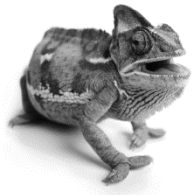

Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston
Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2024-2025 chamber music season
Up Close 2: A play of light and shadow

Sunday, April 27, 2025, 4 PM at Goethe-Institut, Boston

Program:
Ludwig van Beethoven, Trio in B-flat Major, Op. 11 "Gassenhauer"
Alexander Zemlinsky, Clarinet Trio in d minor, Op. 3
Libby Larsen, *Trio Noir* (2022)
Johannes Brahms, Trio in a minor for clarinet, cello & piano, Op. 114

Program notes by Gabriel Rice

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) was the son and grandson of professional musicians, both employed in Bonn, Germany at the court of the Electorate of Cologne. Surprisingly few details of his early years are known, but he displayed enough talent performing on both the violin and piano that he was compared to the young Mozart by a visiting teacher. He visited Vienna in 1787 and probably met and had one or more lessons with Mozart, but only stayed for two weeks due to the fatal illness of his mother. In 1789 Beethoven effectively took over the care of his family, petitioning the court for half of his alcoholic father's salary. In 1790 he met Haydn, and with the help of the Electorate of Cologne moved to Vienna to study with him beginning in November 1792. The relationship, though cordial, was not entirely happy, and – likely to Beethoven's relief – Haydn left in early 1794 to London for one of his extended stays. Beethoven now sought instruction from Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, a master of contrapuntal techniques, and also studied for a time with Antonio Salieri, particularly regarding setting Italian texts to music. By 1796, he had established a renowned career as Vienna's leading virtuoso pianist and was beginning to travel on concert tours, playing his own music and that of others, and often improvising to great acclaim.

But all would not continue happily; as early as 1801 he began to share the information of his increasing deafness, and he suffered to the point of despair with the condition for the rest of his life. Beethoven's individualistic, headstrong, often rebellious nature was only heightened by the social isolation of deafness, and his personal relationships were never smooth. Family troubles continued as well, and in 1813 he became guardian of his nephew Karl despite protracted legal battles with the boy's mother. The relationship with Karl was perpetually marked by drama, taking enormous amounts of time and energy. In 1814, at the height of his fame, Beethoven gave

his last public performance as a pianist; he could no longer function as a performer, and his loneliness and isolation only increased. As his personal struggles intensified, however, his music only reached deeper and deeper into his own soul, and plumbed further the extreme, sometimes violent, sometimes almost divine emotions of the individual human life. His great achievement as a composer can be summed up as the appropriation of the classical forms of Haydn and Mozart's generation for the new age of Romanticism, showing the world how the expression of the intensely personal can become the expression of the universal.

Beethoven chose his official Opus 1 quite deliberately: a set of three piano trios published in 1795 that would elevate the form and distinguish him from Haydn and Mozart, who both wrote trios but treated them more as light salon pieces, unlike their more "serious" string quartets and symphonies. By 1797 Beethoven's reputation was well established, and he welcomed the request of his clarinet-playing colleague Franz Josef Bähr (1770-1819) for a lighter chamber work that would utilize a melody from Joseph Weigl's recent comic opera *L'Amor Marinaro* ("The Corsair"). The hugely popular tune *Pria ch'io l'impegno* ("Before beginning this awesome task, I need a snack") was such a hit that late-night revelers around Vienna were often heard singing it in the streets – thus the subtitle *Gassenhauer*, or "Street Song."

The Opus 11 Trio is in three movements, unlike the more symphonic four-movement scope of the earlier trios, and in B-flat Major, a very friendly key for the clarinet of the time. The third movement is, of course, a wonderfully playful and innovative theme and variations – a form he would come back to masterfully many times in his career – on *Pria ch'io l'impegno*. In order to maximize the publishing potential of the piece, Beethoven also created a lightly edited version for the traditional piano trio including violin instead of clarinet, and for this reason the *Gassenhauer* trio is sometimes, but not always, referred to as his Piano Trio No. 4.

Alexander Zemlinsky (1871-1942) was born in Vienna and studied piano and composition at the Vienna Conservatory. His early works caught the attention of Brahms, and he quickly established a reputation as a pianist, conductor and composer. He conducted an amateur orchestra called the Polyhymnia, through which he made the acquaintance of the young Schoenberg. The slightly older and more formally trained Zemlinsky guided Schoenberg through his first attempts at composition, and they became close friends and eventually brothers-in-law; Schoenberg married his sister Mathilde. He had a passionate affair with Alma Schindler, but she ultimately rejected him for his friend Gustav Mahler.

For many years, Zemlinsky earned his living chiefly as a conductor of opera, obtaining the post of chief conductor of the Volksoper in Vienna, which presented the Viennese premiere of Strauss' *Salome*, and then joining Mahler at the Hofoper. In 1911, he was appointed music director of the Neues Deutches Theater in Prague, where his assistants included Carlos Kleiber, Anton Webern and George Szell. He successfully weathered the political changes during the founding of the Czech Republic, and remained a leading musical figure in Prague, serving often as an influential guest conductor of the Czech Philharmonic, until he moved to Berlin in 1927. During these years he and Schoenberg had a personal and professional falling-out but maintained high respect for each other and ultimately reconciled. Zemlinsky was forced to leave Germany in 1933, returning to Vienna and focusing on composition until finally he had to flee to the United States in 1938.

