CONCERT PROGRAM VI:
Transitions

AUGUST 1 AND 2

Friday, August 1, 8:00 p.m., Stent Family Hall, Menlo School
Saturday, August 2, 8:00 p.m., The Center for Performing Arts at Menlo-Atherton

PROGRAM OVERVIEW
Concert Program VI presents the parallel unfolding of Viennese and Bohemian traditions at the turn of the nineteenth century. Although some chided Brahms in his final years as old-fashioned, works like his Six Piano Pieces would be vindicated by such avant-garde voices as Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern, who credited Brahms’s late music as predictive of their own. Indeed, Webern’s early and late miniatures on this program weave a majestic connection between Romantic and modern aesthetics. Dvořák’s Opus 48 String Sextet demonstrates the fully developed voice of the Bohemian master, complemented by the curiously appealing Concertino by his compatriot and contemporary Leoš Janáček.

SPECIAL THANKS
Music@Menlo dedicates these performances to the following individuals and organizations with gratitude for their generous support:
August 1: Michèle and Larry Corash and also to the David B. and Edward C. Goodstein Foundation
August 2: Elizabeth Wright and also to the memory of Michael Steinberg

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)
Six Piano Pieces, op. 118 (1893)
- Intermezzo in a minor
- Intermezzo in A Major
- Ballade in g minor
- Intermezzo in f minor
- Romanze in F Major
- Intermezzo in e-flat minor

Wu Han, piano

ANTON WEBERN (1883-1945)
Two Pieces for Cello and Piano (1899)
- Langsam in G Major
- Langsam in F Major

ANTON WEBERN
Three Little Pieces, op. 11 (1914)
- Mäßige
- Sehr bewegt
- Äußerst ruhig

Dmitri Atapine, cello; Hyeyeon Park, piano

LEOŠ JANÁČEK (1854–1928)
Concertino (1925)
- Moderato
- Piu mosso
- Con moto
- Allegro

Juho Pohjonen, piano; Alexander Fiterstein, clarinet; Peter Kolka, bassoon; Kevin Rivard, horn; Yura Lee, Summi Chang, violins; Paul Neubauer, viola

INTERMISSION

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841–1904)
String Sextet in A Major, op. 48 (1878)
- Allegro moderato
- Dumka (Elegie): Poco allegretto
- Furtiv: Presto
- Finale: Tema con variazioni

Amaud Sussmann, Nicolas Dautricourt, violins; Paul Neubauer, Yura Lee, violas; Narek Hakhnazaryan, David Finckel, cellos
Program Notes: Transitions

JOHANNES BRAHMS
(Born May 7, 1833, Hamburg; died April 3, 1897, Vienna)

Six Piano Pieces, op. 118
Composed: by 1893
Published: 1893, Simrock
First performance: January 22, 1894 (nos. 3 and 5); March 7, 1894 (complete), London
Other works from this period: Opus 114 Clarinet Trio (1891); Opus 115 Clarinet Quintet (1891); Seven Fantasies, op. 116 (by 1892); Three Intermezzi, op. 117 (1892); Four Piano Pieces, op. 119 (by 1893); Two Sonatas for Clarinet or Viola and Piano, op. 120 (1894)
Approximate duration: 24 minutes

The piano was Brahms’s instrument. And like fellow composer-pianist Beethoven (the giant whose footsteps Brahms admitted to hearing behind him throughout his creative career), Brahms poured into the piano some of his most deeply felt personal statements. Like Beethoven, Brahms’s oeuvre of piano works falls neatly into distinct stylistic periods, which outline his compositional trajectory. The first group of piano works—composed throughout the 1850s and early 1860s—includes three large-scale sonatas (opp. 1, 2, and 5), the Scherzo in e-flat minor, op. 4, and two sets of variations on themes by Handel (op. 24) and Paganini (op. 35). Though skilfully crafted, these works make extreme and virtuosic demands of their pianist. They betray Brahms as a brash young Romantic, as eager to announce himself to the piano literature through these works as Beethoven was through his own early piano sonatas, opp. 2 and 10.

