“Solo Chamber Music” - CMSFW Ensemble with Gary Levinson and Friends
Saturday 12 April, 2025 - Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2025

Piano Trio, Op. 150
Amy Marcy Cheney Beach [Mrs. H.H.A. Beach] (1867-1944)

Female composers are certainly a part of the contemporary music equation, but at the turn of the twentieth century, Amy Beach was one of a kind. Like Felix Mendelssohn’s older sister Fanny Hensel, Amy Beach was a multi-talented prodigy in a world that channeled her, after her marriage, into a career out of the public limelight. Unlike Hensel, Beach lived to a ripe old age and was able to achieve several landmarks for women in music.

Shortly after making her début as a piano soloist with the Boston Symphony in 1885, Amy Cheney married Dr. Henry Harris Aubrey Beach, a prominent Boston physician. She was 18; he was 43. Although Dr. Beach preferred that his young wife curtail her public performance career, he encouraged her to pursue composition – publishing her works under the name Mrs. H.H.A. Beach. She was the first woman to have original compositions performed by such prestigious organizations as the Boston Handel and Haydn Society, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and the Symphony Society of New York.

When her husband died in 1911, Mrs. Beach went to Europe for a couple of years and established an impressive reputation there. By the time of her death, she was the undisputed dean of American female composers and one of the best known living composers, period. Until 1937, she continued to perform regularly with singers and instrumentalists. After that, as her health declined, she appeared less in public.

The Trio was her last major work to be published prior to her death in December 1944. She composed it in June 1938, during a stay at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. The premiere took place at a private performance in New York City's MacDowell Club on 15 January, 1939; Beach was joined by violinist Eugenie Limberg and cellist Phyllis Kraeuter, two of her friends and regular chamber collaborators. The first public performance followed in March 1940 at the Brooklyn Neighborhood Club with violinist Carl Tollefson and cellist Willem Durieux. During the war years, Beach's Trio was performed regularly on the east coast.

Contemporary critics observed, correctly, that Beach ignored the trends that contemporary music had taken. She remained a dedicated romantic, with both feet firmly planted in tonality. All three movements of her Trio are in ternary [A-B-A] form. Swirling piano figuration above a pedal point provide textural background for the strings' soaring theme in the opening Allegro. The central section, marked *tranquillo*, allots a flamboyantly romantic theme to piano first. The strings often respond in octave unison with occasional brief moments of imitation. Beach's fluid modulations through multiple key centers are reminiscent of Fauré.

Her *Lento espressivo* focuses again on octave unisons in the two strings, continuing the mood of the first movement's *tranquillo* section. In lieu of a scherzo, she inserts a contrasting Presto segment, which returns briefly at the end as a coda. Beach's dance-like finale would have made Dvořák smile. It has the flavor and resolute determination of American folk song. The slower central section is tender and relaxed with more independence in the string lines. A

maestoso passage heralds the decisive coda, recalling earlier themes to bring the Trio to a close in brilliant A major.

Duo for Violin & Cello, Op. 7 (1914)

Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967)

Along with his close friend Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály laid the foundations of both modern Hungarian music and the science of ethnomusicology. As important for his contributions in education and folk music research as he was for his compositions, Kodály was a versatile talent who played all four instruments of the piano quartet as a child -- in addition to singing and composing. By the time he was a teenager, his original works were already being performed at school.

Kodály wrote a PhD thesis on Hungarian folksong in 1906 about the same time he started to work with Bartók; the two men became lifelong close friends. The following year, he won a music scholarship that took him to Berlin and Paris. There he met Debussy, an event that had also had a lifelong impact on his music. Despite these decisive and influential contemporaries who helped form his style, Kodály's was an original voice from the very beginning. His biographer László Eösze has written:

> In his use of harmony, though in many respects following the French impressionists, Kodály differs from them in that it is always his soaring melodic invention that is the decisive factor. Indeed, in the final analysis, it will be found that his harmony is always subordinate to, and determined by, the melody.

Kodály's distinctive melodies, strongly indebted to the folk music of Hungary, draw on

pentatonic, overtone, whole tone, and modal scales. Melody is integral to the dramatic *Duo*, Op. 7, which was composed during the early years of the First World War. Most of Kodály's chamber music dates from the period 1905-1920, long before *Psalmus Hungaricus* (1923) or *Háry János* (1926) catapulted him to international recognition. While these are youthful works, they are by no means immature, and the best of them are those for strings, such as his two string quartets (Opp. 2 and 10) and this *Duo*. Kodály was developing a personal instrumental style, drawing on his own extensive experience as a chamber player of the entire string family.

He achieves variety in the *Duo* through tonal and timbral contrast of the two instruments, despite occasional similarity of their material. Sometimes they blend in harmony; other times, they interact in dialogue. There are imitative sections, unison passages, places where one instrument serves as pedal point to the other, and solos for each player.

