

Left Bank Concert Society
Saturday, February 25, 2012 8 p.m.
American University

Casting a Long Shadow

Brahms struggled for years with the enormity of Beethoven's shadow, reputedly □ composing and destroying some twenty quartets before allowing this one, honed to □ crystalline impact, to stand. Bruch's and Webern's later 'responses' to the Brahms □ challenge, each legitimate, and written in startlingly close proximity, provide a □ fascinating study in contrasts.

Program notes by Bonnie Jo Dopp

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) String Quartet No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 51, No. 1 (1865, rev. 1873)

After many attempts, Brahms at 40 was at last confident in his ability to work out a sonata idea in the exposed, demanding medium of the string quartet in a way that exemplified the logical emergence of a big musical thought: what Schoenberg later characterized as 'developing variation.' We expect the descriptor 'concise' to appear in essays about Anton Webern's music, but when compared to the expansiveness of the late string quartets of Beethoven, the first published string quartet from Brahms is a model of thoughtfully constructed compact musical expression. Few keys are explored in its four movements. Sonata forms prevail (except for the ABA third movement, which includes a sweet landler-like trio), thematic elements appear, develop, emerge elsewhere, then bloom with new color as the quartet progresses, and rhythms are superimposed, creating simultaneous moods. Austere, balanced, *Classical* (even though appearing in the midst of a long period where a *Romantic* aesthetic prevailed), this work is appropriately dedicated to Brahms's friend Theodor Billroth, an amateur musician who found Wagner's contemporaneous lush operatic output appalling. It displays well what Leon Botstein has labeled Brahms's "trademark characteristics of ruthless clarity, economy, invention, emotional intensity without sentimentality, and unerring sense of proportion."

For further exploration:

The Compleat Brahms: A Guide to the Musical Works of Johannes Brahms, Leon Botstein, ed. (Norton, 1999). Thirty contributors from academe and music journalism analyze, explain, explore, and sometimes simply express appreciative wonder at Brahms's craft and artistry. All text; no musical examples or illustrations.

Anton Webern (1883–1945) Sechs Bagatellen, Op. 9 (1911 and 1913)

Anton Webern's fame for conciseness in musical expression is well exemplified in *Sechs Bagatellen für Streichquartett, Op. 9*. Arnold Schoenberg was asked to write a preface to the published score (1924). He said, "Though the brevity of these pieces is a persuasive

advocate for them, on the other hand that very brevity itself requires an advocate. Consider what moderation is required to express oneself so briefly.”

The single-page Bagatelles were composed in 1911 (two through five) and 1913 (one and six), before Webern followed Schoenberg’s lead into dodecaphonic techniques that imposed the rule of twelve on pitch lines and which Webern took even further, serializing rhythm, dynamics, and even timbre. Before that came Webern’s ‘atonal’ period of breaking with tradition (such as the music of Brahms) and trying new ways of expressing musical ideas. Theorist Alan Forte considers all Webern’s Bagatelles remarkable but judges the nine-measure sixth one as especially original, “quite unlike anything in the history of music.”

Writing during the time these unusual pieces were published, critic Edwin Evans declared that Webern’s music was “rebellious against verbal elucidation.” He complained that describing what happens in this music would require reproducing the whole score, since every note is crucial. Evans felt that understanding Webern’s short, atonal pieces for string quartet is best accomplished from inside them: players should aim for the extraordinarily difficult task of creating a true ensemble in performance. When a melody line consists of single notes from different instruments using individual tone production techniques (bowing, plucking, striking, creating harmonics, to name a few) and meanwhile complex rhythmic and dynamic matters demand attention, the concentrated *listening* required to execute or understand the music makes both musicians and audiences appreciate the miniature dimension of the scores.

A critic at their premiere described the Bagatelles as “melodies in one breath” that are “uncommonly variegated, iridescent, and suspenseful.” Evans himself later wrote, “In the end, it amounts to this: To those who believe that all music can be ‘explained,’ this is not music, but to those who regard the analytical as an elementary mode of musical apprehension, these suggestive pieces are as stimulating as they are intriguing.”

For further exploration:

By the 1990s, intrepid music theorists had tangled with ‘explaining’ the work of many ‘difficult’ twentieth-century composers. For a detailed technical analysis of *Six Bagatelles, Op. 9* see chapter 8 of *The Atonal Music of Anton Webern* by Allen Forte (Yale University Press, 1998). Among other things, Forte discovers “Renaissance proportions” in them (Webern had written his doctoral dissertation on a Renaissance composer) and points out that Webern opens the sixth Bagatelle with his personal motto: A, E, B – notes signifying letters from his name.

Max Bruch (1838–1920)

Viola Quintet in A Minor, Op. posthumous (1918)

Although Max Bruch’s first violin concerto is a staple of the repertoire and his *Kol Nidrei* for cello and orchestra is often heard as well, some of Bruch’s chamber works have only recently come to light.

Though Max Bruch composed his A-minor string quintet in 1918, it was not published until 1991 because the original manuscript was lost. Not until 70 years later did Irish composer John Beckett discover a set of handwritten score-and-parts for this ‘viola quintet’ in the BBC music library. Beckett (a cousin of Samuel Beckett) had a special interest in the music of Bruch; in his position as program producer for BBC Radio 3 he created nine shows in 1988 to celebrate the sesquicentennial of Bruch’s birth. While doing research for these, he found that in 1937, the BBC had broadcast a live performance of the Bruch A-minor viola quintet, with performers using handwritten parts from the BBC’s own library. The scores were copies made by Bruch’s daughter-in-law Gertrude and dated November 1918. Nobody knows how they came to the BBC, but soon after finding them and programming another performance of the piece, Beckett set about preparing an edition for publication (1991), which required close attention to correcting Gertrude’s inevitable ‘scribal errors.’

In his 2007 obituary of Beckett in *The Guardian*, John Calder wrote, “He was a man of strong likes and dislikes and this strength of reaction showed itself in many ways and often highlighted a highly individualistic and usually unfashionable taste.” The music of Max Bruch was evidently one of Beckett’s ‘strong likes,’ so Bruch’s legacy owes part of its potency (and return to ‘fashion’) to the Irishman’s determination to put his compositional skills to work resurrecting this otherwise lost quintet.

Bruch himself held strong views and he disliked musical ‘innovations’ as exemplified by Liszt and Wagner. The Quintet is in late-nineteenth century German Romantic style and the shadow of Brahms is easily heard in it. If Brahms struggled with the shade of an historic composer, imagine how Bruch may have felt about working contemporaneously with Brahms. Born just five years after Brahms, Bruch described his 32-year relationship with Brahms as filled with “highly strange experiences” and said he found Brahms to be “unique and prickly.” Bruch complained that unlike Brahms, he had a family to support with his scores and was therefore required to write “works that were pleasing and easy to understand.” He honored the older composer by dedicating his Symphony in E-flat Major to Brahms in 1870, but he maintained, “There was never anything to quarrel about in my music as there was in that of Brahms.”

The Quintet contains all that listeners may expect in solid, unquarrelsome concert music: a slow introduction followed by a sonata-allegro that contains major/minor modulations, a sprightly scherzo, a meltingly expressive slow movement (Brahms might have approved!), and a rousing sonata-rondo finale. Expected cadences, hummable tunes, richness of timbre (that extra viola adds presence) – this is music from a master who knew what worked and did not aim to fix what he felt was not broken.

Bonnie Jo Dopp (MLS, MM) is Librarian Emerita from the Michelle Smith Performing Arts Library at the University of Maryland. She has been writing about music for more than thirty years.