

## **Bay Chamber Concerts**

### *Program Notes*

## **Chamber Music All Stars**

Sunday, October 12, 2008 at 4:00 p.m.

Rockport Opera House

### **WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)**

*Piano Quartet in E flat, K.493*

*Allegro*

*Larghetto*

*Allegretto*

### **SAMUEL BARBER (1910-1981)**

*String Quartet in B minor, Op. 11*

*Molto allegro e appassionato*

*Molto adagio – attacca:*

*Molto allegro (con prima)*

### **JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)**

*String Sextet No. 1, in B flat, Op. 36*

*Allegro ma non troppo*

*Andante, ma moderato*

*Scherzo. Allegro molto*

*Rondo. Poco Allegretto e grazioso*

### **WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)**

*Piano Quartet in E flat, K.493*

Living the last decade of his short life in the musically sophisticated city of Vienna, Mozart hoped to succeed as a freelance composer, aiming to balance the demands of the marketplace with his own inward needs as a musician. To make a living, he needed the public to purchase his new music. The public, however, had plenty of composers to choose from and, like the public everywhere, it knew what it liked. The two piano quartets that Mozart wrote in the mid-1780s show the precarious nature of his chosen life.

They were commissioned as part of a planned set of three by the Viennese music publisher Franz Anton Hoffmeister. The G minor Piano Quartet, K.478 was the first to be printed, in 1785, but it had little success among Viennese music lovers. The following year, Hoffmeister had already engraved the printing plates for the E flat Piano Quartet to be played today when he felt it necessary to withdraw from the venture. "Write more popularly, or else I can neither print nor pay for any more of your music," he said to Mozart. Despite Mozart's assurance that he designed his music to please both learned and musically naive listeners, Hoffmeister sold the engraved parts to another Viennese publisher. Mozart never composed the third piano quartet.

Outside Vienna, however, things were brighter. By mid-1788, the correspondent of a Weimar-based journal, the *Journal des Luxus und der Moden*, was reporting on the popularity of the E flat Quartet: "The cry soon made itself heard - 'Mozart has written a very special new quartet and such-a-such a princess or countess possesses and plays it!' This excited curiosity and led to the rash resolve to produce this original composition at grand and noisy concerts and to make a parade with it. . ."

In the report lay both the key to Mozart's success with the public and a hint of the pitfalls that lay ahead. Chamber music with piano was largely the pursuit of middle- and upper-class families, with both time and money on their hands. Their daughters tended to be pianists; their sons, string players. They played for the own enjoyment, often at sight. Their preference was for *galant* music – for polite, charming music that didn't make too many demands on its players. The string parts had to be independent from the piano. After all, if the pianist was indisposed, the string players would have to make do on their own. The outcome was inevitable. "This is what happened innumerable times last winter," the Weimar correspondent reported, recognizing the fine line between public and private music-making. "Many another piece keeps some countenance even when indifferently performed. But this product of Mozart's can in truth hardly bear listening to when it falls into mediocre and amateur hands and is negligently played. . . What a difference when this much-advertised work of art is performed with the highest degree of accuracy by four skilled musicians who have studied it carefully, in a quiet room."

Mozart wrote his E flat masterpiece one month after completing *The Marriage of Figaro*. In feeling, it is generally optimistic throughout. The tender slow movement is the centerpiece of the quartet - a gentle, wistful movement whose mood matches that of the Countess's *Porgi amor* in Act 2 of *Figaro*. Alfred Einstein called the theme of the finale "the purest, most childlike and godlike melody ever sung." With his two piano quartets, Mozart virtually invented the medium; there are no real precedents. Writing just a few days before Mozart's death, November 30, 1791, one critic appreciated what Vienna failed to recognize – stating that the E flat Quartet was written with "that fire of the imagination and that correctness, which long since won for Herr Mozart the reputation as one of the finest composers in Germany."

### **SAMUEL BARBER (1910-1981)**

*String Quartet in B minor, Op. 11*

The slow movement of Samuel Barber's only string quartet, widely known as the *Adagio for strings*, is one of the icons of American music, a piece for occasions of State mourning and many movie soundtracks. Its success in sharing a profound feeling of loss, hope and comfort with its audience dates back to 1938 when it was the first piece of American music to be played by Toscanini and his newly formed NBC Symphony. Barber had sent Toscanini his transcription of the slow movement from the two year-old string quartet on spec. The very success of the *Adagio for strings* had the effect of eclipsing the original version for quartet, so much so that music-lovers might now wonder, from time to time, what the rest of the quartet is 'like'.

Its composition did not come easily to the 26 year-old composer. He worked on the piece in the late summer of 1936 close to Salzburg, in a picturesque alpine chalet he and the composer Gian Carlo Menotti had rented. It was the sort of setting where, Menotti said, "you have to stop in the middle of the day to say to yourself: 'This is too wonderful.'" Barber, however, made slow progress on his quartet. "How difficult it is," he wrote to his former composition teacher. "It

seems to be that because we have so assiduously forced our personalities on Music – on Music, who never asked for them! – we have lost elegance. And if we cannot recapture elegance, the quartet form has escaped us forever. It is a struggle.” With the completion of the slow movement, Barber’s spirits lifted. “It is a knockout,” he wrote to his friend, the cellist Orlando Cole. The third movement, however, continued to trouble him for a long time. Barber only arrived at a solution after the quartet had been publicly performed. He dropped the original long finale and re-wrote it as the much shorter movement we will hear today.

