



Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston

Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2021-2022 chamber music season chamber series 3: a thousand tales sung

Saturday, February 26, 2022, 8 PM at First Church in Boston

Sunday, February 27, 2022, 4 PM at First Church in Boston

Program:

Robert Schumann, *Märchenerzählungen* “Fairy Tales” for clarinet, viola & piano, Op. 132

Lou Harrison, *Ariadne*, for flute & percussion

Karol Szymanowski, *Mythes* for violin & piano, Op. 30 (1915)

Miriam Gideon, *Rhymes from the Hill* for soprano, clarinet, cello & marimba

Johannes Brahms, Piano Quartet No. 3 in c minor, Op. 60

Program notes by Gabriel Langfur Rice

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) was perhaps the quintessential Romantic composer. The son of an author, translator (his father's small fortune was made translating Byron into German) and book dealer, Robert's first interest was literature, and literary or other extra-musical inspiration, as well as a tendency to extreme self-expression, characterized his works throughout his life. Often his pieces had personal associations – memories, feelings, specific events – of which biographers get only glimpses from the notes in his manuscripts. It appears that mental illness ran in Schumann's family; his father died as a relatively young man of a nervous disorder, and his older sister Emilie most likely committed suicide at age 19. In his own short and often tumultuous life he produced an incredibly diverse body of work – symphonies, songs, chamber music, piano music, choral music – usually working extremely fast during periods of inspiration.

As a young man, Schumann acquiesced to his parents' wishes and attended the University of Leipzig to study law. Before long, however, he was studying piano with Friedrich Wieck and meeting Leipzig's musical leaders. He became particularly infatuated with the music of Schubert, which he found satisfying in the same ways as his favorite literature. After a period of travel and self-reflection, he returned to Leipzig to devote himself completely to music, with more intense study under Wieck's guidance. An injury to the middle finger of his right hand cut his performing career short, however, and his path as a composer and critic was determined. He fell in love with Wieck's young daughter Clara, who was being groomed for a career as a concert artist, and despite Wieck's vociferous objections and legal battles, eventually married her. Even as she gave

birth to eight children and raised seven, Clara became one of the most famous piano virtuosi of the century, and the couple were good friends with Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn, Brahms, Liszt, Berlioz, and many other prominent musicians.

During most of his career, Schumann was better known as a music critic than as a composer. He wrote prolifically throughout his life: articles, journals, diaries (including a joint “marriage diary” with Clara), letters, etc. He founded the journal *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* and was its owner and editor from 1835 to 1844. In a sincere effort to represent a dialectic way of thinking, he created characters from whose points of view he would write, both in criticism and private correspondence. Florestan, Eusebius, and Meister Raro represented for him the ability to hold and embrace simultaneously conflicting viewpoints, respecting the value of instinctive emotion as well as calculated thought, and always listening to the voice of moderation to balance the two.

In 1850 Schumann finally achieved a post acknowledging his formidable and diverse abilities as a musician. He was appointed Municipal Music Director in the capital of the Rhine Province, Düsseldorf, and he and Clara and their family settled happily for a time. In 1853 they were visited by the young Johannes Brahms, whose beautifully crafted music and serious demeanor so impressed Robert that he proclaimed him the savior of Germanic music.

Märchenerzählungen (Fairy Tales) Op. 132, for clarinet, viola and piano, was composed during that visit, in October 1853. It is somewhat related to other chamber music miniatures from late in Schumann’s work, including the *Fantasiestücke* for clarinet and piano and the *Märchenbilder* for viola and piano. All three pieces lie somewhere in between absolute music in traditional multi-movement forms and programmatic music that tells a story or portrays an image.

Märchenerzählungen is the most rhapsodically free of the miniature sets in that it has no specific program; rather, it is a free association of images and moods. There is, however, a unifying melodic idea from which all four movements are derived: a rising legato line answered immediately by a descending detached legato line, articulated at the very beginning of the first movement, first by the viola and then the clarinet.

The *Märchenerzählungen* is one of the last pieces Schumann completed. Having suffered for years from mental illness aggravated by syphilis, in February of 1854 he asked to be committed to an insane asylum. Clara was not allowed to see him during this time, finally able to visit only two days before his death in July of 1856.

Lou Harrison (1917-2003) was born in Portland, Oregon and grew up in northern California. During college he studied with Henry Cowell, who encouraged him to seek out Charles Ives and introduced him to John Cage, with whom he presented a series of influential percussion concerts in San Francisco in 1941. During a year in Los Angeles, he attended Schoenberg’s weekly composition seminar, absorbing the influence of his disciplined approach to complement the experimental freedom embodied by his previous mentors.