The Eight Pieces, op. 76, of 1878 heralded a new stage in Brahms’s piano style. With this set, Brahms discovered a genre in which he would continue to feel at home throughout the rest of his career: compact, self-sustaining miniatures, devoid of thematic connection from one to the next. The remainder of his solo piano offerings comprises similar sets to the Opus 76 pieces. The autumnal Six Pieces, op. 118, illustrate the character of all these latter works: subtle, yet immediately emotive and each with its own distinct personality.

These pieces traverse a broad emotive landscape, from the fist-shaking opening to the morose finale in e-flat minor. Music scholar Michael Steinberg has written of these pieces: “Here, in these late musings of a keyboard master who had discovered how to speak volumes with the sparest of gestures, we find the essence of Brahms.”

Composed in the summer of 1893, the Six Pieces, as well as the subsequent Four Pieces, op. 119, were sent as gifts to Clara Schumann as they were completed. Brahms biographer Jan Swafford has surmised: “[Brahms] may have composed the pieces to try and keep Clara Schumann going in body and soul. Since she could only play a few minutes at a time now, and because she loved these miniatures so deeply, maybe they did keep her alive.” Swafford also suggests that the young pianist Ilona Ebenshitz, whose exquisite pianism and feminine charms enchanted the composer equally, may have inspired the genesis of these lyrical, heartfelt utterances. (Ebenshitz premiered Opuses 118 and 119 in London in 1894 and recorded a number of Brahms’s late piano pieces.)

Throughout the Six Pieces, as in all the late piano works, Brahms favors A–B–A form. He marks the opening Intermezzo Allegro non assai, ma molto appassionato—"Not fast, but very passionately." This turbulent vignette fluidly integrates rhythmic and harmonic tension at the start of the B section: cascading eighth-note runs disrupt the rhythmic motif established in the opening measures. A series of diminished-seventh chords (a favorite of the Romantic composers’ for its unresolved pathos) harmonically reinforces the passage’s anxious forward motion.

*Bolded terms are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 100.

While the Opus 118 pieces share no thematic connections, Brahms audibly grouped and sequenced them with deliberate intentions. The first miniature of the set, for instance, ends triumphantly in A major, preparing a seamless transition to the much beloved Andante tenuemente that follows in the same key. This tender intermezzo resembles the Lieder ohne Worte of Mendelssohn, whose piano music certainly influenced Brahms. Of a similar poignancy is the A section of the F Major Romanze (no. 5), a hymn-like chorale marked by rhythmic ambiguity (shifting between groups of two and three beats). A dreamy Allegretto grazioso section offsets this reverent music.

Numbers 3 and 4 of the set likewise offer their fair share of magical moments. Witness the inspired key change from g minor to B major in the g minor Ballade, as well as the transition back to the A section in the f minor Intermezzo.

A haunting theme, evocative of the ancient Dies irae chant, opens the final intermezzo. Brahms introduces the melody as a stark, unaccompanied line, marked sotto voce. Low, rumbling arpeggios in the left hand heighten the music’s angst. The Dies irae theme reappears in menacing octaves before a B section of Beethovenian drama. But unlike Beethoven’s prototypical heroic journey, which follows elegy with transcendence, Brahms’s final measures here remain funereal.

—Patrick Castillo

ANTON Webern
(Born December 3, 1883, Vienna; died September 15, 1945, Mittersill)

Two Pieces for Cello and Piano
Composed: 1899
Published: 1975
Other works from this period: Three Poems for Voice and Piano (1899–1903); Eight Early Songs for Voice and Piano (1901–1904)
Approximate duration: 5 minutes

Drei kleine Stücke (Three Little Pieces), op. 11
Composed: 1914
Published: 1924
Other works from this period: Six Bagatelles for String Quartet, op. 9 (1911–1913); Five Pieces for Chamber Orchestra, op. 10 (1911–1913)
Approximate duration: 3 minutes

Best known as the devoted disciple and torchbearer of Arnold Schoenberg’s twelve-tone method, the Viennese composer Anton Webern in fact underwent numerous artistic transformations over the course of his career. His early works—including the Two Pieces for Cello and Piano, written in 1899 (Webern was trained as a cellist and pianist)—bear the hallmarks of late Romanticism and betray the influence of Wagner, Mahler, and Strauss. His gradual flirtation with atonal music culminated in the settings of fourteen poems by Stefan George, composed between 1908 and 1909, which demonstrated a complete departure from tonality. With the Opus 20 String Trio of 1927, Webern achieved full mastery of the twelve-tone method, which he followed more strictly than even Schoenberg himself for the remainder of his career.

