

## PROGRAM NOTES

VPR Broadcast Tuesday, August 25, 2020, 6:00 PM Eastern

### **GABRIELLA SMITH (b. 1991)**

#### *Brandenburg Interstices* (2012)

In *Brandenburg Interstices*, which pays homage to Bach's 5th Brandenburg Concerto, I tried to incorporate Bach as naturally as possible into my wide range of other musical influences (from minimalism to blues, American folk music, Ligeti, and Xenakis, among others). I envisioned a piece that would celebrate the way in which Bach has inspired me as well as demonstrate the connections I see between Bach and my other influences – by creating a music that morphs fluidly through the centuries and genres, suddenly emerging into spaces of Bach in the form of Bach-inspired textures and passages as well as direct quotes before again submerging back into the patchwork. The form mirrors Bach's three-movement fast-slow-very fast structure, however I combined this three-part structure into a single movement. I organized each of my three parts around one quote from each of Bach's movements.

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### **WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)**

#### Flute Quartet in G, K. 285 (1777)

It is ironic how a piece of music that was written mainly for economic reasons to be played by a musician the composer supposedly disliked (and for an instrument he didn't sympathize with) is now a staple of the chamber music repertoire. Such is the case of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Flute Quartet in D Major K.285*, written in Mannheim, Germany in 1777. This quartet, the first of four pieces written for flute and string trio, was written for Ferdinand DeJean, an amateur flautist who was a student of Mozart's friend and court flautist Johann Baptist Wendling. The commission came after Mozart was unable to secure a position in the Mannheim court and needed money to get through the winter. It is known to have included several flute quartets and concertos, though it was never completed and the composer was paid only half the fee.

Mozart's dislike for the flute has been attributed by scholars to the fact that its popularity among amateur musicians in Mozart's time produced an enormous number of bad players. Contrary to what one might expect then, the *Flute Quartet in D* not just proves but showcases the beauty and virtuosity of the flute and the value of writing for the instrument. This three-movement masterpiece begins with an Allegro section in which there is a purposefully restrained blending of voices between the flute and the accompanying strings. Accomplished through differences in register and timbre, this effect adds brilliance to the flute line at the same time that it creates a sharp contrast to the solo string sections. In

the famous Adagio movement, the pizzicato in the strings along with the more solemn character of the flute melody—creates a complete change in atmosphere despite the flute’s unchanging timbre.

The expressiveness of this flute quartet is in no way compromised by the negative context in which it was written, a fact that demonstrates Mozart’s artistry. That the music does not seem to suggest any frustration or dislike for the instrument puts us in doubt. How could he have written such a beautiful piece with such aversion? Mozart understood the challenges that come with writing for the flute and especially for flutists of his time. Its brightness threatens to saturate the ear and its distinctive tone makes it difficult to hide—especially against strings. The composer resolves these and other issues with a masterful hand and produces one of the most beloved flute pieces in the repertoire. Mozart proves that artistry lies (at least in part) in the ability to overcome the pragmatic difficulties of music in order to access its emotive power.

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## **WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)**

### **Clarinet Quintet in A, K. 581 (1789)**

A virtuoso performer steps boldly forward, readily identifiable, quick to astonish. But the virtuoso composer is quite a different creature. The obvious virtuosity is a breath-taking battery of percussion and a frenzy of rhythm hitting the listener over the head -- in the *Rite of Spring* or the *Symphonie fantastique*, for instance. But sometimes the virtuoso composer will choose to ensnare his listener with a handful of instruments, subtly arming the players with writing of wit and invention and disarming the listeners with melody and complex emotional appeal. Enter Mozart with the “effortless” virtuoso magic of his Clarinet Quintet.