From Los Angeles, Harrison moved to New York, where he wrote for the *Herald Tribune* and various new music publications. In 1946 he conducted the premiere of Ives’ Third Symphony, leading to a Pulitzer Prize that Ives insisted on sharing with Harrison. The stress of New York

was too much for him, however, and he had to be hospitalized following a nervous breakdown. He moved to North Carolina to teach at Black Mountain College for two years, and then settled back in California for the remainder of his life. Harrison received many awards and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1973.

Stylistically, Harrison drew on an incredibly vast array of influences over the course of his long career; from the twelve-tone method to experiments in alternate forms of tuning, to aleatoric practices a la Cage, to Asian and American Indian music. He also composed pieces using his own systems of interval restrictions, and using instruments he developed with his partner William Colvig, a professional electrician and amateur musician. Deeply committed to various political causes, Harrison often used music to voice his views on pacifism, multiculturalism, gay rights, and ecological responsibility. In addition, he was a published writer and poet, a painter whose work has been shown often, and even designed a series of fonts for print and computers.

Ariadne for flute and percussion was composed in 1987 for the dancer Eva Soltes, to be performed with a traditional South-Indian dance called “bharata-natyam.” In the Hindu temple tradition from which this style is derived, the music and dance often express a narrative; in this case, Harrison chose the story of Ariadne’s rescue from the island of Naxos by the god Dionysus. The first movement portrays Ariadne’s despair at the realization she has been abandoned on the island by Theseus. The second movement, *The Triumph of Ariadne and Dionysus*, is composed as a “music kit,” seven melodic and seven rhythmic phrases each consisting of 22 beats, which may be combined in virtually any way the performers please.

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937) was the major figure in new Polish music in the first half of the 20th century and the first innovative and important Polish composer after Chopin. He was born to a family of patriotic Polish landed gentry in Tymoszwówka, a section of the Ukraine then in control of the Russian Empire. He and his four siblings were all encouraged in their literary, artistic and musical pursuits. The music of Wagner, which he heard at the age of 13, made a strong impression that would stay with him throughout his career, even as his own music became more obviously influenced by the French impressionists.

Surprisingly, Szymanowski has not remained a familiar name to American concertgoers. His mature works contain a unique synthesis of French and German/Austrian influences, or impressionist and expressionist models. In addition, his harmonic and instrumental language has more than a little in common with his Russian neighbors Scriabin and Stravinsky. His output, although fairly small (62 opus numbers), is highly varied and includes four symphonies, two violin concertos, several song cycles, and numerous works for the stage, in addition to the pieces for piano and for violin and piano which are more frequently performed and recorded. Szymanowski had a lifelong friendship and collaboration with violin virtuoso Pawel Kochanski, and their work together led to some wonderfully innovative and expressive uses of the instrument, which are particularly evident in the *Mythes* on today’s program.

Each of the three *Mythes* is based on an ancient Greek myth. *The Fountain of Arethusa* depicts the story of Alpheus the hunter and his pursuit of Arethusa, one of the Hesperides. Arethusa is transformed by the gods into a fountain, and Alpheus into a river. He searches for her by

crossing the sea, but without mingling his own form with its waters. The middle movement tells the story of Narcissus, who falls in love with his own reflection in a pool of water and is transformed into a flower. *Dryads and Pan* is perhaps the most instrumentally innovative of the three movements, depicting Pan's flute with natural harmonics and the murmurs of the Dryads, guardians of the forest, with quarter-tones and other harmonic effects. Taken as a whole, the *Mythes* are a significant addition to the violin repertoire, demonstrating the expressive capabilities of extended instrumental techniques. The piece is also an important milestone in Szymanowski's career, marking his independence from the German and Austrian models that dominated his earlier work.

Miriam Gideon (1906-1996) was born in Greeley, Colorado. Her father was a professor of philosophy and modern languages as well as an ordained Reform rabbi, and her early studies in music were organ lessons with her uncle, Henry Gideon. Gideon continued to pursue music while studying French literature and mathematics at Boston University, taking piano lessons with Felix Fox. She had long written music for herself, and while living in New York after college she studied with Lazare Saminsky, a Russian émigré then serving as music director and organist at New York's Temple Emanu-El. He recommended she seek out Roger Sessions, who over the next eight years helped her develop the deeply expressive combination of extratonal and pantonal idioms that marked her mature musical language.

