CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF FORT WORTH PRESENTS
Members of the Atrium Quartet with Jihye Chang, piano
Saturday15 March, 2025 - Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2025

Grand Trio in G Major for two violins and cello

Alexander Borodin (1833-1887)

The English music historian Gerald Abraham once wrote that no more thoroughly Russian music had ever been written than Alexander Borodin's Second Symphony. From the heroic – almost pagan – gesture that dominates the first movement to the pageantry of the finale, that symphony celebrates Russian folk music and culture. The same could be said of other Borodin pieces, particularly the *Polovtsian Dances* and the lovely String Quartet No.2. But Borodin's path to that Russian-ness came about only gradually.

Borodin was a member of the so-called "Russian Five" or "Mighty Handful." These nationalist composers sought to achieve a specifically Russian character in their music rather than emulating Western (specifically Germanic) compositional models. That stated, Borodin was quite fond of music by Beethoven, Schumann, and Mendelssohn – all Germans. In his chamber music and symphonies, he embraced Western classical form more than his colleagues.

He composed several works for string trio, but none of them is for the conventional grouping of violin, viola, and cello. Instead, he combines two violins with one cello in all of them. His earliest work for this instrumentation was based on themes from Meyerbeer's opera *Robert le diable*; it has been lost. Another piece is a single movement trio in G minor consisting of

variations on a Russian folk song. Finally, there are two trios in G major. One is a fragment believed to date from the 1850s; the other is a Grand Trio from *ca.* 1859-62, which comprises two complete movements and an unfinished third movement. We hear the two complete movements this afternoon.

Borodin's opening Allegro is an expansive movement that, if the exposition repeat is observed, takes about ten minutes in performance. The writing is extremely conservative for the mid-nineteenth century, using harmonic progressions that could plausibly have been written during the 1790s or early 1800s. He opens with a unison fanfare that soon breaks into harmony. While it technically is an introduction, the rising arpeggiated motive (known as a 'Mannheim rocket') figures prominently in the development section and the coda. The movement is in clear – if somewhat prolix – sonata form, with unusual emphasis on the cello for thematic statements.

The second movement Andante is in D major. It moves at a leisurely pace, with predominant dotted rhythms. The central "B" section introduces triplets that add a bit of agitation and some passages in B minor. The return to D major is private, quiet, and introspective, with more harmonic wanderings that have a Mendelssohnian flavor.

These two movements languished in manuscript form until 1949, when the Soviet State Music Publishers issued it. Borodin's *Grand Trio* is a curiosity, important not only for our broader understanding of his early evolution as a composer but also as a representative of a somewhat unusual chamber ensemble.

Piano Quartet No.1 in C minor, Op.15

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Gabriel Fauré was both the embodiment of French romanticism and, paradoxically, a contributor to the breakdown of traditional tonality. In a career that spanned more than half a century, he wrote music that embraced nineteenth-century passion and lyricism, while adopting an expanded musical vocabulary that drew on whole tone harmonies and unusual modulations.

Fauré's highly personal, instantly identifiable language is remarkable in light of the Wagnerian influence that dominated French music in the late nineteenth century. Even though he was well acquainted with Wagner's operas, Fauré was preoccupied with creating something new. He studied the music of the past and present with the express purpose of avoiding imitation. That stated, if one seeks a model for the C minor Piano Quartet, one finds it not in Wagner but rather in Schumann.

Fauré spent seven years under the tutelage of Louis Niedermeyer at the Ecole Niedermeyer in Paris, pursuing a curriculum dominated by church music. Upon Niedermeyer's death in 1861, sixteen-year-old Fauré continued piano study with Camille Saint-Saëns, who was by then among the most famous musicians in France. Soon the lessons expanded to include composition as well as piano.

He began his professional career as a church organist in Rennes and retained a reputation as a fine keyboard player for the duration of his life. His music has become popular with the general public in large part through his chamber music with piano.

For three months in 1877, Fauré was engaged to Marianne Viardot, daughter of the celebrated mezzo-soprano Pauline Garcia Viardot. When Marianne severed the liaison in October 1877, the composer was heartbroken. His lifelong friends, Camille and Marie Clerc, helped him to regain emotional stability. During this turbulent time he produced his first two masterpieces, the Violin Sonata in A, Op. 13 and the Piano Quartet, Op. 15. In a touching letter written in 1919, Marie Clerc reminded him that the quartet's opening idea had occurred to him at her home, "on the little balcony at Ste.-Adresse." He worked on the piece from summer 1876 through 1879.

At this point he lacked self-confidence, one reason that these earlier works gestated for so long. Four years after completing the quartet's first version, he discarded the finale, composing an entirely new one, thereby forcing a delay in publication until 1884. Inasmuch as he destroyed his original finale, we do not have the luxury of comparing his first inspiration to his more mature labors.

The opening Allegro molto moderato is bold, masculine, and forceful. A unison string theme supported by offbeat piano chords sets the tone for the movement and, indeed, for much of the quartet. Fauré recognized that the strings had a superior singing quality for his rich themes. Only rarely does he give the melody to the piano. Instead, he uses the keyboard to spin a web of textures from arpeggios, chords, and running scales, often in counterpoint to the strings. Fauré's structure is a clear sonata form, with contrasting first and second themes. Viola introduces the

latter, followed in imitative succession by the other strings. Delicious, unexpected modulations provide transition between theme groups and propel much of Fauré's development section. The syncopated chords of the first measures return at the end in a *pianissimo* coda.

The scherzo is noteworthy for its barely contained energy and schizophrenic switches between 6/8 and 2/4 meter as the wild dance runs its course. Its central trio section surprises with a shimmering chorale for muted strings.

