



Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston

Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2023-2024 chamber music season chamber series 3: Seeking Syllables

Saturday, February 24, 2024, 8 PM at First Church in Boston

Sunday, February 25, 2024, 4 PM at First Church in Boston

Program:

Felix Mendelssohn, *Lieder ohne Worte* for cello & piano, Op. 109

Sebastian Currier, *Vocalissimus* for soprano, flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano & percussion

Johannes Brahms, Piano Quintet in f minor, Op. 34

Program notes by Gabriel Rice

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) was born in Hamburg, Germany to an exceptionally cultured and affluent family. His grandfather Moses Mendelssohn was a prominent Enlightenment philosopher, and his intellectual influence was strong in the household. Of Jewish descent, the family converted to Christianity while Felix was a child – not so much to avoid prejudice as to better match their religious beliefs with their philosophical leanings. Felix received an outstanding general education in addition to musical tutelage, and his broad and cultured background was surely an impetus for his many varied contributions to musical culture. He essentially defined the role of the modern conductor while raising the standards of orchestral performance throughout Europe, and he was single-handedly responsible for the reintroduction of the music of J.S. Bach in the 19th century. In 1843, he founded the Leipzig Conservatory, forming the model for the modern conservatory as well. He organized the faculty into specialized departments and sought out the most outstanding scholars and performing artists to teach their instruments and other subjects, including Robert and Clara Schumann for composition, score-reading and piano. All the while, Mendelssohn composed steadily, in his personal style, particularly disciplined on Classical models of form, harmony and counterpoint. He maintained a Classical elegance at a time of extreme Romantic excess (he had a particular distaste for the music of Berlioz), but his music has never sounded archaic or unoriginal. He died of a brain hemorrhage just three months before his 39th birthday, in a state of acute mourning for the tragic death of his beloved sister Fanny.

Mendelssohn famously considered music to be a much more direct way of communication than words, which he wrote, “seem to me to be so ambiguous, so vague, so easily misunderstood in

comparison to genuine music, which fills the soul with a thousand things better than words.” *Lieder ohne Worte*, or “Songs without Words,” was a genre all his own, a vehicle sometimes for intimate communication (particularly with his sister Fanny), sometimes capitalizing on the increasing popularity of the piano in the parlor of middle-class homes, and sometimes for the most profound expression possible only in the hands of a virtuoso. Mendelssohn wrote such works for solo piano throughout his life, but in 1845 set one for cello and piano for the young French cellist Lisa Cristiani. He took full advantage of the inherent vocal qualities of the instrument and challenged the cellist with a wonderfully broad tonal and emotional range.

Heralded as “music with a distinctive voice” by *The New York Times* and as “lyrical, colorful, firmly rooted in tradition, but absolutely new” by *The Washington Post*, **Sebastian Currier’s** (b. 1959) music has been presented at major venues worldwide by acclaimed artists and orchestras.

With works spanning across solo, chamber and orchestral genres, Currier’s works have been performed by Anne-Sophie Mutter, the Berlin Philharmonic, the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and the Kronos Quartet. In November 2021, conductor Louis Langrée led the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in the world premiere of Currier’s Beethoven-inspired *Track 8. Waves*, Currier’s new work for soprano, chamber ensemble, video and electronics, based on Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*, was premiered by the Network for New Music in Philadelphia in February 2022, then brought to Sarasota by ensemblenewSRQ in April 2022. Other recent premieres include *Voyage Out* (2019) for piano quintet, premiered by the Seattle Chamber Music Society; his violin concerto *Aether* (2018) for violinist Baiba Skride and the Boston Symphony Orchestra with conductor Andris Nelsons (co-commissioned by the Leipzig Gewandhaus); *Ghost Trio* (2018), premiered by violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter, cellist Daniel Müller-Schott, and pianist Lambert Orkis at Carnegie Hall; and *Eleven Moons* (2018), premiered by soprano Zorana Sadiq and Boston Musica Viva.

Currier’s music has been enthusiastically embraced by violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter who has commissioned, premiered, and recorded several of Currier’s pieces, including his “rapturously beautiful” (*New York Times*) violin concerto *Time Machines*, which was commissioned by Ms. Mutter and premiered by the New York Philharmonic in June 2011 with a recording of the performance released by Deutsche Grammophon the following September.

Currier has received many prestigious awards including the Grawemeyer Award (for the chamber piece *Static*), Berlin Prize, Rome Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and an Academy Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and has held residencies at the Institute for Advanced Studies, as well as the MacDowell and Yaddo colonies.

Composer’s Program Note:

My aim in *Vocalissimus* is to explore the wealth of possible interpretations of a single text. It is unusual in that all 18 songs of the cycle set the same text - each, however, set from a different point of view. Basically, whenever a composer sets a text, the musical choices he or she makes cannot but form an interpretation of the text. There is no such

thing as an objective setting of a text. Whether consciously or unconsciously, every word, every phrase, and every idea in a poem must be affected by the composer's highly subjective interpretation before it can take on a musical shape. *Vocalissimus* is a fantasy on this inherent subjectivity of setting words to music. It uses a short Wallace Stevens poem, *To the Roaring Wind*, and sets it from multiple vantage points, each with a title suggesting the particular point of view.

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. Following Robert's nervous breakdown less than a year later, 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, the initial passion fading to a deep affection between confidantes.

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. The f minor Piano Quintet, often considered his crowning achievement in chamber music, is a perfect case in point. Originally conceived in 1862 as a String Quintet (with two cellos after Schubert rather than two violas after Mozart), the piece received gushing praise from Clara Schumann, which was overshadowed by Joachim's judgment that the string writing was not effective. A year later it made an appearance as a sonata for two

pianos on a concert in Vienna. This time it was Clara who tactfully but firmly suggested re-working: “it is masterly from every point of view, but – it is not a sonata, but a work whose ideas you might – and must – scatter over an entire orchestra...Please, for this once take my advice and recast it.” He did not consider himself ready to write a large-scale orchestral work, however, and decided on the instrumentation of string quartet plus piano. The final version was well-received at its world premiere in Paris in the spring of 1868.

The f minor Piano Quintet was a tremendous achievement for Brahms on at least two levels. First, the unity of harmonic, melodic and structural development derived from tiny motives – in this case the half-step outlines of G to A-flat and D-flat to C – reaches new levels throughout the work, informing essentially every small- and large-scale element of the composition. It is this unity Schoenberg referred to in his article “Brahms the Progressive” as he proclaimed his own methods to be its logical extension. This level of compositional detail came somewhat naturally to Brahms, the natural result of his relentless drive to perfect his craft. What was more significant to his long-term success, however, was the unity of narrative achieved throughout the work, the sense of the listener of having heard *one story* at the end of the piece. Such compelling narrative is what makes the symphonies of Beethoven so enduring, and what Brahms knew he needed to find in order to be able to introduce a symphony to the public of which he could be proud. It was not until eight years later that his First Symphony would be premiered, but the Piano Quintet, a jewel of the repertoire on its own terms, is also an important benchmark on Brahms’ journey as a composer to inherit the mantle of his predecessors.

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.

- Gabriel Rice

Currier biography provided by the composer, edited by Gabriel Rice

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