

The Brooklyn Symphony Orchestra
Nicholas Armstrong, Artistic Director

Sunday, October 21, 2007
3.00 p.m.
Church of St. Ann and the Holy Trinity

Program

GEORGE ENESCU – Romanian Rhapsody #1 in A

Intermission

JOHANNES BRAHMS (Orch. Arnold Schoenberg) – Piano Quartet #1 in G minor, Op. 25

PROGRAM NOTES

Romanian Rhapsody No. 1 in A major

George Enescu (1881–1955)

Though its popularity has ebbed somewhat in recent decades, Enescu's first Romanian Rhapsody used to be one of the standard warhorses of the orchestral repertory, comfortably ensconced in a niche of “colourful East European nationalism” along with the second Hungarian Rhapsody of Liszt or Dvořák's Slavonic Dances. Enescu was less than delighted with this outcome. Essentially a subtle, complex, deeply serious composer, he came to regard his two Romanian Rhapsodies, Op. 11 (the Second was never quite as popular as the First), as a youthful indiscretion; a regrettably superficial attempt to evoke the folk music of his beloved Romania, whose inflated success eclipsed all his other works. Yet, like most warhorses, the First Romanian Rhapsody proves to be surprisingly well armored against critical slings and arrows. Its appeal may be obvious, but it is also indestructible. And Enescu's claim that it was just “a few tunes thrown together without thinking about it,” hardly does it justice. Sketches show that he worked carefully on the order in which the Rhapsody's melodies should appear, and the best instrumental setting for each one.

As for the tunes themselves, it's likely that Enescu noted them down by ear. Certainly the opening melody - a song called “Am un leu” (“I want to spend my money on drink”) - is known to have been played by the gypsy violinist Lae Chioru, from whom the child prodigy Enescu had his first violin lessons at the age of 4. Both Romanian Rhapsodies were composed in 1901 (No. 1 being completed on 14 August, five days before Enescu's 20th birthday); he himself conducted their first performance in Bucharest in February 1903.

This Rhapsody is primarily a dance-based piece, evoking especially the artistry and playing style of gypsy fiddlers with tunes part pentatonic, part modal and much decorated. At the start, the slow “Am un leu” is heard first on melancholic solo clarinet, and then a slightly faster variant appears mainly in the strings. A floridly decorated second theme takes over, and from then on Enescu intercuts several different tunes, the tempo generally increasing. Acceleration often occurs within the tunes themselves, as with the one known as “The Skylark,” which is built up by a quickening pattern of trilled notes in the violins. By the end of the piece the tempo is Prestissimo, the music finally exploding in a bravura display of dionysiac energy.

Piano Quartet in G minor Op. 25

Johannes Brahms

Orchestrated by Arnold Schoenberg

The following notes are by Michael Steinberg, written for a performance of the work by the San Francisco Symphony.

JOHANNES BRAHMS was born in the Free City of Hamburg on May 7, 1833 and died in Vienna on April 3, 1897. The date of composition of the G minor Quartet has never been surely settled. Joseph Joachim recalled seeing a version of the work (also of its companion piece in A

major, Opus 26) as early as 1855, and some version of it was around in 1859, when both Brahms and Joachim took part in reading rehearsals. The score reached its final form in 1861, and it was first performed on November 16 that year in Hamburg by Messrs. John Bolie, F. Breytler, and Louis Lee, with Clara Schumann at the piano.

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG (he used the spelling Schönberg until his move to the United States in 1934) was born in Vienna on September 13, 1874, and died in Los Angeles on July 13, 1951. He began this orchestration of Brahms's Quartet on May 2, 1937, and completed it on September 19. The first performance was given on May 7, 1938 by the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Otto Klemperer.

Here is that rarity, a work of hyphenated authorship where the partners on either side of the hyphen are peers. In 1939, preparing to comment on the Brahms-Schoenberg Quartet in his double capacity as the San Francisco Symphony's program annotator and the San Francisco Chronicle's music critic, Alfred Frankenstein wrote to Schoenberg, then teaching at UCLA, and received the following reply, dated Los Angeles, March 18, 1939:

Dear Mr. Frankenstein:

Here a few remarks about the "Brahms."

My reasons:

1. I like this piece.
2. It is seldom played.
3. It is always very badly played, because, the better the pianist, the louder he plays and you hear nothing from the strings. I wanted once to hear everything, and this I achieved.