The pieces that first heralded Webern’s total abandonment of tonality, spanning the years 1908 to 1914, have been commonly referred to as Webern’s aphoristic works. This music is marked by its extreme brevity. It is obsessed with softness and silence. Entire pieces range in dynamics from ppp to no louder than p; the third of the Opus 11 Drei kleine Stücke rises only to a pp. In the works of his aphoristic period, Webern places unprecedented import on sonic gesture: movements as short as twenty
sections magnify such instrumental effects as pizzicato, harmonics, spiccato (short, off-the-string bow strokes), and col legno (bowing with the wood, rather than the hair, of the bow) into musical events in themselves. Webern scholar Kathryn Bailey has identified the Drei kleine Stücke as “the extreme of Webern’s aphoristic style.” Schoenberg noted of Webern’s works during this period: “One has to realize what restraint it requires to express oneself with such brevity. You can stretch every glance into a poem, every sigh into a novel. But to express a novel in a single gesture, a joy in a breath—such concentration can only be present in the absence of self-pity.”
—Patrick Castillo

LEOŠ JANÁČEK
(Born July 3, 1854, Hukvaldy, Moravia; died August 12, 1928, Moravská Ostrava)

Concertino  
Composed: 1925  
Published: 1926  
Other works from this period: String Quartet no. 1, The Kreutzer Sonata (1923); Pochod modráčků (March of the Bluebirds) (1924); Mládi (Youth) (1924)

Approximate duration: 18 minutes

In the years since his death in 1928, the Czech composer Leoš Janáček has increasingly become regarded as one of the most original composers of the twentieth century. His nine operas represent his crowning achievement, and Janáček likewise considered these to be his most important works. But he also produced a fair amount of chamber and orchestral music, and the dramatic instinct and rhetorical expressivity that infuse his operatic output are key elements of his style and inform his instrumental works, as well. Janáček was especially preoccupied with the Czech language and, in his chamber and orchestral music, attempted to capture the cadence and inflection of Czech in his melodic writing. The result is a brand of expressive immediacy entirely unique to Janáček.

He composed his Concertino for Piano and Ensemble in 1925 for the pianist Jan Herman; he was inspired to write the work after hearing Herman play in a performance of his song cycle The Diary of One Who Disappeared. The concerto was written a year after his wind sextet Mládi, Janáček’s nostalgic reminiscence of his youth. The concerto shares something of the sextet’s sprightly energy; Janáček acknowledged, “The whole thing comes from the youthful mood of...Mládi.”

Like many of Janáček’s mature works, the concerto had a programmatic genesis; in this case, in keeping with the childlike joy of Mládi, the composer imagined his young self in nature scenes amidst talking animals. But this extramusical program is but a point of departure for this small masterpiece of a concerto, whose enchanting music more than stands on its own.

The concerto is scored for piano with a colorful ensemble of two violins, viola, clarinet, bassoon, and horn. But Janáček uses the ensemble sparingly. The first movement is scored for just piano and horn. The composer’s programmatic image here was of a hedgehog trying to return to its lair—but the boy Janáček and his pals have blocked the entrance. The spiky ascending theme, rounded off with a downward turn, represents the hedgehog’s frustration.

The downward turn at the end of this central motif spirals into a new musical idea, as the dialog between piano and horn grows more animated. But the excitement quickly subsides, and the spiky opening theme returns to close the movement. Fantasy appealed to Janáček throughout his life, and the accompanying sense of wonder permeates his musical language. Throughout this first movement, mysterious harmonies quietly evoke a wooded fairy-tale setting.

