Monday, November 18, 2024 • 7:30 PM

Westminster Hall at Westminster Presbyterian Church

ACCORDO

Susie Park, violin • Rebecca Albers, viola
Tony Ross, cello • Rieko Aizawa, piano

Sonata for Cello & Piano (1915) — Claude Debussy (1862–1918)
- Prologue: Lent, sostenuto e molto risoluto
- Sérénade: Modérément animé
- Final: Animé, léger et nerveux

Ross, Aizawa

Piano Quartet in A Minor (ca 1876) — Gustav Mahler (1860–1911)
- Nicht zu schnell

Park, Albers, Ross, Aizawa

***D'un Matin du Printemps* for Piano Trio** (1917) — Lili Boulanger (1893–1918)

Park, Ross, Aizawa

Intermission

Piano Quartet No. 2, Op. 26 (1861) — Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)
- Allegro non troppo
- Poco adagio
- Scherzo. Poco allegro - Trio
- Finale. Allegro

Park, Albers, Ross, Aizawa

PLEASE SILENCE ALL ELECTRONIC DEVICES

Sonata for Cello & Piano (1915)
Claude Debussy
(b. Saint-Germain-en-Laye, 1862; d. Paris, 1918)

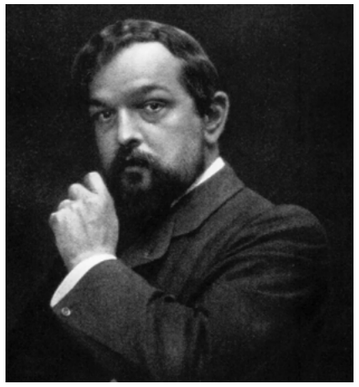
The year 1914—one year before Debussy began writing his cello sonata—Germany declared war on France in WW1. When they began shelling his beloved Paris, Debussy packed everything (including his many cats) and moved to the country to find sanctuary. What awaited him there were really two wars: WW1, and the battle he was fighting with colon cancer that would take his life in less than four years*.

Needing distraction, he buried himself in his work, embarking on a project to compose a series of six sonatas for different instruments (only three were written.) He resolved "to give proof, however small it may be, that not even 30 million Germans can defeat French thought." The first sonata he finished was for cello and piano.

However, Debussy's biggest issue with Germany preceded the war, and it was a musical one, stemming from the question that he and other French composers were asking themselves: "What does it mean to be a French musician?" Debussy decided that to be French in all things musical, essentially meant rejecting all things German. At that time in history, the footprint of Germanic music was huge, prompting French musicians to think deeply about what made them "French." Debussy once made a lengthy statement on Gallic ideals, comparing French clarity and elegance with German length and heaviness:

> *"To a Frenchman, finesse and nuance are the daughters of intelligence. A French musician for example, should not pile sonority upon sonority, that would be un-French. Artists should exercise self-control and restraint."*

He made it his mission to 'liberate' music from the shackles of every tradition that music held dear, things like traditional forms, conventional harmonies, and ordered four-bar phrases. Debussy wanted to tear down the House of Music and didn't care about the consequences, while establishing a new musical aesthetic that was quintessentially French. His music was amorphous and liquid with delicate changes in color, and soft, indefinite



Claude Debussy

cadences. His rhythm was flexible and would seem to defy the bar-line, sometimes combining several complex rhythms at once. He became synonymous with of this new movement of French "impressionist" composers, a title borrowed from the art movement of the same name.

In 1915, with war raging around him and in declining health, he sets to work on the cello sonata. On the title page of the manuscript appear the words "Claude Debussy, Musicien Français," no doubt a pointed editorial comment that this work would not be cast in the time-honored mold of the German masters.

The opening movement presents a confidently singing theme in the cello, that by turns brings ecstatic outbursts and calm sighs. Debussy took care to advise that "the piano must not fight the cello but accompany it." The middle movement *(Sérénade)* is almost jazz-like in the way the partners trade both riffs and roles: the piano in a dual role of melodic partner with the cello, and at times, a bluesy accompanist, while the cello trades roles as well: bowed in its upper register trading riffs with the piano, with the lowest notes plucked out in syncopations like an upright jazz bass. The Finale, as in the previous movements, leaves the cellist scarcely a moment's rest and is marked by extreme shifts in tempos and the striking juxtaposition of unrelated tonalities.

As Aaron Copland said of Debussy, "His work incited a whole generation of composers to experiment with new and untried harmonic possibilities."

> ***Sidebar:** an achievement that Debussy probably wishes was not in the historical record, was that he was one of the very first people to ever get a colostomy in response to his colon cancer. (Sorry Claude. Just doing my job. – M.A.)

Piano Quartet in A Minor (ca 1876)
Gustav Mahler (b. Bohemia, 1860; d. Vienna, 1911)

If you know anything about Gustav Mahler, you might be scratching your head about this piece, because most people had no idea that he wrote any chamber music at all. In fact, nobody knew, until it was discovered by Mahler's widow Alma Mahler in 1964. It is his earliest surviving work, written when he was a 16-year-old conservatory student, thought to be the first movement of a longer work that he never finished, along with a brief 44-bar sketch for a *scherzo*.

