



Chameleon

Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston

Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2026-2027 chamber music season chamber series 1: I dwell in Possibility –

Saturday, October 10, 2026, 7:30 PM at First Church in Boston

Sunday, October 11, 2026, 4 PM at First Church in Boston

Program:

Benjamin Britten, Phantasy Quartet for oboe & strings, Op. 2

Elliott Carter, Woodwind Quintet (1948)

Ludwig van Beethoven, Violin Sonata No. 2 in A Major, Op. 12

John Cage, *Nocturne* for violin & piano

Richard Strauss, Piano Quartet in c minor, Op. 13, TrV 137

Program notes by Gabriel Rice

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) was the dominant British composer of the Twentieth century. In a time when western art music saw so many different strains fighting for ideological dominance, Britten maintained a personal voice grounded in lyricism and beauty without ever sounding antiquated or conventional. His earliest exposure to music was from his mother, an amateur singer, and he composed prolifically but without any real training until he met and began to study privately with Frank Bridge in 1927. He subsequently entered the Royal College of Music in 1930, at age 16, where he developed great skill as a pianist and accompanist but found composition study with John Ireland less than rewarding. Britten left the school in 1933 because the college's rules prevented him from going to Vienna to study with Alban Berg. He won the Farrar Prize for composition twice, and his early success led to many premieres and a contract with the music publisher Boosey and Hawkes in 1936. In 1937 he met and fell in love with the uniquely gifted tenor Peter Pears, who became his lifelong companion and frequent performing partner. The poet W.H. Auden was also a close friend and frequent collaborator. Britten's contributions to opera, including *Peter Grimes* (1945), *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946), *Billy Budd* (1951), *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), and *Death in Venice* (1973), among others, are widely considered to be his greatest achievements. He was the first British composer since Henry Purcell (1659-1695) to write successfully for the opera stage, and his works have become important standards of the repertoire. Britten was the first composer to be named a Peer, Baron Britten of Aldeburgh, in June 1976, five months before his death.

Returning Chameleon audiences may remember Walter Wilson Cobbett (1847-1937), the

extremely successful industrialist, philanthropist, and amateur violinist who founded the Cobbett Musical Competitions that spawned so many works of English chamber music with the word “phantasy” in their titles. Cobbett’s primary business was Scandinavia Belting, which became a leading supplier of automotive belts essential to the transmissions of Ford and other motor vehicles in the United States and Europe. By 1907 he was independently wealthy and began spending more and more of his time on his musical interests, including chamber music in his home and amateur orchestras such as the Strolling Players’ Orchestral Society. He also delivered lectures, contributed to *The Strad* magazine and *Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, established a free music library in partnership with the Society of Women Musicians, and in 1929 published the *Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, still a standard reference tool. He owned a fine collection of Cremonese violins and sponsored a competition for British luthiers. As a member of the Music in War-Time Committee during the First World War, he helped organize concerts at military camps and hospitals, in social clubs for the wives of armed forces personnel, even lunchtime concerts for munitions workers in factories, all of which provided both employment for musicians and much-needed entertainment. Between 1905 and 1919 he established the Cobbett Musical Competitions, five separate contests, all but one open only to British subjects, for various ensembles and with various guidelines. Most of them called for a “phantasy,” his own conception of an older genre, short pieces for viols called “fancies” or “fantasies” from the 16th and 17th centuries by composers such as William Byrd and Orlando Gibbons. For the purpose of the competitions a “phantasy” was defined as a piece up to 12 minutes long that may consist of different sections varying in tempi and rhythms and performed without pause.

The young Benjamin Britten had won a Cobbett prize in 1932 for his Phantasy string quintet. He submitted the Phantasy for oboe and strings in 1933 and did not win, but the celebrated oboist Léon Goossens took note and premiered it on a BBC Radio broadcast in 1933 to excellent reviews. The critic for the *London Times* noted “by comparison John Ireland’s 15-year-old pianoforte trio sounded old-fashioned” – quite a dig to Britten’s then-teacher! A performance in 1934 at the International Society for Contemporary Music Festival in Florence earned him the beginnings of his international acclaim as well. The easy lyricism of Britten’s writing for the oboe foreshadows the vocal music that would become his great strength, and the logical, engaging form of this early piece is a testament to what is perhaps his greatest gift: a direct musical language that is accessible yet retains interest and individuality.