Living in New York, he suffered a stroke in 1939 and passed away three years later, all but forgotten.

Zemlinsky's music is distinguished by the highest level of craft and a tremendously expressive language that pushed the limits of tonality but never left it. In a letter to Schoenberg, he wrote: "A great artist, who possesses everything needed to express the essentials, must respect the boundaries of beauty, even if he extends them further than hitherto."

The young Zemlinsky held as his highest model for musical craft none other than Johannes Brahms, and his mature style was truly an extension of Brahms, generating the maximum possible expression and variation from the simplest thematic material. Decades later he would describe "how his music affected me and my colleagues in composition, including Schoenberg. It was fascinating, its influence inescapable, its effect intoxicating…My goal at the time was nothing less than the appropriation and mastery of this wonderful, singular composition technique…I remember how even among my colleagues it was considered particularly praiseworthy to compose in as 'Brahmsian' a manner as possible. We were soon notorious in Vienna as the dangerous 'Brahmins'"

So when Brahms got to know the younger composer and offered the critique of his earliest works that they were too loosely structured, without enough internal logic to the harmonic progressions, Zemlinsky took his words to heart. The Clarinet Trio, Op. 3, was a direct result of those efforts, and he submitted it to a competition in July 1896 sponsored by the *Wiener Tonkünstlerverein* (Viennese Society of Musicians), where Brahms was not only one of the judges but had contributed to the prize money. Though Zemlinsky did not win (he was awarded third prize), Brahms was impressed enough by the piece, and by the seriousness of Zemlinsky's efforts, to recommend it to his own publisher, Simrock. Obviously, this was a huge boost both personally and professionally, and Zemlinsky's career as a composer was launched.

Libby Larsen, born December 24, 1950 in Wilmington, Delaware, is one of America's most performed living composers. She has created a catalogue of over 500 works spanning virtually every genre from intimate vocal and chamber music to massive orchestral works and over 15 operas. Grammy award-winning and widely recorded, including over 50 CDs of her work, she is constantly sought after for commissions and premieres by major artists, ensembles, and orchestras around the world, and has established a permanent place for her works in the concert repertory.

As a vigorous, articulate advocate for the music and musicians of our time, in 1973 Larsen co-founded the Minnesota Composers Forum, now the American Composer's Forum, which has become an invaluable aid for composers in a transitional time for American arts. A former holder of the Papamarkou Chair at John W. Kluge Center of the Library of Congress, Larsen has also held residencies with the Minnesota Orchestra, the Charlotte Symphony, and the Colorado Symphony.

Composer's program note:

I composed *Trio Noir* for Romie de Guise-Langlois, clarinet; Dmitri Atapine, cello and

Hyeyeon Park, piano. I intend the piece as a film noir movie score meant to interact with your mind's eye. If you will, close your eyes and let *Trio Noir's* narrative form – *Introduction to a Flashback, Flashback, Dark Bargain, Sealed, The Caper, Doubt, Rash Action, No Way Out* – plunge into your imagination with your own crime drama and cast of characters.

I love film noir – its dark plots, femme fatales, detectives, chumps, bad guys and good, loyal women – its dark, low-key lighting and high-contrast *mise en scène*. I love the sadder-but-wiser protagonist's voice-over narration and the way it book-ends the story. Most of all I love the music – the way it creates unbearable tension, its sudden, hyper-dramatic bursts, its smoldering, sultry melodies. I hope *Trio Noir* is, for you, a quantum experience – flashing you back from our 2023 world into your own 1940/50 cinematic fantasy.

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.

By 1891 Brahms felt that he was ready to retire, that he had written all the music he needed to write. Fortunately for all of us, however, he met Richard Mühlfeld, a remarkable clarinetist and a member of the Ducal Orchestra at Meiningen. He was so impressed with Mühlfeld that he spent many hours working with him to understand the full capabilities of the instrument and then wrote two pieces for him in quick succession: the Trio for Clarinet, Cello, and Piano Op. 114 and the Quintet for Clarinet and Strings, Op. 115. Two years later he added the two sonatas, Op. 120, and soon created equally satisfying versions for viola. The Trio was premiered on December 12, 1891, with Mühlfeld, cellist Robert Hausmann of the Joachim Quartet, and the composer at the piano; the Quintet was on the same program, with the Joachim Quartet joining Mühlfeld.

Mühlfeld impressed Brahms not only with his captivating phrasing and musical sense, but also with his command of the wide array of colors available in the different ranges of the clarinet, from clear, bright high notes to the sometimes-breathy and mysterious middle, to the dark, earthy low range, known as the *chalumeau* register. The cello was the perfect partner in such timbral variation, and a friend wrote to Brahms praising "the harmonious blending of the tones of the clarinet and the cello are magnificent; it is as though the instruments were in love with each other." Brahms became quite close with Mühlfeld, calling him "Fräulein Klarinette" and "my dear nightingale," and in later years when they would go on concert tours playing the two sonatas, Brahms gave all his concert fees to his friend.

\- Gabriel Rice

Larsen biography provided by the composer, edited by Gabriel Rice