My intentions:

1. To remain strictly in the style of Brahms and not to go farther than he himself would have gone if he lived today.
2. To watch carefully all these laws which Brahms obeyed and not to violate such, which are known only to musicians educated in his environment.

How I did it:

I am for almost 50 years very thoroughly acquainted with Brahms's style and his principles. I have analyzed many of his works for myself and with my pupils. I have played as violist and cellist this work and many others numerous times: I therefore know how it should sound. I had only to transpose this sound to the orchestra and this is in fact what I did.

Of course, there were heavy problems. Brahms likes very low basses, of which the orchestra possesses only a small number of instruments. He likes a full accompaniment with broken chord figures, often in different rhythms. And most of these figures can not easily be changed, because

generally they have a structural meaning in his style. I think I resolved these problems, but this merit of mine will not mean much to our present-day musicians because they do not know about them and if you tell them there are such, they do not care. But to me it means something.

I hope this satisfies you.

Many thanks for kindly mentioning our meeting in my home and we really hope ourselves to see you once in your home: perhaps on the occasion of a visit to the world fair.

Yours very sincerely,
Arnold Schoenberg

I once asked Mr. Frankenstein whether Schoenberg's letter had indeed satisfied him; my recollection is that he only chuckled. (He printed it in his program note, making no comment on it or on the transcription itself.) But the letter, inevitably quoted at least in part whenever the Brahms-Schoenberg Quartet is discussed, is a good point of departure for such a discussion, using Schoenberg's own "chapter headings."

His reasons: "I like this piece" is overriding. In his book *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation* ("developing variation" being a concept formulated by Schoenberg in his 1947 essay "Brahms the Progressive"), Walter Frisch calls attention to a fascinating and touching document in the archives of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute at the University of Southern California. Brahms once autographed a fan for Johann Strauss's stepdaughter Alice, writing down the first few bars of *The Blue Danube* with the words, "Leider nicht von Johannes Brahms!" (Unfortunately not by Johannes Brahms!). Schoenberg, perhaps just doodling, wrote Brahms's inscription on a piece of paper (from memory, and experimenting with imitating Brahms's hand), and underneath he added the first four bars of the G minor Quartet with the words, "Leider von Johannes Brahms--only orchestrated by Arnold Schoenberg."

"I like this piece" goes beyond Schoenberg's fondness for this particular work. His place in and connection with "tradition," by which he meant primarily the central Austro-German tradition from Bach through Mahler and Richard Strauss, was of major concern to Schoenberg, quite as much as the related issue of wishing his music to be perceived as the product of evolution, not revolution. Making these points in an unpublished essay written in 1931, Schoenberg continues: "My teachers were primarily Bach and Mozart, and secondarily Beethoven, Brahms, and Wagner."

Chronological closeness to Brahms, being one of the "musicians educated in [Brahms's] environment," was an issue for Schoenberg as well. He was twenty-two when Brahms died in 1897, and he wrote his first string quartet, the unnumbered D major, that year; the young beginner and the old master were members together of the Vienna Composers' Association; and, in a world where most musicians were either Brahmsians or Wagnerians, the young Schoenberg was a devout Brahmsian until Alexander von Zemlinsky, the nearest he ever had to a teacher, opened his ears to Wagner.

To return to the letter to Frankenstein: After the crankiness that leads Schoenberg into the paradox of maintaining that the better the pianist, the worse he plays, one more point is of crucial importance—"I wanted for once to hear everything, and this I achieved." Indeed he did achieve it, and some who have been disturbed by Schoenberg's orchestration have cited this very quality—the startling audibility of everything and the corresponding loss of hierarchies of vividness and clarity—as a fault. One is tempted to compare such people to those who objected to the cleaning of Rembrandt's (misnamed) Night Watch, but the issue is more complicated. In that subtle way, Schoenberg's Brahms orchestration, for all its honorable intentions, spills from translation into transformation.

His intentions: "To remain strictly in the style of Brahms and not to go farther than he himself would have gone if he lived today." Evoking what one might call the Stokowski defense ("If Bach had only had the Philadelphia Orchestra. . ."), Schoenberg gets into some trouble. If he means Brahms's orchestral style, he contradicts himself in measure one, where he uses, along with B-flat clarinet, an E-flat clarinet and a bass clarinet, two instruments you will find in none of Brahms's own scores. It is of course silly to be schoolmasterly with Schoenberg about these things, and his "getting into trouble" over logic is rendered absolutely inconsequential by the brilliance and beauty of his achievement here.

