

**Chamber Music Seminar:
Prof. Edward A. Parson, Michigan Law School, 2007-2008:**

Notes for the Second Session, November 14

The next meeting of the chamber music series will be next Wednesday, November 14, at our house -- 1814 Hermitage Road.

For this session, we have a live reading/performance of the two string sextets of Brahms (1833-1897), with four performance faculty from the UM Music School -- Aaron Berofsky (violin, also concertmaster of the Ann Arbor Symphony), Yehonatan Berick (violin), Kathryn Votapek (Viola), and Richard Aaron (cello) -- plus visiting professor Susan Crawford (viola) and Ted Parson (cello).

Please come a few minutes early this time by 7:45 PM. The music will start a few minutes after 8:00.

Since we won't have time to talk about these works before playing them, I'm providing a little primer here.

String Sextets of Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

A string sextet is an ensemble of two violins, two violas, and two cellos i.e., you take a conventional string quartet and add a second viola and second cello, so the three instruments are at equal strength. Since it takes only three or four instruments to create full harmonies, the additional two instruments give lots of extra flexibility in the writing creating a thicker, lush sound (also *louder!*), and using the extra instruments to create a wider range of textures, effects, and theatrical gestures e.g., doubling a melody by having it played in parallel on two instruments, passing fragments of a melody back and forth in turn between two instruments, or various coloristic techniques like a little plucked string (*pizzicato*) here, a little shimmering or oscillation there. (all without leaving the rest of the harmony under-staffed).

The two sextets are each in four movements: These are both young works, the first written at age 25, the second at age 31. In his youth, Brahms was a great virtuoso on the piano and his earliest compositions including his earliest chamber music -- were all for the piano. These are the first two pieces he wrote for strings without a piano. He was rather daunted by the great expectations that were thrust on him early in his career -- at last, the true heir of Beethoven! -- and approached with particular diffidence the forms in which Beethoven wrote his greatest works. For example, he didn't start work on his first symphony until age 29 or 30, and didn't finish it for 14 years! In chamber music, he started with works centered on the piano, and when he moved with these works to string-only composition, he opted for the sextet a rarely used form instead of inviting comparisons with Beethoven by writing a string quartet. (This would be akin to, perhaps worse than, say Wayne Gretzky's kid wanting to be a hockey player and being pretty good at it).

Brahms tended to write longer works in his youth, more condensed and economical ones in his old age. These ones fit the mold. They are expansive, moderate in speed in the big movements, with lots of big long sweet singing melodies.

The first is much more popular, simple, and accessible e.g., it's been used in several films and even on the soundtrack for one episode of Star Trek: Next Generation, where it is mis-identified in the script as a Mozart string quartet. (This allegation is from the liner notes on a recording, which I have not been able to confirm or deny.)

Sextet No. 1, Op. 18, in B-flat major (1858).

The four movements are:

- Allegro, ma non troppo (a very lyrical, sweet piece in sonata form)
- Andante, ma moderato (a set of variations on a somber theme)
- Scherzo (a medium-fast, kind of jocose piece with a gentle good humor the character is perfect for the recessional at a wedding, for which a friend recently used it.)
- Rondo (poco allegretto e grazioso) happy, gentle, good humored.

Sextet No. 2 in G major Opus 36.

This second sextet, written five years later, after Brahms had moved from his native Hamburg to Vienna, is more serious and complex, more intellectual, more beloved by musicians (if I may presume to generalize), and (unsurprisingly) less popular i.e, I'm fairly confident it has not been used on a Star Trek soundtrack. It has a more ethereal character, the themes are (mostly) more abstract and less like simple songs, there's more counterpoint, more exploration of complex relationships among thematic material, etc.

The four movements are:

- Allegro non troppo
- Scherzo: Allegro non troppo
- Poco adagio
- Poco allegro

Here's a nice description of the work, from a CD review:

The piece as a whole is romantic and highly expressive, yet over all there hovers an air of restraint and mystery. It opens with an allegro that rejoices in the wide range offered by the six instruments. Over a murmuring drone in the first viola the first violin states the emotional initial theme - a sinuous, rising and falling melody charged with poignancy. The spaciousness of this opening is enhanced by the echoes awakened in the lower instruments at every pause in the melody's flight. After the cello repeats the melody it immediately begins a romantic theme that is picked up by the violin which soars to its highest reaches before the music subsides and the opening mood is recaptured. Then

follows an imaginative development section in which fragments of the first theme are brought into intricate contrapuntal relationships with each other before Brahms ends the movement. The scherzo begins with a lyrical, delicate melody that features the upper instruments playing over a pizzicato figure in the lower strings. The mood wavers between wistfulness and gentle playfulness before breaking into a rousing peasant dance. This is soon followed by a return to the gossamer strains of the opening scherzo before ending on an urgent note. The third movement was once characterized as "variations on no theme" - the melody not being considered distinctive enough to form the basis for the imaginative variations. That being said, it remains an extremely moving piece of music, reaching soaring emotional heights and then subsiding into a restful, soothing extended passage that brings the movement to conclusion. The concluding allegro opens with a nervous, edgy introduction that soon gives way to a lyrical singing first theme. The restless beginning alternates with broad, melodic passages and brilliant development of the various motifs until the piece surges to an end with a stirring, joyful coda.

Finally, I have to note that Brahms had an extremely troubled love life – in flippant modern language, we might say he had commitment issues – and these works were written around the time of two particularly painful affairs. Many writers on music find impressively specific and literal references to composers' life events in their works, and these works, especially the second, have provided plenty of grist for such speculation. While obviously there is some level on which there is probably (or maybe there must be) some truth to this stuff, I suspect there's a lot of projection going on. Nevertheless, here are a couple of examples of what modern writers say on the subject of these works and Brahms love life.

The remarkable piece we will hear tonight is permeated with the bittersweet melancholy peculiar to much of Brahms' work. It was completed in 1864 when the composer was 31 and had not yet assumed the mantle of Beethoven's logical successor. Although he never married, Brahms would fall in love many times during the course of his life. The sextet in G was written in part to provide emotional closure to a failed romantic relationship with Agathe von Seibold whom the composer met in 1858. Declaring his love but pronouncing himself "unable to wear fetters", his aversion to marriage caused the affair to end unhappily. Always feeling that "I have played the scoundrel toward Agathe", he used the sextet to clear his conscience. He wove the letters of her name into the second theme of the first movement and wrote to a friend "I have freed myself from my last love".

A sense of foreboding is also marked by the emergence of the theme which appears in unison octaves: it hints at Brahms' personal despair following the agony of his failed romances of both Agathe von Siebold and Clara Schumann.

And my over-the-top favorite:

"What kind of man loves a married woman, pulls away when she is free, turns to another, then withdraws his proposal after she has accepted it? Brahms's String

Sextets, written after his fractures with Clara Schumann and Agathe von Siebold, are among his most revealing works, the first hinting at his crippling insecurity, the second spelling out Agathe's name in its first movement. The Nash Ensemble's passionate reading may be too purple. Occasionally there is a cluttering of texture. Yet the intense, heel of the bow emotionality of this recording is also its most compelling aspect. A red wine, red meat disc from the must-have boutique label." (The Independent, 27 May 2007)

I look forward to seeing you all tomorrow evening.