



2010 SUMMER SOLSTICE FESTIVAL

SUMMER PASSION
SUNDAY, JUNE 20, 2010
3 PM
ROBERTSON-WESLEY UNITED CHURCH

PROGRAM NOTES BY DAVID BERG

A pre-concert talk by D. T. Baker begins at 2:15 PM in Memorial Hall.

Chamber music is an intimate conversation among players, composer and audience. This afternoon's compositions all thrive on elements of this relationship as we are invited into this private conversation. The charm and wit of the Beethoven composition triumph in this milieu; the emotional directness of Barber's *Adagio* reaches depths not found in its orchestral manifestation; and the magical nuances of Brahms' musical personality resonate with an exquisite immediacy.

The mid-1790s were a time of growing popularity and success for **Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)** the composer-performer. He was eager to develop his exposure in his new community. The circumstance of the **Piano Trio in B Flat Major, Op. 11 "Gassenhauer" (1798)** provides a glimpse of Beethoven's Vienna. The work (at least the final movement) was inspired by a request from the clarinetist, Josef Beer (1744-1811), for a set of variations on *Pria ch'io l'impegno*, an extremely popular aria from the opera *L'Amor Marinaro* by Joseph Weigl. It is from this aria that the Trio has acquired its nickname, the *Gassenhauer* or Street Song trio.

Beethoven later arranged the work for violin, cello and piano, but this afternoon we hear the work in its original, ebullient arrangement. Beethoven's inventiveness, particularly in the first movement, shows a subtle and sensitive exploration of theme, motives, complementary harmonic and ideas in a creative formal structure. A commanding, chromatic unison statement opens the first movement (**Allegro con brio**). An understated second theme based on a broad, triadic melody with a surprising key change, establishes a sublime contrast to the opening theme. Contrary to convention, Beethoven begins the development section with this second theme in a remote D-flat major. With finesse and light touch, Beethoven maneuvers this material back to the opening theme.

In the second movement, (**Adagio**) marked *Con espressione*, the voice of the cello initiates the simple arioso melody, followed by the clarinet. The expansive minor key middle section gives the piano ample opportunity to embellish the song without overshadowing the straightforward expression of the melody. For the finale, Beethoven takes Weigl's popular opera aria and varies it nine different ways. It begins with a piano solo; a cello and clarinet duet follows for the second variation. The third variation (*con fuoco*) is a whirlwind version of the theme. This is followed by a minor and major version of the theme. Variation six finds Beethoven tossing imitation between the piano on one hand and the cello and clarinet on the other. A minor key returns in the stately seventh variation. The robust eighth variation brings back the major key for an energetic return of the melody, rendered by clarinet and cello. In the final variation, the shimmering piano steps off for a brief development before a syncopated, dancing coda closes this inventive work.

The string quartet is often considered the ultimate testing ground and experimental medium for a composer. The young **Samuel Barber (1910-1981)** began his quartet in 1936, while in Europe after receiving the American Prix de Rome and a Pulitzer Traveling Scholarship. The **String Quartet no.1 in B Minor, op. 11** is comprised of three sections (two movements with a short coda). The second movement is the basis for Barber's best-known work, the *Adagio for Strings* (1938), which is a transcription for orchestra of this material. In October of 1936, Barber — comfortably nestled in the Alps — wrote his friend, Orlando Cole, the cellist of the Curtis String Quartet, "I have just finished the slow movement of my quartet today — it is a knockout! Now for a finale." Although very pleased with the first two movements, Barber struggled for years on the final movement/coda, eventually settling (in 1943) on the version we hear today.

Unison strings boldly open the first movement with a fiery theme (**Molto allegro e appassionato**). Barber contrasts the aggressive melody with a more lyrical second theme, occasionally tinged with chorale-like interludes. The development throughout the movement is organic and restless. The movement ends with an understatement, as though stepping aside for the profound second movement.

The **Adagio** begins with its chant-like melody, immediately underscored with tender harmonic suspensions. The long phrases, subtle imitation from the other strings, and cumulative expressive dissonances build this chorale into a statement of profound emotional intensity.

To give closure to this resonant, impassioned essay, Barber concludes the quartet (**Molto allegro (come prima)**) with music from the first movement, capped by a brief, fiery **Presto**.

Johannes Brahms' (1833-1897) chamber music with piano is a treasure trove of imagination, beauty and play. This afternoon's composition, **Piano Quartet No. 2 in A major, op. 26, (1861)** for violin, viola, cello and piano, is an exercise in subtlety. In the early 1860s, Brahms was beginning to settle in Vienna. Around this time, he composed the G Minor and A Major piano quartets. Of the two, the less extroverted second requires more attention from the listener. In this work, we hear the beginnings of what theorists call Brahms' "developing variation" technique. Evolution of the material begins straight away following the stately, cheery opening by the piano. Brahms develops melodic material, background ideas are moved forward and transformed, a straight duple rhythm becomes a triplet and a different thought emerges, yet continuity is retained. This approach modifies "tone and mood while retaining the same pitches."

The second movement is an almost secretive song, shadowed by some ominous rumblings. This gently throbbing Andante exhibits some of the exquisitely tender qualities only possible with the ingenious rhythmic texture of triplet against eighth note rhythms. Muted strings add to the sweetness. The undulating, gentle ambience is broken by pleas from the piano, gradually building until the strings (without piano) reestablish the gentle songlike quality.

The third movement is a scherzo. As playful as this scherzo is, there is something intimate or personal about its tone. The middle section of the trio contrasts sharply with what precedes it: the canonical imitation between the piano and strings includes material closely related to the main scherzo theme.

The final movement has a touch of the "Hungarian gypsy" sound to it, but unlike other "Hungarian" pieces by Brahms, it is not overwhelmed by rhythmic drive. Instead, Brahms expands his development of the material with grace, subtlety and invention