

South Bay Chamber Music Society
February 22 & 24, 2019

Joshua Ranz, clarinet
and the
New Hollywood String Quartet:
Tereza Stanislav, violin
Rafael Rishik, violin
Rob Brophy, viola
Andrew Shulman, cello

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



The string quartet and the clarinet

As a chamber music group, the string quartet consists of four instruments: two violins, a viola, and a cello. From its humble beginnings in outdoor serenades, the string quartet became one of the most prominent chamber ensembles in classical music. Austrian composer Joseph Haydn is credited with elevating the genre of the string quartet in the mid-18thth century. Since his time, practically all major composers have written string quartets, and the genre now boasts a vast repertoire.

Today's program features the pairing of forces, the solo clarinet with the string quartet. The clarinet's history reaches back to ancient times, and its immediate ancestor is the Baroque *chalumeau*. The chalumeau was similar to a recorder, but with a single-reed mouthpiece and a cylindrical bore. Around the turn of the 18th century, German instrument maker Johann Christoph Denner added a register key to the chalumeau, thus creating the first clarinet. This instrument had a much wider range than its predecessor, and over time, forced the chalumeau out of use. With Mozart's fondness for the instrument, clarinets became standard members of the orchestra, later gaining a considerable chamber repertoire.

Clarinet Quintet in A Major, K. 581 (1789)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)



One can find quite a few chamber works by Mozart that combine strings with a wind instrument, such as the flute, oboe, horn, or clarinet. In each instance, Mozart creates a seamless ensemble that maintains the unique character of the wind “guest.” Written for his friend and clarinetist Anton Stadler, one of the great virtuosi of the time, the *Clarinet Quintet in A* demonstrates the ease of a master at the height of his skill. In this single work, Mozart combines his considerable gifts as a supreme composer of opera, concerto, and string quartet. Much of Mozart’s instrumental music has a singing quality to it, conjuring in this piece solo arias, duets, dances and choruses from the five musicians. At other times the work could be mistaken for an intimate concerto for clarinet and strings, while many passages resemble a well-crafted string quartet. Yet, taken as a whole, the work is remarkable for its integrity of sound and for the equality of the participants.

The quintet opens with a moderately paced movement in which the string melodies are commented upon by the clarinet in virtuosic passages. The beautiful second movement is written in the style of an aria, in which the main melody is “sung” by the clarinet, later joined by the violin. The third movement changes the scene from a love song to a party where aristocratic and rustic country dances alternate. The theme and variations finale features a vast variety of moods, many different instrumental combinations and solo passages, resembling a small opera and bringing the whole ensemble together to bring the piece to a close.

To hear a rendition of this work, please click here:

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

String Quartet in C minor ‘Quartettsatz,’ D. 703

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Having written several string quartets at the age of 16, Schubert abruptly abandoned the genre, only to return to it later in life—at age 23. The work on today’s program, which has only one movement, inaugurated his four final quartets, all of which are masterpieces in the genre.

The title of the work, “Quartettsatz,” is German for ‘quartet movement,’ referring to the fact that Schubert finished only one movement. The piece was first published more than 40 years after Schubert’s death under the editorial guidance of Johannes Brahms. It has been considered as masterful a work as his ‘Unfinished’ Symphony ever since. The fragmentary second movement first appeared in print in 1897 in a collection of Schubert’s works. The “Quartettsatz” is a fine example of Schubert’s mature style with his signature contrasts between tension and serenity, set in sonata form.



Listen to this work here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l06wDJjQ2M>

Clarinet Quintet in B Minor, Op. 115

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Brahms gave several indications in his mid-fifties that he would stop composing, letting “young folks take over.” What pulled him out of this self-imposed retirement was the clarinet playing of Richard Mühlfeld, which inspired him to write four final chamber works featuring the instrument: two sonatas, a trio with cello and piano, and the quintet on today’s program.

The piece is set in the traditional four-movement structure, but Brahms created a masterful interconnectivity of musical material across the entire work: The first movement’s opening themes provide the main material for much of the music that follows.

The first movement is in sonata form, showcasing the entire ensemble, albeit contrasting the power of the strings with the intimacy of the clarinet. The center of the quintet is the second movement, which begins and ends as an effortless nocturne with muted strings and long, quiet tones from the clarinet. The serenity is broken by the dark and desperate mood of the middle section in which Brahms showcases the full expressive capabilities of the clarinet.

The brief third movement features a Brahmsian song, and frames the lively *scherzo* middle section. The finale is a theme and five variations that weaves into its texture the first main idea of the opening movement, revealing the interrelationships of the movements. In spite of the joy and nostalgia that carries the work to its conclusion, Brahms ends the quintet with a sobering chord, perhaps signaling the inevitability of the end of his compositional career and his remarkable life.



Mühlfeld and Brahms

You may find a recording of this piece here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDfx-hadA1o>

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