



Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston

Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2020-2021 chamber music season

virtual chamber series 2: interrupted and in between

Saturday, December 5 through Saturday, December 12, 2020

Program:

Zoltán Kodály, Intermezzo for string trio

Harrison Birtwistle, *An Interrupted Endless Melody* for oboe & piano

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Ballade in c minor for violin & piano, Op. 73

Johannes Brahms, Piano Trio No. 1 in B Major, Op. 8

Program notes by Gabriel Langfur Rice

Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967) grew up in the Hungarian countryside, where his father was an employee of the Hungarian state railway system assigned as station master to posts in Szob, Galánta, and Nagyszombat. Both of his parents were amateur musicians – his father played the violin and his mother sang and played the piano – so as a child he heard both classical music and original Hungarian folk music as sung by his schoolmates. With very little instruction, he learned to play the violin, viola, cello, and piano well enough to read chamber music and play in the school orchestra.

While attending Budapest University to study Hungarian and German, Kodály also began attending the Academy of Music, earning diplomas in composition and teaching, and received a PhD in 1906 for his thesis titled *A Magyar népdal strófaszervezete* (“The Stanzaic Structure of Hungarian Folksong”), which was particularly perceptive in analyzing the relationships of music and speech patterns. There was already some material on this subject to read, but much of his work was based on his own field research, often with Béla Bartók at his side. The two men became close friends and collaborators, determined not only to document and expand on Hungarian music, but also to lift up the people of Hungary with a music education system rooted firmly in their own traditions.

Also in 1906, Kodály received a scholarship for six months of study in Paris, where his most memorable experience was hearing the music of Debussy. Upon his return, Kodály was appointed to the faculty of the Academy of Music. The First World War and the subsequent bourgeois revolution interrupted Kodály’s academic career, his field research with Bartók, and

his growing international reputation as a composer, but publication of his scores by Universal Edition beginning in 1921 and the resounding successes of *Psalmus Hungaricus* and the singspiel *Háry János* put his career firmly back on track.

Even as Kodály's international reputation grew he remained mostly in Hungary, carrying out his mission for the good of the Hungarian people. During the Second World War he focused mostly on patriotic music, sometimes even as he and his wife were taking refuge for safety. Following the war he again began traveling internationally, recognized as a leader in the study of folk music and receiving honorary doctorates from the universities of Budapest (1957), Oxford (1960), East Berlin (1964) and Toronto (1966), and honorary membership of the Belgian Academy of Sciences (1957), the Moscow Conservatory (1963) and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1963). He was named president of the International Folk Music Council in 1961 and honorary president of the International Society of Music Education in 1964. In 1965 he was awarded the Herder Prize for his work in furthering East–West cultural relations.

Bartók wrote of his friend: “If I were to name the composer whose works are the most perfect embodiment of the Hungarian spirit, I would answer, Kodály. His work proves his faith in the Hungarian spirit. The obvious explanation is that all Kodály's composing activity is rooted only in Hungarian soil, but the deep inner reason is his unshakable faith and trust in the constructive power and future of his people.”

The Intermezzo for string trio is an early work, composed around 1905. Kodály's musical personality was yet to fully emerge, but the sounds of Hungary are clearly present, even if rooted in the language of his Viennese and German models. The mood is that of a relaxed serenade; not necessarily a momentous occasion in itself but a perfect intermezzo, a pleasant interlude in between events of more gravity and import.

Sir Harrison Birtwistle was born in 1934 in the north of England. He attended the Royal Manchester College of Music on a Clarinet scholarship, but also studied composition with Richard Hall. Among his classmates were the composers Alexander Goehr and Peter Maxwell Davies, the pianist John Ogdon and the trumpeter Elgar Howarth, all of whom had a keen interest in new music and would become leaders for their generation of British musicians. They formed the New Music Manchester Group, one of the only ensembles of its kind outside of London at the time. Following military service as a clarinetist and a brief time with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Birtwistle decided to sell his clarinets and devote himself to composition. He spent two years in the mid-60s in the United States, first studying serialism with Milton Babbitt at Princeton, and then studying Schenkerian analysis at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He argued that study of both systems was necessary for him in order to reject them.

A lifelong preoccupation with the intersection of music and drama led to Birtwistle's appointment at the new National Theatre in London. He served there from 1975 to 1982, first as music director and then as associate director. A particularly significant production he worked on was Peter Hall's *Oresteia* in 1981, in which the score, dominated by percussion and simple drones, was thoroughly modern and yet perfectly mated to a staging inspired by the ancient

Greek tradition of a masked, all-male cast. His concert works became increasingly theatrical in nature as well, often drawing on mythology and ritual for inspiration.