Elliott Carter (1908-2012) was born in New York to a successful family of businesspeople. As a teenager he became interested in the modern music from Europe that was beginning to be performed in New York, and he met and befriended Charles Ives. They would often attend concerts together and discuss the modern works they heard, usually in the context of Ives parodying the “tricks” of the Europeans. Carter hadn’t yet begun to consider himself a composer, so their relationship wasn’t quite that of student and teacher. Ives’s letter of recommendation for Carter’s application to Harvard praised his character and his interests in literature and music but made no mention of compositional studies. His undergraduate years at Harvard were spent studying Greek and philosophy and taking lessons in piano, oboe and solfège at the Longy School of Music. He stayed on for an MA in music and then moved to France to study counterpoint with Nadia Boulanger. After returning to New York in 1935, Carter began to find a

mature voice as a composer and accepted a series of temporary teaching jobs throughout the 1940s and 50s. From 1964 to 1984 he taught at Juilliard, exerting a profound influence on generations of composers. He received the Pulitzer Prize in 1960 and again in 1973.

Carter was the most famous representative of American Modernism in composition, writing music that is truly complex in form, conception and execution. At its best, as in Carter's works, such music is captivating for the energy and sense of structure and drama that it creates, even with harmonic and melodic materials that can seem alienating at first. Carter has consistently remained a presence in the concert hall due to the logical and dramatic sense of momentum that he infused in every piece. Over the course of his long career his musical materials became ever more refined, and he remained an active and important composer until shortly before his death in 2012, just over a month shy of his 104th birthday.

Elliott Carter composed his woodwind quintet in 1948. Dedicated to Nadia Boulanger, the quintet was written in the neoclassical style that she had encouraged for him. In that sense, he considered it somewhat retrogressive, more like his earlier music than other works from those years. However, he noted: "I also attempted to individualize each instrument, assigning different character to each one, and that procedure anticipates some of my later writing," and "On looking over some earlier quintet works, I found the composers were in the habit of overlooking the fact that each of these instruments has a different sound. I, on the other hand, was particularly struck by this, and so decided to write a work that would emphasize the individuality of each instrument and that made a virtue of their inability to blend completely."

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. 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. From this point on 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's first three sonatas for piano and violin, published together as Opus 12, were composed in 1797-1798 and dedicated to Antonio Salieri. This is very clearly early Beethoven, still very much under the influence of his Classical models of Haydn and Mozart, but of course showing hints of the sudden changes of mood and *sturm und drang* to come. The second sonata in A Major is the most lighthearted of the three and the outer movements are particularly playful, almost like children's games in the rollicking, back-and-forth conversation between the instruments.

John Cage (1912-1992) was arguably the most influential American composer of the 20th century, the impact of his thinking extending into the worlds of dance, theater, visual art, and philosophy. Cage was born in Los Angeles and attended Pomona College before traveling to New York to study with Henry Cowell at the New School for Social Research. He returned to California in 1934 to study with Arnold Schoenberg, who became an important influence on his early work. In 1938 he moved to Seattle to work at the Cornish School where he met choreographer and dancer Merce Cunningham, who would become his lifelong partner and collaborator. Cage's early innovations used time as the primary focus for structure. He created percussion works using all kinds of found objects, as well as Asian instruments and electronic devices, and began to experiment with "prepared" piano by placing objects inside the instrument to create new sounds. His percussion group toured throughout the West Coast, and he began collaborating with Lou Harrison in San Francisco.

In 1941 Cage began a journey east with a move to Chicago and a subsequent move to New York, where he continued experimenting with prepared piano and received an award from the Guggenheim Foundation. In 1949 he met Morton Feldman and began a long and intense exchange of ideas. Along with Earl Brown and Christian Wolff, they became known as the New York School of composers, aligned with similar avant-garde movements in other arts such as abstract impressionism and improvisational theater. He became interested in Zen Buddhism, which led to the incorporation of silence as a driving force in his creative work. He wrote: "silence is not acoustic. It is a change of mind, a turning around. I devoted my music to it." It is because of this that he began using the *I Ching* for chance operations to develop works, describing his approach as "asking questions instead of making choices." His most famous "chance operation" is the infamous silent *4'33"* of 1952.

