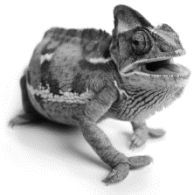

Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston
Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2024-2025 chamber music season
Up Close 1: Fragments and Fantasies

Sunday, March 16, 2025, 4 PM at Goethe-Institut, Boston

Program:
Johannes Brahms, Scherzo in c minor from "F-A-E" Sonata, WoO 2
Franz Schubert, Fantasie in C Major for violin & piano, Op. 159, D. 934
Judith Weir, *Music for 247 Strings*
Robert Schumann, Sonata No. 2 in d minor for violin & piano, Op. 121

Program notes by Gabriel Rice

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, the initial passion fading to a deep affection between confidantes.

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 most immediate outcome of Brahms' visit to the Schumanns in 1853 was Robert's invitation to join him and his student Albert Dietrich in a special project as a gift to their mutual friend Joachim. The "F-A-E" Sonata, as it came to be known, was based on Joachim's personal motto: *Frei aber einsam* (free but lonely). The idea was that Dietrich would compose the first movement, Schumann the second movement intermezzo and the finale, and Brahms the third movement Scherzo, and each of them would use the notes F, A, and E as the pitch material for their themes. Joachim was invited to the Schumann home on October 28th, where he would perform the new sonata with Clara at the piano (he was presented the score earlier in the day) and then guess which of his three friends had written which movement – which he had no problem doing whatsoever.

Joachim treasured the score, guarding it tightly and publishing only Brahms' movement in 1906, ten years after the composer's death. The complete sonata was published in 1935, and the Scherzo has remained the most popular and most often performed part of it.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) is the only major composer associated with Vienna who was actually native to the city. He was only first-generation Viennese, however; his father had moved to the capital from a section of Moravia that is now part of the Czech Republic. Schubert's family was not wealthy, but his father was a teacher so his children were well educated in academic subjects as well as music. The violin was young Franz's first instrument, and the family string quartet was the laboratory for some of his earliest compositions. By the time he was seven years old, his family had noted enough talent to send him to sing an audition for Antonio Salieri, the court music director, and he filled a vacancy in the Salieri's *Hofkapelle* choir in 1808. With the choir position came free tuition and board in the prestigious Imperial and Royal City College, the best school in the city for non-aristocrats. Music played a large role in the program at the College, with an excellent student orchestra in which Schubert was soon a member of the second violins. He also had the opportunity to take regular lessons with Salieri.

After five years at the Imperial and Royal City College, Schubert left for a teacher-training course, in order to follow his father and older brothers in the teaching profession. Despite

producing an impressive number of compositions, he had shown no signs yet of being able to support himself as a musician. He grudgingly taught school for a number of years but was nonetheless able to continue writing music with increasing facility. The years 1814 and 1815 in particular mark the blossoming of his skills. Always able to work fast, Schubert composed almost 150 songs, two string quartets, two symphonies, two masses, and at least four *Singspiele* – in a period of only fifteen months. His output during this time averaged at least 65 bars of music a day, which would have been remarkable for a full-time composer. Schubert was also teaching year-round at his father's school, taking twice-weekly composition lessons with Salieri, attending operas and concerts, teaching privately, and socializing with numerous friends. Unfortunately, Schubert's circle of friends included several whose lifestyles were largely idle and pleasure-seeking, and he spent a great deal of time and money drinking heavily and living hard.

He was eventually able to make a reasonable living and enjoy some fame as a composer, but he was the first of the major composers who did not also earn regard as a sought-after performer. By 1823, just around the time that he was beginning to be compensated well for the commissions and publications of his works, Schubert began to turn down requests to appear in person due to illness. All evidence points to the first stages of syphilis, which afflicted as many as one in five in some European cities at the time. Over the next five years until his death, Schubert was often forced to retire to his bed, to the countryside, or occasionally the hospital, trying to cure the various manifestations of the disease. Although he remained productive throughout his illness, he died just short of his thirty-second birthday. Considering the quantity and range of his output in such a short time, one can only guess what his impact on music history could have been had he lived even ten more years.

Towards the end of his life, Schubert composed one of his few works for violin and piano, the Fantasie in C Major, Op. 159, D. 934. Though it is as long as a typical sonata, it was likely given the designation Fantasie because the four sections are played without pause, and the heart of the piece is the virtuosic theme and variations that comprises the third section.

The melodic material of the Fantasie comes from Schubert's own song *Sei mir gegrüsst*: "I greet you," or more accurately though more difficult to express in English, "Be greeted from me." Composed in 1821, *Sei mir gegrüsst* takes its text from Friedrich Rückert, the German poet and translator, and professor of eastern languages whose work was also set to music by Brahms, Mahler (the *Rückertlieder* and *Kindertotenlieder*, or "Songs on the Death of Children") and others. As is so often the case in Schubert's songs, the lovely melody captures perfectly the complexity of the text: the deeply felt love right alongside the yearning and heartache that the lover cannot be with the beloved.

I greet you
English translation by Richard Wigmore

You who were torn from me and my kisses,
I greet you!
I kiss you!
You, whom only my yearning greeting can reach,
I greet you!

I kiss you!

You who were bestowed on this heart
by the hand of love,
you who were taken
from my breast! With this flood of tears
I greet you!
I kiss you!

Defying the distance that, hostile and divisive,
has come
between you and me;
frustrating the envious powers of fate,
I greet you!
I kiss you!