As for Schoenberg's undertaking "to watch carefully all these laws which Brahms obeyed," he certainly observed a central Brahmsian law, which is that the sound must fit the sense. Or, to put it two other ways, you use the sound to articulate and clarify the sense, and the orchestration is organic.

How he did it: Here we have another of those innocent statements whose implications are huge. Schoenberg knew his Brahms--this we need not question--and "therefore knew how it should sound. I had only to transpose this sound to the orchestra *and this is in fact what I did*" (emphasis added). Watch out when you meet that word, "only." This is the stage at which Schoenberg's fantasy, his analytical acumen, his creative exuberance, and his enormous experience as an orchestrator (which included 7,000 pages of other people's operettas orchestrated in his youth) come into play. Not everyone would "know" that the piano's octaves in the first three measures "should" have the sound of E-flat clarinet, B-flat clarinet, and bass clarinet in octaves.

Not least, Schoenberg obeyed an artistic law so ingrained that he did not even think to restate it to Frankenstein. Whoever stands between a composition and a listener--stands, one hopes, as a bridge, not a wall--must get the listener really to listen. Schoenberg hoped that listeners would participate in and rediscover Brahms's Quartet, and there too he might have said, "this I achieved."

The naïve way to orchestrate such a piece would be to give as much as possible of Brahms's string parts to the orchestral strings and to let the woodwinds and brass take care of the piano material. That would be an accurate translation of a sort, the sort that gives accuracy a bad name. It certainly would not sound like a convincing orchestra piece, and the translator-transcriber does take on the maddening double task of producing a score that faithfully conveys the expressive

and structural sense of the original and that sounds like a convincing composition in its own right.

The development of the first movement offers a captivating example of Schoenberg's imagination as a translator, and one the more interesting for seeming completely to stay within Brahms's style. Concerning this first movement there is a tradition of kvetching that extends all the way from Joachim to Frisch: too many themes, themes insufficiently distinguished, the recapitulation unconvincingly prepared and entered--these are the recurrent burdens of the complaints. The symphonic sound-scale of Brahms-Schoenberg makes Brahms's stride in this movement all the more convincing. In the famous "New Paths" article in which he first drew attention to the twenty-year-old Brahms, Robert Schumann called the newcomer's sonatas "veiled symphonies," and I have sometimes wondered if Schoenberg recalled that phrase when, in his California exile and in a dry spell as a composer, he set about the refreshing and joyous task of scoring Brahms's Quartet.

The second movement is an intermezzo in a tempo neither slow nor fast, a type of piece we find often in place of a scherzo in Brahms's chamber music and even in his symphonies. Schoenberg's scoring is, with all of its richness, feather-light, and it becomes phenomenally imaginative in the trio. The final ping on the triangle suggests *The Nutcracker*, and in fact Schoenberg once confided to the conductor Hans Rosbaud that there was nothing he longed for "more intensely than to be taken for a better sort of Tchaikovsky."

The third movement begins as a richly lyric *andante*, and as it progresses we find Schoenberg both scrupulous and virtuosically resourceful in translating Brahms's most pianistic figurations to the orchestra, for example, the rapid accompanying arpeggios for woodwinds. The middle section of the movement is a magnificent episode in swashbuckling quasi-military style. In his Quartet, Brahms is writing in quotation marks, as it were, offering a chamber transcription of an imagined band music. Here Schoenberg's task is to retrieve the imagined original, at the same time elevating it from band music to the splendors of a grand orchestral style.

With each movement, Schoenberg becomes more free. The finale is *alla zingarese*--in the Gypsy style. Schoenberg, again challenged to make explicit what Brahms could only allude to, has a wonderful time with his xylophone, tambourine, fluttertongue on stopped horn, glissandos for muted trombones, and so on. The most daunting problem is a piano cadenza. It goes terrifically as a wailing plunge of the E-flat clarinet, the piano's left-hand stabs turned into a dazzling mixture of plucked solo strings, trilling woodwinds, and snapping brass, all culminating in the tumultuous fortissimo descent of all the cellos and basses.

Brahms-Schoenberg: Master has met master