The soft timbre and mellow expressive human quality of the clarinet sound fascinated Mozart from childhood. He pioneered its use in symphonic writing and even elevated it to opera stardom in *Clemenza di Tito*. (Check out “Parto, parto” on YouTube.) This charming quintet resulted from Mozart's friendship with one of Vienna's less charming characters, the scurrilous Anton Stadler, who caroused with Mozart, mooching both lodging and money unconscionably from the easy-going composer. On Mozart's death he owed him thousands. But the guy was a marvelous clarinetist and the friendship was -- for posterity, at least -- a fortuitous one. The geniality of their relationship surely affected the composition, but the brilliance of the quintet consists of the way Mozart weaves together his understanding of all the genres he was master of -- the string quartet, solo concerto, opera aria, the grand symphony, and even country dance music, everything blended seamlessly and given to only five instruments.

Employing the conventional structure of the Classical quintet, Mozart slyly parades his mastery -- a sonata-form opening with symphonic dignity and an abundance of themes; an operatic lyrical slow movement; a set of dances with a double trio, muscular first for strings alone, then a twirling country solo dance; finally a set of variations with concerto ambitions. At the heart of the piece, the *larghetto* unfolds as a leisurely nocturne, the warm strings sometimes just supporting the dreamy flights of the clarinet, other times drawing the clarinet into a dialogue. The whole quintet displays a rich emotional depth -- a whisper of “world enough and time” -- with all roles distributed evenly but the clarinet first among equals. The listener feels privy to a narrative of intimate confidences.

Aside from the scurrilous clarinetist who inspired all this, the work has other ironic distinctions. A Major is usually a key of heroic outgoing cheerfulness, but Mozart diabolically employs it here for quite the opposite effect -- mature inner reflection. Brahms in his 60s wrote his clarinet quintet entirely aware of its autumnal nature. Mozart unfurls a work of the same pensive stature when still a young man in his 30s, a farewell composition only because nature played a mean trick on him -- and us. He had no idea that death was around the corner. On the one hand the majestic inner security of this quintet confirms what many listeners have resorted to saying about his work: the music of Beethoven and others may strive for Heaven; the music of Mozart comes from Heaven. As Einstein observed, "his music is of such purity and beauty that one feels he merely found it -- that it has always existed as part of the inner beauty of the universe waiting to be revealed." But of course Mozart did not "merely find" this music. He crafted it with his unparalleled cleverness, beyond ordinary imagination, and you can bet he had a rollicking good time playing viola with Stadler when the quintet premiered, knowing there would be drinks afterwards, but also knowing that as a composer he was better than anybody. *Anybody*. And in this quintet he is throwing it all at you. Critics and scholars may find lots to work with here, but perhaps it is best not to wonder why this virtuoso music is so good. Just take Shaw's sound advice about listening to Mozart: "Admire. Admire. Admire."

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## **DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)**

### **Seven Romances on Poems of Alexander Blok (1967)**

Shostakovich composed the Seven Romances in the last years of his life, choosing to set poetry by the great Russian symbolist poet Alexander Blok. After decades of oppressing the country and imposing strict controls on artistic expression, Stalin was dead, and Shostakovich enjoyed relative artistic freedom after the end of that tyranny. His later years reflect a creative and professional rebirth, despite his failing health and deteriorating ability to perform publicly. The composer was exploring new techniques, including simple uses of Schoenberg's twelve tone system. Works that had been banned by the state were gradually allowed permitted into performance repertoire again. In this last decade, his music became even darker and more serious than before, at times obsessively focused on death and dying. Though the Blok cycle is commonly called "Seven Romances," Shostakovich preferred the terms "poems" or "verses" for his songs, feeling that "Romances" was too light.

The cycle was born when Mstislav Rostropovich approached the composer to write a new work for himself and his new wife, the extraordinary Russian soprano Galina Vishnevskaya. Rather than write a set of works for cello and soprano alone, Shostakovich decided to expand his musical and expressive options by adding violin and piano to the ensemble. David Oistrakh was enlisted to play, and the composer himself was to perform the piano part for the premiere -- quite a group! But Shostakovich was too ill to follow through in the performance and a fellow composer was asked to play in his place.

