

The Performing Arts Center, Purchase College presents

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center DELIGHT & DRAMA March 18, 2023



PROGRAM NOTES

Six Children's Pieces for Piano, Four Hands, Op. 34 (1894) Anton Arensky

- Born June 30 (July 12 Gregorian), 1861, in Novgorod
- Died February 25, 1906, near Terioki, Finland (now Zelenogorsk, Russia)
- Composed in 1894
- Duration: 13 minutes

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was not uncommon to hear a performance featuring two pianists, as for decades a solo pianist and accompanying pianist were a common instrumentation for the proliferation of piano concertos and symphonies (think of today's standard recitals, in which we hear so many concertos in the solo instrument-piano format).

And while piano compositions for four hands are not standard in the professional repertoire of 21st-century classical music (at least in the mainstream), they nonetheless provide important insights into the styles, musical influences, and cultural expectations of the times in which they were written. A case in point is Anton Arensky's *Six Children's Pieces for Piano, Four Hands, Op. 34*. The child-like melodies and figures belie the depth of musical ideas and the variety of styles present in this work. The first movement, "Fairy Tale," begins in a deceptively simple way before moving into more texturally adventurous territory. "Cuckoo" is perfectly evocative of its name, while "Tears" immediately conjures associations with Debussy through harmonic spacing, descending figures, and pianistic resonance. "Waltz" combines the charm of "Fairy Tale" with the refined nature of its namesake, and impressionistic timbres return in the gentle "Cradle Song." The final movement, "Fugue on a Russian Theme," calls for a sharp verticality in articulation, interlocking the two pianists in an exciting fugal exchange.

Trio No. 1 in D minor for Piano, Violin, and Cello, Op. 32 (1894) Anton Arensky

- Composed in 1894
- Duration: 28 minutes

To Arensky, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was a dear colleague and source of creative inspiration. When the older composer passed in 1893, Arensky explicitly honored his memory in his *Second String Quartet* (whose second movement is subtitled "Variations on a Theme by Tchaikovsky") and more subtly in his *Trio No. 1 in D minor*. Completed in 1894, it is one of the most frequently performed and recorded of Arensky's contributions to the chamber music repertoire. Like Tchaikovsky's *A minor Piano Trio*, it is melodically driven, memorable, and conversational. In the first movement, the main theme sets up a passionate back-and-forth between violin, cello, and piano, leading into a rapturous and sparkling development section in which the main and secondary themes appear in new keys and permutations. Arensky's approach to the recapitulation is similar to Tchaikovsky's in his *Piano Trio*: rather than bring the movement to an intense, virtuosic end, it concludes softly, almost pessimistically, belying what will come next. The *Scherzo* is the opposite in character: it is light and carefree, and requires deft technique and swift emotional shifts. The third movement centers the melodic lushness and depth of the trio ensemble; in minuet-trio form, this movement has a lighter, hopeful section before the return to the somber and bittersweet lyricism of its opening. The *Finale* features more unified sections, particularly between violin and cello, and more leadership from the piano. Rather than creating a stale texture, the rhythmic and melodic unisons heighten the tension and excitement, whether in chords or during the iri-

descent secondary theme. Unexpectedly, the first movement's theme reappears, signaling the exciting drive to the trio's conclusion.

Selected Hungarian Dances for Piano, Four Hands Johannes Brahms

- Born May 7, 1833, in Hamburg
- Died April 3, 1897, in Vienna
- Composed in 1868 and 1880
- Duration: 9 minutes

Brahms's Hungarian Dances remain among his most popular and successful works. They have been arranged, performed, and recorded regularly by orchestras, solo pianists, and solo violinists. Moreover, they have become staples of children's group recitals and are nothing less than synonymous with the German composer himself. But what may not be as well-known is the fact that they were originally composed for four hands; only later did Brahms arrange all 21 Hungarian Dances for solo piano and a few for orchestra. The variety of instrumentations we know today are more popular than the original versions—an important reminder that engaging with classical repertoire in different instrumentations does not constitute a dilution of quality, technique, or authenticity.

The Hungarian Dances were published in two sets of two. The first two books were published in 1868, followed by the third and fourth in 1880. The genesis of this work was in 1850, following Brahms's touring with Hungarian violinist Ede Reményi and his study of Eastern European and Romani folk music. Ranging in character, technique, and degrees of interaction between performers, both the more popular dances (for example, No. 1, No. 5, or No. 17) and their less frequently performed counterparts illustrate the collaborative possibilities between pianists that is not always thoroughly explored in today's standard programming.

Trio in C major for Piano, Violin, and Cello, Op. 87 Johannes Brahms

- Composed in 1880–82
- Duration: 28 minutes

Composed over a two-year period, Brahms's second piano trio had better luck than the E-flat trio he began around the same time; he ended up throwing the latter away. Brahms premiered the work in late 1882 and received critical praise from his confidante and collaborator Clara Schumann. The creation and completion of the Piano Trio in C major coincided with a significant number of Brahms's other contributions to the chamber music and sonata repertoires, including but not limited to his three violin sonatas, second cello sonata, and first two string quartets.

The Allegro illustrates a deft balance between Classical and Romantic aesthetics: unified melodic lines between violin and cello with supportive piano, clear phrase endings, and a cultivated emotional sensibility. The second movement continues the refinement of the previous one, but with more agitation and uncertainty, offsetting the unification of cello and violin. The Scherzo is uncharacteristically spritely for a Brahms chamber movement, but a welcome contrast to the lyrical solemnity that came before. The Finale is jubilant, with more sharing of leadership responsibilities between the piano, cello, and violin. Brahms is sometimes stereotyped as a humorless man, more academic than emotional. With this trio and its final movement, he not only proves the stereotype wrong, but shows that being academic and emotional are not mutually exclusive.

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