Not at all an incidental work, the *Duo* runs more than twenty minutes in performance. Each of the movements is full length and fully developed. The first is in sonata form; the second, more like a *sonata quasi una fantasia* with a highly contrapuntal theme that is almost a double fugue. The third movement opens with a slow introduction that echoes a theme from the middle movement; it is followed by a *Presto* and a coda that develops out of that more animated music in an exciting *stretto* close. Eösze writes of the *Duo*:

> Throughout the major part of the work *rubato* instrumental folk themes are predominant, though in the *Presto* of the final movement a children's song is introduced, with its driving *ostinato* and rigidly disciplined rhythm.

Kodály was the first modern composer to treat violin and cello as equal partners in an

unaccompanied chamber work, celebrating their difference in range rather than apologizing for it or neutralizing it. So great was the success of this composition that many other composers have followed suit, greatly enriching the chamber duo repertoire.

Piano Quintet in E major, Op. 15

Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957)

Remember those swashbuckling and romantic Errol Flynn movies from the 1930s and 1940s — *The Sea Hawk, The Adventures of Robin Hood, Captain Blood, Anthony Adverse,* and *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*? A substantial part of their aura was the sweeping, lush scores of Erich Wolfgang Korngold, one of the greatest film composers in Hollywood history.

Korngold was a child composition prodigy. As an adolescent, he produced scores that elicited praise from Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler. He published a piano trio at age 12; by the time he was 16, both Artur Nikisch and Felix Weingartner had conducted his music in Vienna.

His meteoric career expanded to cinema in 1929 when he began working with the Austrian director Max Reinhardt. Inevitably, involvement in the film industry took him across the Atlantic to Hollywood. Because of the rise of Nazism, Korngold eventually settled permanently in Southern California, changing his citizenship in 1943.

The Piano Quintet dates from 1921 when Korngold was in his early twenties. He was the

pianist at its premiere in February 1923 in the north German city of Hamburg. Publication followed in 1924. Despite his youth, Korngold was already at the height of his powers. The quintet followed his opera *Die tote Stadt* [The Dead City], widely regarded as his masterpiece. After concurrent premieres in Hamburg and Cologne, *Die tote Stadt* enjoyed further productions – with its youthful composer on the podium – in the musical centers of Dresden, Frankfurt, *and* Vienna. Clearly energized by the opera's success, Korngold embarked on a pair of chamber music projects, producing in rapid succession his first string quartet and the piano quintet.

By any measure, the quintet is a major work: three substantial movements taking more than half an hour in performance. Technically the first movement is in sonata-allegro form, but this music is more about tonal color rather than structure. Korngold's harmonic vocabulary is tonal, but he migrates fearlessly through multiple key centers, often within a single measure. Listeners familiar with Richard Strauss's chamber music will recognize certain characteristics: dense textures, big gestures, and soloistic writing for all five players. Another contemporary who clearly influenced Korngold is Gustav Mahler; like his older mentor, Korngold provides detailed performance instructions in virtually every measure of the work. He also shifts meter regularly yet somehow maintains a forward flow.

The slow movement is a set of nine variations on themes from Korngold's 1920 song cycle *Lieder des Abschieds,* Op. 14. The cycle is associated with Korngold's romance with the actress and singer Luise [Luzi] von Sonnenthal, whom he would marry in 1924. He primarily uses the melody from the third song, "Mond so gehst du wieder auf" [Moon, thus you rise once more]. The writing is extraordinarily dense, with expansive chords in the piano in most of the

variations; however, those chords do not obscure the melody. Korngold's writing is extravagant, incorporating harp-like *glissandi* for all five players and flageolet harmonics in the strings to isolate specific overtones. He introduces daring dissonance in some of the variations, but we never lose our tonal moorings. Similarly, he employs frequent metric changes, but they do not disrupt the sense of flow from one variation to the next. The coda – heavily chromatic – foreshadows the music of Olivier Messiaen.

Dramatic unison strings open the finale, answered by punctuated piano chords. A short cadenza for first violin provides the bridge to an Allegro giocoso. Living up to that Italian tempo marking, it overflows with ebullient high spirits, almost dance-like. Rhythmically it is very defined, again with frequent metric changes and detailed interpretive instructions to the players. Korngold's textures are more imitative than in the earlier movements, and he does not short us on melodic ideas. All five players have near-constant movement and activity, with virtuosic writing. Toward the end, a brief reprise of the dramatic opening – including another brief violin cadenza – serves as a bridge to the coda. Korngold surprises us with pizzicato strings and *Till Eulenspiegel*-like levity, slipping in allusions to the slow movement theme. The quintet is dazzling up to its final chord.