Though there is a wide range of emotions expressed in these songs, rarely does the music depart from the serious. Shostakovich uses the simple device of adding instruments song by song, featuring first the cello with voice for the haunting Song of Ophelia, then the piano for the brooding and dramatic Gamayun, Bird of Prophecy, then the plaintive violin for We Were Together. He then sets strings and piano in combination for the serene fourth song, The City Sleeps, and the fifth, The Tempest. The full ensemble finally meets in the beautiful last song, aptly titled Music. In this final offering, the music trails

off into a quiet sunset at the end, with slight and distant interruptions in the piano, as if to leave the listener curious as to what might come next.

Shostakovich explores many diverse compositional and performance techniques in the piece, all with striking effect. The fifth song opens with a raspy “sul ponticello,” a sonic description of a torrential nighttime storm outside. The sixth song Secret Signs, has its own kind of coded message with a chromatic instrumental melody reminiscent of a twelve-tone row. The composer experimented with some of these techniques before the reign of Stalin, and at this late juncture in his life was returning to taste a little of what had been avant-garde decades before.

One can only wonder what direction Shostakovich would have taken in his music had he the artistic freedoms afforded composers in the West from early on. Ironically, without the populist accessibility forced into his music by the Soviet state, he may not have enjoyed the popularity he does today. Regardless of his circumstances, there is no doubt that he would be ranked as one of the great masters of the twentieth century.

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## **JOHANNES BRAHMS (1883-1897)**

### **Trio for clarinet, cello and piano, op. 114 (1891)**

In 1894, Brahms had declared his work to be done. Like many people of a certain age, he began to write a will. And in this will, he announced his retirement. No more writing music. Done.

....Or not.

Two months after writing his will, Brahms had the opportunity to hear clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld perform works by Weber and Mozart (including the wonderful Mozart quintet featured in last summer’s Festival that was played so brilliantly by Ricardo Morales). Brahms was so taken by Mühlfeld’s playing that he picked up his pen and wrote a letter to Clara Schumann, exulting the sound he had heard. He also wrote four of the most fantastic chamber works ever conceived for the clarinet: the two Op. 120 Sonatas, the Op. 115 Quintet, and this Trio for clarinet, cello, and piano. In addition to these four pieces, Brahms also sent Mülfeld a set of silver teaspoons, engraved with Mülfeld’s initials. While the four works for clarinet are performed regularly today, the fate of the tea set is unclear.

Brahms first sent this manuscript of his newly-completed trio to his good friend Eusebius Mandyczewski, who responded with a letter: “The inventive conception of the themes, born of the spirit of the wind instrument and, more especially, the harmonious blending of the tones of the clarinet and the cello, are magnificent; it is as though the instruments were in love with each other.” The piece begins with a soaring line in the cello, which is then echoed by the clarinet. The piano announces the change to allegro with a rather ominous-sounding melody in triplets, and then we’re off and running into the deeply rhapsodic first movement which ends quietly in A major. The second movement begins with the clarinet in full siren song mode, which soon evolves into a duet with the cello. The third movement is a lovely diversion that neither fits the mold of a waltz or a minuet, but in triple meter, it still dances. The final movement wastes no time re-entering the intensity of the first movement, but rather than hurtling

forward to an agitated conclusion, it comes in fits and starts through its relatively brief length, ending rather abruptly in tragic A minor.

The list of pieces for the combination for clarinet, cello, and piano is actually quite large, but very few composers we would consider “major” have written works for this group of instruments. Beethoven’s Op. 11 Trio comes to mind, but beyond that, the list trails off into the deep, dark, dusty corners of the classical music repertoire. It’s worth noting, though, that a young Austrian named Alexander Zemlinsky composed a trio for these instruments immediately after Brahms completed his trio. The young man worked up the courage to send Brahms the manuscript, and Brahms passed it along to his publisher – and the piece ended up being published as Zemlinsky’s Op. 3. It’s not a well-known piece, but this early success likely propelled Zemlinsky to his eventual status as one of the foremost composers of the early 20th century. Ah, the power of the Clarinet Trio.

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