



2012 SUMMER SOLSTICE FESTIVAL

SUMMER PASSION
SUNDAY, JUNE 24, 2012
3 PM
CONVOCATION HALL, UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

PROGRAM NOTES BY DAVID BERG

Chamber music offers performers and composers an intimate arena of infinite possibilities. In this realm, musicians can experiment with unique instrumental combinations or delve deeper into longstanding small ensemble traditions with innovative compositions. This evening's selection of chamber music spans several centuries, cultures, compositional styles and instrumental combinations.

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959) was a self-taught composer raised in a musical family. He learned to play cello and clarinet from his father, an amateur musician. As a composer, Villa-Lobos would claim that his teacher was the streets of Rio de Janeiro where he played in street bands and a theater orchestra. At eighteen, he was said to have ventured into the "dark interior" of his home country, Brazil. Villa-Lobos took care to study the musical trends in Europe, especially when important musicians travelled through Brazil. His relationships with pianist Arthur Rubinstein and the French composer, Darius Milhaud, had a significant impact on the composer. Villa-Lobos traveled to France in the 1920s, where he had the opportunity to have his music performed while weaving tall tales of the Amazon. His early music is particularly influenced by late 19th century Spanish styles. He began to incorporate Brazilian indigenous and street music styles into his language in the late 1910s, producing an exotic fusion.

The striking *Assobio a Jato (Jet Whistle)* for flute and cello (1950) is a gem. The clever (and unlikely) scoring for flute and cello provided Villa-Lobos with a palette of contrasts. The spare texture of the two instruments highlights the independence and interplay of the two, at times switching roles as soloist and accompanist. The *Allegro non troppo* commences with an elegant and expansive melody in the cello teased by the birdlike call of the flute. The flute takes the lead with a soaring and flamboyant variation of the main melody. Each instrument takes its turn again with the material. The flute has the melody in the cool and reflective *Adagio*. The driven *Vivo* is launched with an angular flute melody and jaunty cello accompaniment. The drive subsides, while a legato cello accompanies the pyrotechnical runs in the flute. The wild runs in the flute return for the climax of the piece, where the flautist produces the "jet whistle" effect of the title.

Of the almost one hundred works composed in her lifetime, **Rebecca Clarke** (1886-1979) saw fewer than two dozen published. Born in England, she began her musical training at the Royal Academy of music in 1903, studying violin. After one of her professors made a proposal of marriage, her domineering father withdrew her from the Academy. She returned again to the Academy, studying composition and switching to viola. Studies were abruptly halted when her father banished her from the family household (after she criticized him for his extramarital affairs). Left to fend for herself, Clarke began a career as a professional violist in 1912, becoming one of the first women in the Queen's Hall orchestra. In 1916, she moved to the

U.S. It was during this period that she composed her viola sonata (1919), the runner-up in the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge competition. Her Trio was a runner-up for the 1921 Coolidge competition. Mrs. Coolidge later commissioned her (the only female she ever so supported) to compose her Rhapsody for Cello and Piano. In 1924, Clarke returned to England, performing with many famous musicians of her day. She formed an all-female piano quartet and performed regularly as a soloist and chamber musician on BBC and in recordings. A contemporary account from the London *Star* gives us a glimpse of the respect and disdain a female composer/performer was up against:

How remarkable it is that our women composers are so much more virile in style than some of our young men. Miss Rebecca Clarke has a strong right arm (We speak figuratively, of course). She can lay down the foundation of a big chamber work like her piano trio heard last night, with all the emphasis of a Liszt and carry on with the sturdiness of a John Ireland or Frank Bridge.

Clarke's style is a refreshing and original assimilation of the French innovations and British style of the early 20th century, flavored with occasional folk-like material. The harmonic language is daring at times, and the composer embroiders complex textures with imaginative harmony and rhythmic nuance.

The **Piano Trio in E-Flat Minor** (1921) is one of Rebecca Clarke's best-known works. Its three movements are threaded together by the insistent, hammered gesture that appears immediately in the piano in the *Moderato ma appassionato*. This outcry is first passed to an understated cello and developed by both the strings. The contrasting second theme appears in the piano. The development is largely based on material spun from the opening gesture. The second theme returns in the development's climax, resounding in powerful piano chords. The piano and cello initiate the recapitulation with an imitative duet based on the opening theme, and winding down to a resigned close.

The violin opens the muted *Andante molto semplice* with a version of the work's unifying main theme. The work's main theme returns but in a gentler guise as a folk-like melody. This variation winds down the *Andante*. The *Allegro vigoroso* begins with a bounding folk-like theme. This energy yields for a sentimental section recalling the opening motive of the Trio. The first movement's second theme returns, as the movement's development leads to a declamation of the work's opening theme. After this climax, the music takes on a darker cast as if reflecting on the inescapable nature of the motive. Collecting its energy, the movement winds up with an assertive and confident close.

The provenance of **Johannes Brahms' F Minor Piano Quintet** (op. 34) is fascinating. We first hear of the work in a letter from Clara Schumann in the autumn of 1862: "What an adagio! How rapturously it sings and rings from beginning to end!" Brahms had just sent Clara the first three movements, although in its initial form, the quintet included two *cellos*, not two violas. This scoring reveals Brahms' close acquaintance with the String Quintet, op. 163, of Franz Schubert. Brahms' friend, the violinist Joachim, felt there was something unconvincing about the Quintet, and Brahms continued to work on it.

In 1864, the quintet reappeared, but as a duo piano sonata played by Brahms and Clara for the Princess Anna of Hesse. While the work was still in its two-piano form, Clara encouraged Brahms to score it for larger forms: "it is masterly from every point of view, but—it is not a sonata, but a work whose ideas you might—and must — scatter over an entire orchestra." Brahms declined to take that leap, however.

The first movement, *Allegro non troppo*, is monumental in scale. From the opening melody in the piano and strings and the subsequent tempestuous gesture, Brahms gives us the elements upon which he will develop all the material. The very quality of the opening melody sufficiently alerts us that we are embarking on an epic journey. The darkly passionate opening theme is followed by a lyrical theme over a triplet motive. The exposition's close is somewhat brighter, setting the tragic opening in relief. After an extensive and richly nuanced development focusing on the opening and second themes, the recapitulation closes the work, wresting the powerful momentum to a halt.

The serenely lyrical *Andante, un poco adagio* begins with a sweet piano melody in thirds. The middle section brightens the character as the strings introduce an octave leap gesture and a more expansive sound. The gentle opening song returns to conclude the movement.

The peaceful spell is broken with the unsettling *Scherzo: Allegro*. After a foreboding opening, it breaks into an aggressive march. The middle Trio section is a much warmer, though quite resolved and majestic version of material based on the march. The gripping march returns, concluding an emotionally charged essay.

The *Finale*, a large rondo movement, opens with a mysterious and melancholy introduction, setting a tragic tone that is not to be overcome by even the most ebullient music in the movement. The light and uneasy first theme is reminiscent of Brahms' "Gypsy" music. An imploring second theme is introduced in the violin, and the movement's remaining material is an imaginative transformation of the themes, gradually building to a resounding and defiant conclusion.