

South Bay Chamber Music Society
November 30 & December 2, 2018

The Thies Consort

Robert Thies, piano

Roger Wilkie, violin

Brian Dembow, viola

Armen Ksajikian, cello

Program Notes by Boglárka Kiss, D.M.A.



The piano quartet

Most commonly, the *piano quartet* is a chamber ensemble comprised of a piano, violin, viola, and cello, but the term has been used for other formations as well. Its origins can be traced to the accompanied keyboard divertimentos of the mid-1700s, and to early keyboard concertos. The Viennese embraced the piano quartet enthusiastically: Not only did they appreciate works written for the ensemble by the likes of Mozart, but amateur keyboard players also bought published arrangements of many popular works. By the late 19th century, the piano quartet became a genre of “serious” chamber music intended for professional musicians to perform, with compositions showing a unified conception of style. The two works on today’s program are excellent examples of Romantic piano quartet writing, with their virtuosity and blend of Classical forms with Romantic expression.

Brahms and Dvořák

(From the website of The Dvořák Society for Czech and Slovak Music)

Brahms and Dvořák first came into contact when the latter was applying for his second state scholarship for young musicians. Brahms, who was on the committee, had a great appreciation for Dvořák's work from the very beginning and, apart from awarding him the scholarship, he recommended the young composer to his music publisher. The two composers became good friends, a relationship fueled by mutual admiration and interest in each other's new works. Dvořák's correspondence shows that he was extremely fond of Brahms. In turn, Brahms demonstrated his affection by readily agreeing to make corrections to Dvořák's compositions due for publication while he was in the United States. After Dvořák's return from America, Brahms tried to convince him to move to Vienna with his family and even offered him his property if he did so. However, Dvořák never took up this offer. In 1897 Dvořák traveled to Vienna to visit Brahms, who was terminally ill by then, and a month later he attended his funeral. As if he had come full circle, Dvořák was then appointed member of the committee for the state scholarship he had won years before, filling the position vacated by Brahms.

Aside from their friendship, the two composers are linked musically as well: They shared a similar aesthetic, a blend of Romantic impulse within Classical forms that was a far cry from the progressives of their day, such as Liszt and Wagner.

Piano Quartet No. 2 in A Major, Op. 26 (1863)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)



The second piano quartet by Brahms is the longest chamber work by the composer, written using the standard four-movement structure. The piece was premiered in Vienna by members of the Hellmesberger String Quartet with Brahms at the piano. The Quartet played an important role in Vienna's musical life: The ensemble performed works by Beethoven, premiered works by Schubert and Brahms, and commissioned and premiered Antonín Dvořák's String Quartet No. 11, Op. 61.

Brahms felt a strong affinity for Schubert's music, and studied his chamber works intensely in the 1850s. This piano quartet borrows some of Schubert's approach to composition, namely the effortless stringing together of musical phrases and popular music references—notably a waltz in the

second movement. Brahms' own voice is also present with its variety, freshness of presentation as well as the pitting of the piano against the string trio throughout the work.

Brahms demonstrates his keen sense of lyricism in the first movement: The piano introduces the main theme alone, from which the entire movement is built. Brahms immediately achieves a pastoral mood, a welcoming contrast to the turbulent and dramatic openings of his other two piano quartets. The second movement, a nocturne, is a type of homage to the Romantic spirit of the era as well as to Brahms' mentor, Robert Schumann, who passed away only months before Brahms began working on this piece. The third movement is a rather gentle scherzo, which is followed by a finale whose first theme features a Gypsy tint, only to be overtaken by long Schubertian melodies, woven together masterfully to offer a grand and joyous conclusion.

You may find a rendition of this work here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMQamKZkDvc>

Piano Quartet No. 2 in E Flat Major, Op. 87 (1890)

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)



The work on today's program is the second and last piano quartet Dvořák ever wrote. The composer is known for having a dual style: He blends a pan-European aesthetic with Bohemian and other folk material seamlessly. This duality of style is demonstrated by this piano quartet as well:

The outer movements of the work are quite Brahmsian in approach, the first featuring expansive lyrical melodies as well as a small repeating motive, presented in sonata form. The slow movement has a song-like quality with its grace and emotionality. The third movement, a *scherzo*, hints at a folk waltz, while the finale recalls the boldness and lyricism of the opening, infusing it with dance-like elements and the sound of a dulcimer or other Central European folk instrument. Dvořák concludes the work with a nearly orchestral sonic might and a definitive exuberance matching that of Brahms.

Please click the link for a rendition of this piece:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6M76FqdRrQI>

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