As in love's fairest spring
you once came to me
with greetings and kisses,
so with all the fervour of my soul
I greet you!
I kiss you!

One breath of love dissolves time and space,
and I am with you,
you are with me;
I hold you closely in my arms' embrace,
I greet you!
I kiss you!

Dame Judith Weir was born into a Scottish family in 1954 but grew up near London. She was an oboe player, performing with the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, and studied composition with John Tavener. She went on to Cambridge University where her composition teacher was Robin Holloway and in 1975, she attended at Tanglewood where she studied with Gunther Schuller. After Tanglewood, Weir spent several years working in schools and in adult education in rural southern England followed by a period based in Scotland where she taught at Glasgow University and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

Weir's operas, composed over the course of more than 30 years, lie at the heart of her output. They draw on folk tales, myth, and legend from diverse cultures across the ages, reshaped with the combination of wit and ingenuity that has become her signature. Notable among them are *King Harald's Saga*, *The Black Spider*, *A Night at the Chinese Opera*, *The Vanishing Bridegroom*, and *Blond Eckbert* which have received many performances in the UK, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, and United States. Her most recent opera, *Miss Fortune,* premiered at Bregenz in 2011 and was staged at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden in 2012.

In collaboration with director Margaret Williams, Weir also created several opera films including *Scipio's Dream*, *Hello Dolly*, and *Armida*.

As resident composer with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in the 1990s, she wrote several works for orchestra and chorus (*Forest*, *Storm,* and *We are Shadows*) which were premiered by the orchestra's then Music Director, Simon Rattle. She has also been commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra (*Music Untangled* and *Natural History*), the Minnesota Orchestra (*The Welcome Arrival of Rain*), and London Sinfonietta (*Tiger under the Table*); and has written concert works for notable singers including Jane Manning, Jessye Norman, Dawn Upshaw, and Ailish Tynan, among others.

In recent years, Judith Weir has considerably expanded her choral catalog. As associate composer with the BBC Singers (2015-2019), she completed two oratorios: *In the Land of Uz*, about the prophet Job, and *blue hills beyond blue hills*, to Zen-influenced verse by the Scottish poet Alan Spence. Her Christmas carol, *Illuminare Jerusalem,* written for Stephen Cleobury and the choir of King's College Cambridge, is regularly performed worldwide.

Now based in London, Weir has had a long association with Spitalfields Music Festival and has taught as a visiting professor at Princeton, Harvard, and Cardiff universities. Among her many honors are a Critics' Circle Award for significant contribution to music in Great Britain, the Elise L. Stoeger Prize for chamber music, and a CBE and The Queen's Medal for Music.

From 2014 to 2024, Judith Weir served as Master of the Queen's Music. In this role she composed music for national and royal occasions including the Queen's 90th birthday celebrations and the UK's official commemoration of the 1918 Armistice. She also created works for many community groups and schools, and supported music teachers, amateur orchestras and choirs, and rural festivals.

Composer's program note:

> *Music for 247 Strings* was written in 1981, in response to a request from a British violin-piano duo, Paul Barritt and William Howard. They wanted a piece that would feature genuine duo playing, rather than violin solo plus piano accompaniment. I began to imagine these two instruments combined into one big machine which had the 4 strings of the violin added to the 243 strings of the grand piano I was then working on (I have since learned that different pianos have a variable number of strings inside them).
>
> The music consists of 10 very tiny pieces played as a progression, without any breaks between them. The first few pieces are played in complete – and perhaps rather restricting – rhythmic unison. Then, in the central pieces, the instruments seem to seek some independence from each other. By the end, the violin and piano have joined together again, perhaps in a more genuine spirit of togetherness than they started out with.

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. Success would be short-lived, however. The next three years would be his last as a productive composer before succumbing to mental illness aggravated by syphilis; the disease would confine him to an asylum beginning in February 1854. Clara was not allowed to see him during this time, finally able to visit only two days before his death in July of 1856.

In typical fashion, Schumann wrote his three violin sonatas in rather quick succession in the early 1850s. The first in a minor, composed in 1851, was a relatively short work in three movements, dedicated to Joseph Wasielewski from Mendelssohn's Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. The third, from 1853, began as two movements of the aforementioned collaborative "F-A-E" Sonata for Joachim and was then expanded to a complete work, which was held back by Clara only to be rediscovered and published in 1956.

The second sonata on today's program was composed in October and November of 1851 and

dedicated to Ferdinand David, Mendelssohn's Gewandhaus concertmaster (also the dedicatee of Mendelssohn's concerto), though Joachim gave the first performance with Clara in 1853. Schumann called it a Grand Sonata, both for its length and for its scope of conception. Just the first of the four movements is nearly as long as the first sonata, beginning with a flourish and then a recitative-like statement from the violin, and then developing two themes that shift back and forth between major and minor modes and explore multiple related key areas. The second movement Scherzo culminates in a quotation from the traditional chorale melody "All praise to you, Jesus Christ," which then serves as the theme for the remarkable variations of the third movement. The finale is marked "Bewegt" (moving), and move it does, with constant rhythmic variation often led by the piano in a true partnership of equals. Joachim wrote of the d minor sonata: "I consider it one of the finest compositions of our times in respect of its marvelous unity of feeling and its thematic significance. It overflows with noble passion, almost harsh and bitter in expression, and the last movement reminds one of the sea with its glorious waves of sound."

- Gabriel Rice

Weir biography provided by the composer, edited by Gabriel Rice