Birtwistle's single largest project was *The Mask of Orpheus*, commissioned by the English National Opera and premiered at the London Coliseum in May 1986. It served as a turning point in his career, a remarkable synthesis of all the work he had done to this point and a hugely influential piece in the development of late 20th century opera. Without going into too much detail, *Orpheus* is a tremendously imaginative and large-scale work, in which drama is inseparable from ritual, time is presented not in a linear flow but as discrete events containing past and future that are examined multiple times in multiple ways, and the three principal characters are represented simultaneously as Man/Woman (singer), Hero/Heroine (mime) and Myth (giant singing puppet), all wearing masks to highlight the work's ritual aspect. Birtwistle also incorporates electronic sounds: in six interludes that are mimed to pre-recorded music created at IRCAM; an electronically generated disembodied voice of Apollo, also created at IRCAM; and "aura" sounds that play in the background representing the seasons and the tides, among other things.

The Mask of Orpheus earned Birtwistle worldwide acclaim, including the 1986 *Evening Standard* Opera Award and the 1987 Grawemeyer Award. He was made *Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres* in 1986 and knighted in 1988. In 1995 he was the first British composer to receive the Siemens Music Prize since Britten in 1973. In 1993 he was named composer in residence to the London Philharmonic, and in 1994 appointed director of contemporary music at the Royal Academy of Music and Henry Purcell Professor of Composition at King's College, London, where he served until 2001.

Birtwistle's dramatic approach to music is evident even in such a seemingly simple and small-scale piece as *An Interrupted Endless Melody* (1991). The mechanism of an "endless melody," a line that appears from the beginning to the end of a piece virtually without break, appears in several of his concert and theatrical pieces. Rather than classify the musical materials simply as melody and accompaniment, he calls them "cantus" and "continuum," representing the individual and the collective respectively. In this case, Birtwistle gives the performers an unusual amount of latitude to make choices about the structure. The oboe melody can begin at any of three points, and the player is free to observe or ignore a number of repeat indications; the line could theoretically continue forever. The pianist can choose from three different accompaniments and play them in any order. The effect of the piece, therefore, can vary significantly from one performance to another, but it generally gives a sense of timelessness, as if the listeners have happened in on an event that began long ago and will continue for a long time to come.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912) was born in London to a White Englishwoman and a Black surgeon from Sierra Leone named Daniel Hugh Taylor. The couple was never married and Dr. Taylor returned to Africa, probably before Samuel was born, apparently never to know his son. Coleridge-Taylor's mother's parentage is not clear, and she was known by various names: usually Alice Hare Martin, but also Alice Taylor and sometimes Alice Holmans. She named her son after the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. During his early years they lived with a couple named Sarah and Benjamin Holmans in the comfort of suburban Croydon. Samuel

referred to Benjamin Holmans, who gave the boy his first violin and lessons, as his grandfather, and he may well have been.

Samuel began singing in the choir of St. George's Presbyterian Church at age ten and was admitted to the Royal College of Music as a violin student in 1890. His first significant work, a *Te Deum*, dates from this time, and by 1893 he was awarded a scholarship to study composition with Charles Villiers Stanford. Coleridge-Taylor's most famous and celebrated piece, the cantata *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, based on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*, also dates from his student years, and it became an international sensation widely performed for decades. Sir Edward Elgar soon took note of the extraordinary skills and gifts of the young composer, and recommended a commission from the Three Choirs Festival, which resulted in the *Ballade in a minor for orchestra*, first performed in 1898.

As much as he was recognized for his talents and accomplishments, Coleridge-Taylor was no stranger to racism; his nickname at school was "coaley," and the double entendre was lost on nobody. During one particularly scary incident his curly hair was set on fire. He became determined to highlight and improve the standing of musicians of African descent both in Europe and America, and he quickly became a beacon of hope. A group of African American singers in Washington DC formed the Coleridge-Taylor Choral Society and sponsored the first of his three trips to the United States in 1904, during which he conducted them in his own works with the accompaniment of the US Marine Band and met President Theodore Roosevelt. Also in 1904, he was appointed conductor of the Handel Society of London and was soon named to the Composition faculty of both the Guildhall School of Music and Trinity College, London.

