tonal shifts.

Johannes Brahms: Piano Trio in B major, Op. 8
(1854 rev. 1889, 38 minutes)

The initial version of the B major Trio dates from Brahms's twenty-first year, and was his first published chamber work. This was the very time in which he had met and become close friends of Robert and Clara Schumann. Mere weeks after the conclusion of the Trio, Robert Schumann tried to drown himself in the Rhine, leading to his being institutionalized for the remainder of his life. Some 35 years later, near the end of his composing career, Brahms revisited the Trio, shortening it fairly substantially and revising three of its movements. He wrote humorously, "I

didn't provide it with a new wig, just combed and arranged its hair a little," This Trio is thus the only work of the composer to exist in two published versions, although it is the later one that is much more often performed nowadays.

Unusually, the Trio starts in a major key and ends in the minor. The first movement opens with a lovely, expansive theme in the cello that gradually builds in intensity. The second theme, lyrical and tender, is presented by the strings in unison. A short motive that serves as a transition between the two melodies actually becomes the basis for much of the subsequent development section. The second movement, by turns dramatic and mysterious, alternates powerful rhythms and more delicate passages. Opening with a chord-based theme in the piano, joined by delicate accompaniment from the strings, the introspective slow movement also features a central section dominated by a poignant melody introduced in the cello. The agitated first theme of the final movement, with its dotted rhythm, is chromatic and has some tonal ambiguity. The following theme in the piano seems, to some, to allude to "The Star-Spangled Banner," of all things. After a short recollection of the first movement, the work comes to a fiery conclusion.