By the 1960s Cage had achieved an international reputation and was occupied by numerous commissions and speaking engagements and also became more active in other media such as painting and film. His last compositional period began in 1987 with a series of 43 numbered works which are referred to as "time bracket" pieces.

The *Nocturne* for violin and piano is an early work, composed and premiered in 1947 when Cage was 35. It displays Schoenberg's influence in its general sound-world, and of course the specifically determined notes and rhythms in traditional notation. Cage's goal with this short character piece was to blend the sounds of the violin and piano as much as possible into integrated gestures, rather than the more typical compositional strategy of highlighting their fundamental differences of articulation and sustain. The result is an enchanting, impressionistic, utterly captivating miniature.

Richard Strauss (1864-1949) was the son of Franz Joseph Strauss, longtime principal horn player of the Munich Court Orchestra. Like Mozart, he showed tremendous early promise, writing music by the time he was six years old, but unlike Mozart (and probably to his benefit) he didn't have the same prodigy upbringing in the musical centers of Europe. There was much to learn at home however; he was allowed free access to rehearsals of his father's orchestra and was much influenced in his teens by Wagner, despite his father's disapproval of the man and his music. By age 21, the young Strauss had had works performed by Hans von Bülow and other great German conductors of the day, as well as Theodore Thomas, founding conductor of the Chicago Symphony.

Writing in fairly conventional forms at the beginning, Strauss quickly took up the orchestral tone poem, a medium pioneered by Franz Liszt intended to depict a story line or, as Strauss often did, a series of events in the life of a particular character. Strauss' youthful tone poems, which made him famous in his twenties and early thirties, are marvelous showcases of the broad spectrum of color available to the modern orchestra. He then turned his attention to opera, making a sensation with the premiere of *Salome* in 1905, a bracingly modernist depiction of the brutal New Testament story adapted from Oscar Wilde's play, and following quickly with *Elektra* (1909) and *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911).

Already in high demand as an excellent conductor of opera (even before his successes as a composer in that genre) Strauss cemented his place as a leader in German musical culture with his work to secure copyright protections for composers. This put him in an awkward position during the ascent of Hitler and the National Socialists. In private he expressed opposition and resisted the restriction from working with valued Jewish colleagues, in particular the librettist Stefan Zweig. He even went so far as to refuse to call Hitler "der Führer," and a letter to Zweig critical of the Nazi regime was intercepted by the Gestapo. As a result, Strauss lost the post of president of the *Reichsmusikkammer*, and his opera to Zweig's libretto, *Die schweigsame Frau*, was banned after just four performances. He effectively salvaged his career by keeping his opinions to himself from that point on, while composing and conducting in support of the regime and cultivating relationships with certain Nazi officials. While it is not entirely accurate to say, as has sometimes been suggested, that Strauss was an anti-Semite or Nazi sympathizer, he was certainly guilty of ignoring the atrocities and selfishly acquiescing in order to maintain his status, protecting both his career and his family; his daughter-in-law was Jewish, and therefore his grandchildren were classified as "grade-one half-breeds."

As World War II progressed, the position and safety of Strauss and his family became

increasingly tenuous, and in October 1945 they fled to Switzerland, their bank accounts frozen and his royalties cut off. He was able to sell sketches for some income, and a tour to England in 1947 generated more, but his health gradually deteriorated, and he passed away in September of 1949 following a heart attack and kidney failure.

Strauss's Piano Quartet in c minor is a work from his youth, one of just a handful of chamber works written before 1890 when he devoted his energies to orchestral music and operas. His father's tastes had given him a solid grounding in the styles of Mozart and the more conservative Romantics such as Mendelssohn, but Richard's departure for Berlin at age 19 freed him to explore other influences. The quartet, composed in 1884-85 and premiered in December 1885, is clearly inspired by Brahms (he had the opportunity to meet his then-idol at the premiere of the latter's fourth symphony in October of the same year).

Similarities to the masterful chamber music of Brahms abound in the quartet, starting with the expansive four-movement structure and richly hued orchestration. The young Strauss clearly paid attention to the details as well: in the first movement particularly, he adopted a wonderfully Brahmsian style of development, spinning small motives into a large-scale structure that drives to a grand conclusion. His achievement was recognized with the first prize at the piano quartet competition sponsored in 1886 by the Tonkünstlerverein of Berlin.

- Gabriel Rice
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