

## 29 November 2015 The Aronowitz Ensemble Programme notes by Chris Darwin

### Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) Selection from “Cypresses” for string quartet (1887)

In 1865 Dvořák was working as a viola player in the orchestra pit of the Prague Provisional Theatre, which had lured Smetana back from Göteborg to be its conductor. To help make ends meet Dvořák gave piano lessons, and fell in love with one of his pupils, Josefína Čermáková. He composed 18 love songs for her, settings of poems by Gustav Pflieger-Moravský. She did not return his affection and so Dvořák, like Mozart, eventually married the younger sister. Dvořák retained an affection for Josefína; in 1894, news that she was dying inspired the slow movement of his cello concerto. Some 20 years after writing the songs, in 1887, Dvořák made an arrangement for string quartet of twelve of them.

The poet Moravský was a member of the *Májovci* ("May School"), a significant group of Czech writers, who, after the fall of the old order in the Revolution of 1848, reintroduced Czech as a literary language and promoted liberty, democracy and social justice. Moravský's Cypress poems, however, tell of unrequited love and of the attractiveness of death, given the circumstances. The cypress tree is rich in associations with death. Ovid tells how Cyparissus mistakenly killed his friend Apollo's pet deer, threw himself onto the ground in inconsolable grief and was metamorphosed into a Cypress tree with tears of sap on its trunk - all good stuff for a lovelorn young composer.

### Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Sonata in D for cello & piano Op 102 No 2 (1815)

Allegro con brio

Adagio con molto sentimento d'affetto

Allegro

Beethoven's five cello sonatas cover all three of his major creative periods: the first two (Op 5) were written when he was a young piano virtuoso of 25, the third Op 69 is from his 'middle' period while the two Op 102 cello sonatas, together with the contemporary Op 101 piano sonata, mark the start of Beethoven's 'late' period. They come at the end of a frustratingly unproductive time for a man beset by both personal and political problems: deteriorating health, a troublesome nephew and the cultural brutality of Metternich's Austria. The Op 102 cello sonatas are dedicated to Beethoven's stalwart friend the amateur pianist Countess Marie Erdödy, on whose estate Joseph Linke was living. Linke had been the cellist in Count Razumovsky's string quartet, led by Ignaz Schuppanzigh, and he probably gave the first performance of the new sonatas in the summer of 1815 with the Countess on piano.

The new 'late' style of these sonatas can be terse – they are half the length of the Op 5s – drawing extensively on Baroque devices such as counterpoint and fugue. For Beethoven, these devices are not mere rehashes of Bach and Handel; they need, using his word, to be something more 'poetic'. Another feature of the new style appears in this sonata: extreme contrast between the busily energetic outer movements and an exquisitely expansive slow movement.

The flourish of the opening bar grabs your attention before you are bundled



down the staircase of descending semiquavers and embraced by the soulful cello. The

movement swings unpredictably between extreme moods – anger, tentative wistfulness. There are brief moments of tender beauty, but you are never allowed to bask in them - they are whisked away.

*Adagio con molto sentimento d'affetto*



The slow movement by contrast almost suspends time. It opens with a dirge-like chorale, whose individual phrases have disturbingly abrupt final notes. An answering phrase introduces the sinister dotted rhythm which will insistently dominate the movement.

The cello introduces the last movement with a simple rising scale, as if asking permission to use it. The piano echoes it affirmatively, and the cello starts the fugue, whose wild 'poetic' intensity baffled contemporary audiences. This sonata has much in common with the Op 130 string quartet written ten years later, whose final Great Fugue is even wilder and more baffling.

**Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Piano Quintet Op 34 in F minor (1864)**

*Allegro non troppo*

*Andante, un poco Adagio*

*Scherzo: Allegro*

*Finale: Poco sostenuto—Allegro non troppo*

Brahms' only piano quintet has an interesting history. The year 1861 was the start of Brahms' 'first maturity' in chamber music; he produced his first string sextet (Op 18) and his first two piano quartets (Op 25 and 26). The next year, following Schubert whom he deeply admired, he wrote a quintet for two violins, viola and two cellos. His close friends, pianist and composer Clara Schumann and violinist Joseph Joachim, were asked for their comments. They were concerned about the choice of instruments. After a private performance, Brahms, discouraged, rewrote the quintet as a sonata for two pianos (rather than the one-piano 4-hand arrangements that he habitually made) and, as with much of his early chamber music, destroyed the original. The 2-piano version was successfully performed in a number of concerts, but Clara and her fellow pianist Hermann Levi suggested alternative scorings to Brahms, who decided on a piano quintet, which he finished in October 1864. The 2-piano version was published 6 years after the piano quintet as Op 34*bis*. There have been a number of creative reconstructions of the destroyed 2-cello original (recently by Anssi Karttunen, the Finnish cellist, and also by Antony Gray, the Australian pianist), but the piano quintet version remains the most frequently performed. As you listen to the work you might like to wonder how it might have sounded with an extra cello and no piano.

The first movement illustrates Brahms' ability to make simple materials change and grow.

Ivor Keys in his BBC Music Guide *Brahms Chamber Music* shows how the first bars lay out the material with which Brahms will work.



The pregnant pause in bar 4 is followed by an outburst of energetic semiquavers, which take their shape from the notes under [1] and [2], together with a falling semitone assertion by the violins (which will figure prominently in the Scherzo). The semiquavers become the accompaniment and the falling semitone seeds a new theme, which the viola then adopts in a changed form. And



so on. In Keys' words "no extended instrumental composition can ever be convincing if it doesn't possess the coherence that comes from integrity."

The slow movement is altogether more straight-forward: generally four bar phrases, simply harmonised forming an ABA structure. The opening mood is gentle, like the *Romanza* of Brahms' later first string quartet. The middle section brightens from A $\flat$  into a bell-like E major and leads back to a more lushly scored reprise of the first part.

*The Scherzo* is a different beast altogether. The ominous mood set by the *pizzicato* beat on the cello and the threatening dotted rhythm in the strings are suddenly dispelled by a triumphant march. These moods abruptly alternate with the dotted rhythm which is transformed into the manic 'hammer and tongs' passage (*illustrated*) - we really *do* need the piano for this bit! On its reprise a sinister downward D $\flat$ -C semitone is incessantly hammered out. This falling semitone is



The image shows a musical score for Strings and Piano. The top staff is labeled 'Strings' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Piano'. Both staves are marked with a forte dynamic 'ff'. The music is in 2/4 time and features a driving, rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and dotted rhythms. The piano part has a prominent descending semitone (D $\flat$  to C) that is repeated throughout the passage.

reminiscent not only of the first movement, but also of the end of Schubert's 2-cello quintet. All this breathless drama is contrasted with the most optimistic of Trios.

The falling semitone at the end of the Scherzo metamorphoses into a rising one in the searching, slow introduction to the Finale. The contrasting episodes of the Finale itself appear to be searching for cohesion, so that when the brakes are at last released on a coda of unusually sustained energy, the audience is swept along to an ending that is designed to bring the house down and them to their feet.