In 1949, Gideon married an Assistant Professor at Brooklyn College named Frederic Ewen. They were both political leftists, and his refusal to testify before the Senate Internal Security Committee chaired by Democratic Senator Pat McCarran in 1952 led to an early retirement. She was investigated by the FBI and resigned from teaching posts at City College and Brooklyn College in 1954 and 1955. Eventually rehired at City College, she also taught at the Manhattan School of Music from 1967 to 1991. In 1975 she was the second woman elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Another important influence and promoter of Miriam Gideon's work was Hugo Weisgall, a prominent composer and intellectual who was then chairman of the faculty at the Jewish Theological Seminary's Cantors Institute and Seminary College of Jewish Music (now the H.L. Miller Cantorial School). He invited her to teach there, and they enjoyed a mutually beneficial friendship for many years. She eventually earned a doctorate from the seminary.

Gideon was inspired by literature and its expression in vocal music, saying that she was "moved by great poetry and great prose almost as much as by music." In particular, she was adept at placing a singer in a chamber ensemble, with the voice often functioning very much as one of the instruments. Her music was highly expressive and thoroughly modern, without giving in to the fashion for alienating intellectualization that marked so much of the late 20th century. "As far as I am concerned," she said, "I must see whether what I am writing comes from a musical impulse, and whether I am responding to it. What I write has to mean something to me.... It has to seem new. I have to be surprised by it, and it must register as feeling."

Composer's program note:

Rhymes from the Hill is a song cycle, composed in 1968, comprising five poems from the *Galgenlieder* (Gallows Songs) by Christian Morgenstern, set in the original German for solo voice, clarinet, cello and marimba. On the first appearance of these poems in Germany in 1905 a critic spoke of the “magnificent subtle humor of the heart behind these crazy verse fancies.” From this sardonic collection I have chosen five poems:

1. *Song of the Gallows Gang*: Nocturnal shrieks and sinister sounds of nature are heard in the clattering of the marimba and the wail of the clarinet.
2. *Gallows Child's Lullaby*: A biting parody of the nursery rhyme *Sleep, baby, sleep*, in which the rocking of the marimba, the sinister purring of the clarinet, and the lulling of the cello suggest a less than benign path to slumber.
3. & 4. *Two clocks*: the first moving backward or forward, the second adjusting its pace as desired – a clockwork with a heart. Brittle sounds from the marimba provide a mechanical, ticking background for the espressivo phrases of cello and clarinet.
5. *The Sigh*: a tribute to Love. Skating on the ice, the sigh becomes so overheated by amorous thoughts that the ice melts and he disappears. Tremolos on the marimba, grace notes on the clarinet, and glissandi on the cello are used to depict this ironic tragedy.

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 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.

By the end of his life, Brahms had fulfilled the spirit of Robert Schumann’s predictions, serving as the foil to Wagner in the minds of those who placed supreme value on upholding and furthering tradition. In truth, the two men shared a real, if grudging, mutual admiration. For those of us who care more about the music itself than the politics of the 19th century musical world, the significance of Brahms’ work lies in his synthesis of Classical balance with Romantic humanity and emotion, and his ability to honor tradition while creating an instantly recognizable personal voice.

The c minor Piano Quartet was begun in 1855, during the time when Brahms was virtually living in the Schumann home. Robert had attempted suicide the previous year and been committed to an asylum, and Brahms was doing all he could to help Clara and her children. He even managed the family’s financial affairs while she went on a performance tour to generate income. And although he was completely devoted to his friend and mentor Robert, Brahms fell passionately in love with Clara, as evidenced by his surviving candid letters to her. He destroyed her responses so we will never know the nuances of her feelings, but they remained close friends and confidantes for the rest of their lives.

The Quartet was completed at that time, but Brahms was dissatisfied and set it aside for twenty years. He picked it up again in 1873 and worked on it gradually until 1875, thoroughly revising the first movement, taking material from the original finale for the scherzo, composing new slow and final movements, and lowering the key a half-step from the original c# minor. When he finally sent the Quartet to his publisher, he included the following note: “You may place a picture on the title page, namely a head – with a pistol in front of it. This will give you some idea of the music.” For those versed in German Romantic literature, the reference is clear: Goethe’s hero Werther killed himself over his impossible love for a married woman, and the “Werther” nickname has stuck with the c minor Quartet ever since.

- *Gabriel Langfur Rice*

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