The Piano Quartet provides an interesting peek inside young Gustav's head at a seminal point in his early development. In hindsight, we know he would become a *monumentalist* who excelled at writing massive works for large symphony orchestras, yet here he is, in the intimate confines of a piano quartet. Orchestrally, Mahler paints on a huge sonic canvas and can be at times grandiose. While it is much harder to be grandiose with the small forces of a piano quartet, he gets credit for trying, nonetheless. You will hear traces of his mentors (Brahms, Schumann, Bruckner, and Wagner make appearances), but this example of a budding genius at 16 might best be described (to borrow from James Joyce) as "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man".

***D'un Matin du Printemps* for Piano Trio** (1917)
Lili Boulanger (b. Paris, 1893; d. Mézy-sur-Seine, 1918)

As with Debussy's Cello Sonata, Boulanger's *D'un Matin de Printemps* was composed during WW1. Completed along with its companion piece *D'un Soir triste ("Of a Sad Evening")*, Boulanger was only 24 years old and suffering terribly from tuberculosis which would end her life just two months after its completion. By this time, she had already made a name for herself as the first woman ever to win the prestigious Prix de Rome and was lauded for her unique voice among her fellow Impressionists. *D'un Matin* exists in multiple versions: for orchestra, for violin and piano, flute and piano, and this version for piano trio.

Born in Paris to a family of musicians, Lili contracted bronchial pneumonia as a toddler, leaving her in a chronically weakened state and susceptible to tuberculosis. Her older sister Nadia became the most famous musician of the family, as the 20th-century's most influential teacher and mentor of composers (including Aaron Copland and Ástor Piazzolla), but she remained Lili's greatest champion as she worked to preserve her legacy.

QUICK NOTES

SHORT NOTES WITH THE NEED-TO-KNOW

C. Debussy: Sonata for Cello & Piano
Written in 1915 Debussy's cello sonata was the first of his unfinished project Six sonatas for various instruments. Only three were written, including the sonata for flute, viola and harp (1915), and the sonata for violin and piano (1916–1917).

G. Mahler: Piano Quartet in A Minor
Mahler's Piano Quartet is his earliest surviving work, written when he was a 16-year conservatory, and thought to be the first movement of a longer work he never finished.

L. Boulanger: *D'un Matin du Printemps*
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J. Brahms: Piano Quartet No. 2, Op. 26
Brahms started work on the Piano Quartet No. 2 shortly after Robert Schumann's death—his most important mentor. Many scholars find that this piece can be seen through a lens of the composer's love of Franz Schubert's music, and Vienna, the city that Brahms was fated to adopt.

Piano Quartet No. 2, Op. 26 (1861)
Johannes Brahms
(b. Hamburg, 1833; d. Vienna, 1897)

Brahms' A major Piano Quartet was written right on the heels of his enormously successful first Piano Quartet in G minor Op. 25. He had an odd habit of producing things in pairs, often working simultaneously on two different works of the same genre. He wrote two overtures that way, as he did two sets of vocal waltzes, two orchestral serenades, his first two symphonies, two string quartets, the two clarinet/viola sonatas, and his first two piano quartets. Apparently once he'd started on a work, he'd get interested in all the challenges and problems to be solved, and he'd start working on another one almost right away.

How he managed to do this yet not have the pairs turn out anything alike is amazing. The two piano quartets, for example, have very different characters. When the G minor quartet was premiered—with Brahms himself at the piano—the audience was hugely impressed, and the violinist who played it proclaimed he was "Beethoven's heir."

The Viennese were so taken by this handsome young gent from Hamburg, that they couldn't wait for his next piece. They didn't have to wait long, as Brahms had the just-finished A major piano quartet waiting in the wings for the premiere just thirteen days later. It is also Brahms' longest piece of chamber music. But fear not, because as with most great composers, their genius lies in their ability to beguile us with such inspired music that time seems to stand still.

He started work on the Piano Quartet No. 2 shortly after Robert Schumann's death—his most important mentor. Many scholars find that this piece can be seen through a lens of the composer's love of Franz Schubert's music, and Vienna, the city that Brahms was fated to adopt. By the time Brahms had relocated to Vienna from Hamburg there was a revival of interest in Schubert's instrumental music and chamber music in general.

There are many passages in this piece that seem to suggest, if not memorialize Schubert. A good example is the first movement's main theme — four lyrical measures featuring the piano alone that alternates gently flowing eighth notes with triplets. The cello joins at the fifth bar with an important scale figure that reoccurs throughout the movement. These initial ideas, as unassuming as they may first sound, provide a wealth of material for Brahms to develop. The entire first movement has an underlying lyricism that would have made Herr Schubert proud.

The *Poco adagio* movement is in rondo form (ABACADAE...) and is one of Brahms' most exquisitely beautiful slow movements. The sweet, childlike innocence of the main theme defines this movement, which returns several times in slightly varied form. All the strings are muted as the piano plays in a soft register. The effect is veiled and intimate.

The Scherzo and Trio combined are much longer than would be considered "usual," as Brahms decided to set both in Sonata form. This means that the thematic material presented in both sections undergoes considerable development, making for quite a hefty structure. But then again, this is a hefty piece.

The finale is surely the liveliest movement so far, with the syncopated opening theme suggesting a Gypsy influence, as in the finale of Brahms' first Piano Quartet Op. 25, but this time less frantic. The intensity and drive build throughout, leading to a spirited and satisfying conclusion.

Enough with the sublime, how about the mundane: Brahms dedicated the A major Piano Quartet to his hospitable landlady back in Hamburg, where he was living while composing this piece.