



CLEVELAND
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PROGRAM NOTES

Academy of St. Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble
October 18, 2022 – 7:30 p.m.
Plymouth Church, UCC

Chacony in G minor for Strings

Henry Purcell [*ed. Benjamin Britten* (Lowestoft, England, 1913 – Aldeburgh, 1976)]

Born: London, 1659

Died: London, 1695

Composed: 1680

A *chaconne* (like its close relative, the *passacaglia*) is a set of variations over a recurrent ground bass or a recurrent harmonic progression. Purcell was very fond of this form, which he used in several of his stage works, most famously in *Dido and Aeneas*.

The present “Chacony” (to use the original spelling) is an independent piece, in which the composer handled the variation form with remarkable freedom and virtuosity. In addition to altering the rhythm and ornamenting

the melody, he varied the instrumentation as well, occasionally omitting the bass altogether and at one point assigning the bass melody to the treble.

Benjamin Britten had a life-long love for Purcell’s music. He performed and recorded it frequently with his partner, the great tenor Peter Pears, and published many modern editions and realizations which contributed considerably to the Purcell renaissance in the 20th century.

String Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major

Johannes Brahms

Born: Hamburg, 1833

Died: Vienna, 1897

Composed: 1858-60

The two sextets for two violins, two violas, and two cellos are Brahms’s earliest chamber works without piano, preceding the string quartets and quintets by a long time. They reveal a composer

full of youthful energy yet possessed of an emotional maturity well beyond his years.

Brahms in his mid-twenties did not feel quite ready to write a string quartet, a genre in

which Beethoven's legacy seemed particularly oppressive. Although the performing forces are larger, a string sextet actually presented a lesser challenge. First of all, string sextets did not have such a daunting history (in fact, they hardly had any history at all), and second, chamber ensembles of six or more players (not necessarily all strings) had previously been associated with lighter, serenade-type music. Brahms, who had composed two orchestral serenades in the late 1850s, adapted their genial atmosphere to the chamber-music medium in his first sextet, premiered in Hannover by Joseph Joachim and five of his colleagues on October 20, 1860.

Joachim was not only one of the greatest violinists of his time, he was also a composer in his own right. During their long friendship, Brahms often asked Joachim for his opinion in compositional matters. He did so not only in the case of the Violin Concerto where he needed his friend's technical expertise, but also with the First Piano Concerto, as well as the present sextet. In the latter work, Joachim felt that the opening theme of the first movement needed to be stated twice, lest the subsequent modulations begin too soon. Brahms heeded the advice and added ten measures at the beginning of the work. The first cello thus received the honor of announcing the lyrical theme, before it is taken over by the first violin. The character of this tender and romantic movement is best defined by the performance instructions *espressivo*, *tranquillo*, and *dolce*, found frequently in the score.

The second movement, in the form of

Octet, Op. 7 **George Enescu**

Born: Romania, 1881

Died: Paris, 1955

Composed: 1900

What nineteen-year-old would write a composition as ambitious and passionate, not to mention as superbly crafted, as George Enescu did with his visionary String Octet in C major? The work certainly deserves to stand with the sixteen-year-old Mendelssohn's similarly

theme and variations, contains some unmistakable echoes of Bach's famous Chaconne from the D-minor partita for unaccompanied violin (a piece that Brahms later arranged for piano). The D-minor melody, like many Baroque variation themes, is dominated by a descending harmonic progression, but Brahms enriched it with some characteristic modal (that is, neither major nor minor) inflections. There are five variations, of which the first three grow gradually more and more impassioned. In variations IV and V, the key changes to D major, and the music evolves from gentle lyricism to a moment of supreme magic. The theme then reappears in its original form but in a much more subdued instrumentation.

The third movement is an extremely brief scherzo in the Beethovenian mold, with allusions to the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies. The main section, already quite fast, frames a Trio that is even more animated. Some of the trio's thematic material returns, *à la* Beethoven, as the movement's coda.

The last movement's graceful theme is passed from the first cello to the first violin, as in the opening movement. The light serenade tone prevails throughout, except for a brief moment where the music becomes more agitated. Each time the main theme returns, its instrumentation changes. At the last recapitulation, for instance, the melody is divided between two groups of three instruments each, alternating in every measure. The work ends with a spirited coda, getting faster and faster to the end.

miraculous String Octet from 75 years earlier. However, it also shows how much had changed in the world of music (and in the world in general) during the intervening three quarters of a century. There were some dark clouds on the horizon now that Mendelssohn never knew.

Enescu was a child prodigy who grew up to be an adult prodigy. He entered the Vienna Conservatory at the tender age of seven; by the time he reached his teens, he was at the Paris Conservatoire, where he was Ravel's classmate. One of the great concert violinists of his age, he was also an esteemed pianist, conductor and teacher (Yehudi Menuhin was one of his students), as well as the author of a large and extremely varied body of compositions.

His dual training (German and French) and his devotion to the folk music of his native Romania gave him a unique musical profile that doesn't fit into any ready-made categories. His Octet is a close contemporary of Schoenberg's string sextet *Verklärte Nacht* (1899), with which it shares its emotional intensity (though little else). In some of the tender moments, faint memories of Enescu's teacher Fauré may briefly shine through. Yet on the whole, the Octet doesn't much resemble the work of any other composer.

The work is in four interconnected movements that make use of many of the same thematic ideas. The first of these is introduced at the beginning as a jagged unison theme of uncommon dramatic energy. (It will return in many different guises throughout the composition, as a kind of motto.) Subsequent themes are in turn lyrical, vigorous, mournful, mysterious, and always richly textured. The movement builds up to a searing climax but ends in great calm as the opening motif of the energetic first theme returns, played by a single violin with some quasi-improvisatory embellishments over the drone of the other

instruments.

After this reverie, the wild second movement—a scherzo of sorts—comes as a rude awakening. Marked “Très fougueux” (“Very fiery”), it starts, once again, with a vigorous unison theme, after which the opening theme of the first movement reappears, transformed into a furious fugue. There is a dreamy middle section (quasi-trio) that itself becomes quite agitated as it is developed. It then gives way to a second fugue, even more ferocious than the first. “Fiery” and “dreamy” moments continue to alternate until the music subsides and the soft, low notes of the two cellos bring the movement to rest.

The slow third movement is an island of calm. Delicate, intensely emotional, and lushly scored for the strings, it retains its splendid tranquility. At the end, the dramatic tensions of earlier movements resurface as the “motto” theme reappears to lead us into the finale.

The last movement is called a “rhythmic waltz,” but it is certainly no Blue Danube! The agitated quality of the music almost makes it sound like a deconstruction of the waltz, along the lines of *La Valse*, which Enescu's friend Ravel would write a full twenty years and a world war later. The work ends with an insistent recall of the ominous two-note motif (D-flat – C) that had provided the shocking ending for Schubert's Quintet in C major 72 years earlier. Thus, it is no empty phrase to say that Enescu's Octet forms a bridge between past and future; the year of its composition (1900) truly possesses symbolic significance.

-Peter Laki

Mr. Laki is a musicologist and Visiting Associate Professor of Music at Bard College. He has been the annotator for the Society's program booklet since 2012, having previously served as annotator for the Cleveland Orchestra from 1990 to 2007. He is a native of Budapest and holds a Ph.D. in music from the University of Pennsylvania.