Of the three movements, the third is, in fact, a much shortened recapitulation of - and coda to - the first. In the middle comes the lovely *Adagio*. The outer movements contain two contrasted ideas: a rhythmic, striving and slightly astringent theme and a gentler, pulsing theme, which is rather reminiscent of plainchant. The emotional center of the work is the haunting *Adagio*, written a striking step downwards from the prevailing B minor of the outer movements, in the key of B flat minor. The *Adagio* has extraordinary power, generated, to a large degree, by its restless, forward-moving harmony. As it progresses inexorably onward, the harmony is constantly interrupted and never permitted a resolution. A melody unfolds, first in the violin, then on viola and finally on cello. As the music soars ever higher, the tension increases, reaching an almost unbearable climax close to the upper limit of the quartet’s register. Now, after repeated probing and questioning, Barber provides some release, as a major chord shines through the unforgiving minor tonality. As the music returns to its restless questioning, its urgency has been diffused. The mood gives way to resignation, and comfort is offered. Barber’s genius lies in his ability to tap into a form of universal grief and express it in music.

The quartet was first performed in Rome by the Pro Arte String Quartet in December 1936. It was to be Barber’s only string quartet. “I’ve never been able to manage string quartet writing very well,” he wrote when he began to write a second quartet, a little over a decade later. He never completed that work.

### **JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)**

*String Sextet No. 1, in B flat, Op. 36*

This is the first of Brahms’s chamber works without piano and his first published work for strings. Although he was just 27 when he wrote it in 1860, its polished, carefully crafted structure reflects the thorough grounding he had given himself. Brahms had already written several string quartets, a musical form he – and the 19<sup>th</sup> century in general – regarded as the pinnacle of chamber music for strings. But he had found none of them worthy of publishing. In fact, the hyper-critical Brahms is known to have destroyed 20 quartets before arriving at the one we now know as his first. The B flat sextet, for two violins, two violas and two cellos, was one of the steps along the journey he took to arrive at a solution to the challenge of the string quartet. Its particular combination of instruments was almost without precedent - although the starting point may have been a Sextet by the violinist and composer Louis Spohr, published a few years earlier. Brahms is believed to have been unfamiliar with an even earlier sextet, by Boccherini. Neither of these precedents was meaty enough for Brahms to feel the weight of tradition bearing down on him, as he did with both the medium of the string quartet and the symphony. Free from what he referred to as “the tramp of giants,” he wrote the B flat Sextet after the two Serenades of the late 1850s. All these works share an optimism of outlook, an expansiveness of scale and a generally joyful spirit.

The first movement opens with a glorious melody from the first cello and its effect on the listener is not unlike the effect of taking a warm bath in the dead of winter. But, like many apparently spontaneous gestures throughout the work, this striking opening was not arrived at easily. The cello melody – the first 10 bars of the piece - was actually added *after* the première of the work, at the suggestion of the violinist Joseph Joachim. Reworking, rewriting and worrying over details were all part of Brahms's normal working practice throughout his life. As a result, he often provides a complex infrastructure under the most seamless of phrases. Throughout the sextet, the first cello frequently takes the lead while the second cello provides the bass line. Together, they help emphasize the mellow, tenor register of the overall ensemble. This is just one point of similarity with the great C major String Quintet of Schubert, to which work the B flat Sextet is, in many ways, a key successor.

Throughout his life, Brahms continued to make a deep study of counterpoint and Baroque techniques and it informed virtually every piece he wrote. In the slow movement of the sextet it takes the form of a sequence of variations on a favorite theme from the Baroque, known as *La folia*. There are three variations in the minor key, two in the major and then an extended coda. Although the character of the original is somewhat changed, the spirit of many an 18<sup>th</sup> century set of variations on the theme is sonorously recreated in Brahms's 19<sup>th</sup> century clothes. By progressively subdividing the beat in the first three variations Brahms gives the impression of increasing the speed, working towards the low, rumbling cello scales and mysterious atmosphere of the third variation. This variation may well have colored Rachmaninoff's thinking when he came to write his own variations on this same theme (which he titled *Variations on a theme of Corelli*). At the same time, the discipline and rigor of the writing shows that Bach's Chaconne was never very far from Brahms's mind when composing the movement.

The Scherzo, with its exuberant trio, has the character of a rustic dance. It contrasts with the easy-going, expansive finale, which, in the first of several parallels with the first movement, opens with a resonant cello melody. It concludes with a spirited coda. The première of the B flat Sextet was given in Brahms's hometown of Hanover by the augmented Joachim Quartet, with the composer present. Within the next few decades, Dvořák, Rimsky-Korsakov, Raff, Gade, Schoenberg and Tchaikovsky each wrote a sextet to build on the tradition initiated by Brahms's pioneering work.

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