Rhythmic drive characterizes Fauré's music, even in his slow movements. Once he establishes a pattern, its reiteration provides continuity and momentum for the music. Violin, viola and cello assume more independent roles in the Adagio, now emphasizing the dark hues of C minor. Fauré's gift for rhythm permeates the piano figuration, which is as integral and essential to the texture as it was in the first movement. Here again, he favored the lush, sustained sound of strings for his themes.

Ironically, Fauré's finale has been criticized as the weakest movement in the quartet. Most musicians disagree, savoring its release from the heavy, quasi-Wagnerian feel of the first movement. Here, by contrast, Fauré's finale seems to embrace a Gallic sense of occasion, with more delicate and subtle interplay among the four musicians. Individual solos are fleeting rather than ponderous or declamatory. Textures are akin to crystallized water particles: etched, weightless, and sparkling.

Piano arpeggios and sweeping upward melodic ideas provide the finale with its surging energy. Fauré closes his quartet with a strong and masculine coda. It caps an exciting and dramatic quartet that remains Fauré's most frequently performed chamber composition.

Piano Quartet in G minor, Op.25, "Alla Zingarese" (1861)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

In the late 1850s, Brahms was still based in his native Hamburg for most of the year, where one of his principal duties was conducting a women's chorus. Though only in his twenties, Brahms's ambition was to be selected as the next conductor of the Hamburg Philharmonic. Yet the lure of Vienna, Europe's musical capital, was becoming stronger to him. One Bertha Porubszky, a Viennese woman who visited Hamburg periodically and sang in Brahms's chorus, spoke glowingly of her native city and encouraged Brahms to visit. So did his friend Luise Dustmann-Meyer, an opera singer who worked in both Vienna and Hamburg.

When his colleague Julius Stockhausen was awarded the Hamburg conductor's baton in spring 1862, Brahms began to take concrete steps to change his venue, making plans for an exploratory visit to Vienna. One of his first calls once there was to Julius Epstein, a prominent pianist who taught at the Vienna Conservatory. Epstein was well acquainted with Brahms's music, and went to some effort to arrange performances of the talented young German's new compositions.

The three works Brahms selected to launch his Viennese career were the formidable Handel Variations (Op. 24) and two new Piano Quartets in G minor (Op. 25) and A major (Op.26). Brahms played piano for all performances. His music and his pianism were both well received. In turn, he was enchanted by the beautiful Austrian capital and the warmth of the Viennese people. His three-week visit to Vienna extended to a full season; eventually he would make Vienna his permanent home.

Following very closely on the heels of the B-major Trio, Op. 8 (1853-4) and the first String Sextet, Op. 18 (1858-60), the Op. 25 Quartet is comparably rich in its thematic material. Yet it already shows more discipline in its development of motivic ideas and has a singularity of purpose that points convincingly toward the magnificent F minor Piano Quintet, Op. 34 (1861-64). Like the Quintet, the G minor quartet opens quietly with a dark unison theme for piano; it also shares with the Quintet a more animated response that figures prominently in the development. Quite ingeniously, Brahms uses the Quartet's sixteenth-note figure to accompany his lyrical second theme as well as the main theme.

The first movement breaks with formal tradition in several ways. Its exposition is sunlit by an unexpected modulation to D, the dominant major, rather than the more conventional relative major of B-flat. Brahms dispenses with the repeat of the exposition, moving directly to a dramatic and dense development. Neither is there any formal recapitulation. His texture is almost uniformly thick in this movement, keeping all four players very busy.

Clara Schumann is reputed to have suggested to Brahms that he alter the title of the quartet's scherzo to *Intermezzo*. She advised him well for this mysterious, oblique movement.

Muted strings at the opening emphasize tonal ambiguity. A key signature of three flats implies either C minor or E-flat major, but Brahms takes a long while to resolve his tonal center, and when he does, he surprises us. Repeated eighth-note triplets pulse restlessly beneath the unstable harmonies, which eventually settle in C major before proceeding to the Trio section, marked *animato*. Here at last Brahms gives us music more scherzo-like in spirit but reinforcing the chromatic volatility of the Intermezzo. Like high clouds in a strong wind, harmonies break up and form new alliances in a pattern of constant change and reinvention. After the repeat of the Intermezzo, the coda is a rainbow in C major.

The opening pages of the slow movement, *Andante con moto,* are the closest Brahms came to sounding like Mendelssohn. Equilibrium of phrase lengths and the smoothness of the string trio are nicely balanced by the graceful writing for the piano. A march-like middle section, defying its meter of 3/4, provides contrast. But it is all preparatory for the dramatic finale.

One of the most famous movements in the chamber music repertoire, the so-called "Gypsy Rondo" has precedent in Haydn's G major Piano Trio (Hob. XV:25) and Brahms's own Variations on a Hungarian Song (Op. 21b) for piano, composed in 1861, approximately the same time as the quartet. Brahms had toured extensively with the Hungarian violinist Eduard Remenyi in 1853, developing a keen interest in the popular music played by Gypsy fiddlers. The Quartet's *Rondo alla zingarese* is some of the fruit of that interest, which reached its zenith in the Hungarian Dances of 1872. Brilliant and spirited, the Rondo's three-bar phrases give it precipitate momentum. We always feel that we are on the verge of losing our balance! A tribute to Brahms's instinctive understanding of Gypsy spirit is his success in making this movement lively and

positive in its message, despite the minor mode. A piano cadenza toward the end is a clear emulation of the *cimbalom*, the hammer dulcimer popular in Gypsy orchestras. Increasing in suspense as it gathers momentum, this is one of the most exciting conclusions that Brahms ever wrote.