Coleridge-Taylor's fame – he was sometimes referred to as the "African Mahler" – led to an unsustainable schedule of activity, and in August 1912 he collapsed while waiting for a train at West Croydon station. He died a few days later of acute pneumonia, just 37 years old.

The *Ballade in c minor for violin and piano* was composed in 1907 for the Russian-born violinist Michael Zacherewitsch. Coleridge-Taylor originally intended it as a tone poem for violin and orchestra, but made a version with piano so that they could perform it together on recital tours. Perhaps in tribute to his friend's Slavic heritage, the piece is reminiscent of the music of Eastern Europe, with hints of Tchaikovsky but also more than a suggestion of the tuneful warmth of Dvorák, one of Coleridge-Taylor's heroes. In any event, it is a rhapsodic tour de force, at times melancholy, at times bravura, and engaging from beginning to end.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) was a native of Hamburg, Germany. His father, a double bass player, was the first member of his family to be a professional musician, and had to make a living without much support. Much of the younger Brahms' early musical training was put to use arranging and composing for dance orchestras and other small ensembles performing for public and private functions. He showed early promise as a pianist, nearly embarking on a career as a child prodigy showcase performer. Instead, he directed his energies toward more extensive composition study. In 1848, a flood of Hungarian refugees came through Hamburg, and Brahms met the violinist Eduard Reményi, who later engaged him as accompanist for a concert tour. Reményi taught Brahms the authentic *alla zingarese* style that became an important part of his

musical vocabulary. While on tour he met the violinist Joseph Joachim, who, although only in his early twenties himself, was already one of Germany's most prominent musicians. They quickly formed a bond that would last their lifetimes, despite the inevitable periods of estrangement that would spring up between two such strong personalities. Joachim convinced Brahms to travel to Düsseldorf in 1852 to introduce himself to Robert and Clara Schumann, and musical history was set in motion.

Robert Schumann wasted no time in proclaiming the young Brahms the savior of Germanic music – the implication being that he would save it from the likes of Wagner and Liszt. Within a month of their first meeting, he published an article in the *Neue Zeitschrift* under the title “*Neue Bahnen*” (“New Paths”) describing the 20-year-old Brahms as “someone [who] must and would suddenly appear, destined to give ideal presentation to the highest expression of the time, who would bring us his mastership not in the process of development, but springing forth like Minerva fully armed from the head of Jove. And he is come, a young blood by whose cradle graces and heroes kept watch... ‘This is one of the elect’...” The purple language continues, revealing at least as much about the manic side of Schumann's mental illness as it does about his assessment of Brahms' talent.

The young Brahms, as it turned out, was very much “in the process of development.” And the mantle of the chosen one was a heavy burden to bear, making an already self-conscious, self-critical youth even more so. Many early works were destroyed in acts of self-censorship, only the best ideas kept to be reworked into later pieces. One piece that survived, thankfully for all of us, was the Piano Trio, Op. 8.

Perhaps inspired by the Schumanns' penchant for chamber music with piano, Brahms set to work on his first piano trio in the early days of 1853 while visiting Joachim in Hanover. His work was interrupted when the Schumanns came through for a few days, but the piece was complete before tragedy struck at the end of February; Robert suffered a complete breakdown and threw himself into the Rhine River in an apparent suicide attempt. Brahms rushed to Clara's side and helped her commit him to the asylum where he would live out his days.

In the coming months and years Brahms spent a great deal of time with Clara and, although he was fourteen years younger, fell in love with her. He remained devoted to her throughout his life, although the initial passion faded to a more appropriate and realistic affection between confidantes. She was a vital critic and faithful promoter of his work, and an important boost to his career was her recommendation of the Piano Trio, Op. 8, to Breitkopf and Hartel for publication in 1854.

Thirty-six years later, the publisher Simrock, with whom Brahms had the longest association, bought the rights to the trio and a few other early works and offered him the opportunity to make any revisions he deemed necessary. He wrote to Clara in September of 1889: “With what childish amusement I whiled away the beautiful summer days you will never guess. I have rewritten my B major Trio and can now call it Opus 108 instead of Opus 8... It will not be so wild as it was before – but will it be better?” It was a large-scale revision: he altered the second themes of the first, second and fourth movements and refined the developments and forms throughout, shortening the piece significantly and making it even more poignant. This 1889 version is

presented today, and it is a wonderful expression of youthful exuberance and bursting emotions, tempered by the refined craft of the master composer. Few pieces in the chamber music repertoire are as direct and eloquent.

- *Gabriel Langfur Rice*

© 2020 Chameleon Arts Ensemble, All rights reserved.