The up-tempo second movement is scored for piano and clarinet. The quick chords and abrupt silences that start things off represent a squirrel dashing from branch to branch. The clarinet follows with a rascally melody above a light, staccato piano accompaniment. The young Janáček captures the squirrel in a cage; its futile attempts to escape are illustrated by long trills above static harmonies.

The full ensemble finally appears in the second movement’s final measures, and the music segues into the third movement, marked Con moto and portraying a mass of squawking birds. Janáček’s deployment of the instruments here is simultaneously ravishing and eerie.

The music proceeds without pause to the Allegro finale. The piano presents a puckish tune, accompanied by syncopated pizzicati in the violins. That music escalates into a boisterous racket by the full ensemble. Near the end of the finale, the piano calls for everyone’s attention with a frenzied cadenza, followed by a triumphant proclamation, issued to the exultant acclaim of the strings. After a brief, meditative utterance in the piano, the full ensemble joins back in, and the concerto comes to an exhilarating close.

—Patrick Castillo

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK
(Born September 8, 1841, Nelahozeves, near Kralupy; died May 1, 1904, Prague)

String Sextet in A Major, op. 48  
Composed: May 14–27, 1878  
Published: 1879, Berlin  
First performance: November 9, 1879, Berlin  
Other works from this period: Detailed in the notes below  
Approximate duration: 37 minutes

Dvořák composed his Opus 48 Sextet over a two-week period in 1878, in the wake of an important dual success. His Three Slavonic Rhapsodies and the first set of his Slavonic Dances for Orchestra had premiered in May of that year, fueling his rise to international stardom. Just as those works helped to establish Dvořák not only as an important new compositional voice but also as the representative of a distinctly Czech style, so did the String Sextet reinforce that reputation in the realm of chamber music. The work received its first hearing in 1879, at a private performance in the home of the great violinist Joseph Joachim in Berlin, marking Dvořák’s first premiere outside of Czechoslovakia. Over the next year, Joachim would perform the sextet in Vienna and twice in London, effectively solidifying Dvořák’s international stature.

The sextet is brimming with Bohemian charm, even as it recalls Schubert, Dvořák’s favorite composer during his early years, in its abundance of inspired melodies. Moreover, Dvořák draws a rapturous sonic warmth from the ensemble of two violins, two violas, and two cellos. One benefit of this rich scoring is the ability of the second cello to serve as the bass voice, allowing the first to pursue a lyrical melodic role. The main theme of the first movement, introduced as a rhapsodic duet between the first violin and first cello, demonstrates all of these qualities. The second theme, in a quicker tempo, is marked by upward leaps and exciting dotted rhythms. In the spirit of Schubert, Dvořák extends each of these themes to euphoric effect—within just the exposition—and then reimagines them further in the movement’s development section.

The sextet’s middle two movements draw from traditional folk forms: the second movement is a dumka, a sung Slavic folk ballad. Phlegmatic pizzicati in the cellos and plaintive sighs in the violas accompany a ruminative melody in the violins. Midway through the movement, Dvořák introduces poignant, Gypsy-like music, which soon gives way to a tender Andante lullaby in the rarefied key of F-sharp major.
The understated tones of the dumka are obliterated by the rambunctious third movement furiant, a traditional Czech folk dance. The word furiant literally means “a proud, swaggering, conceited man”—an apt description of the music’s impetuous energy.

The final movement is a set of five variations on a melancholy theme, presented by the first viola, accompanied by the second viola and cellos; the absence of the brighter-toned violins accentuates the theme’s moodiness. The violins join in for the first variation: the deployment of the full ensemble playing long, legato phrases and the two-against-three rhythmic scheme lend the music a rich sonority. The second variation is redolent of a scherzo in Mendelssohn’s signature Midsummer Night’s Dream style. The first cello issues the desolate melody in the third variation; the rest of the ensemble holds a spacious pianissimo chord, evoking a lonely wanderer in a barren landscape. That sense of desolation extends into the fourth variation, now given anxious voice by the violins and first viola above a threatening undercurrent of triplets in the second cello. From the uneasiness of this fraught music emerges the fifth variation, which resets the theme with the immediacy of a folk song; flowing sixteenth notes, punctuated by rocketing pizzicati, make for a texturally rich accompaniment. Dvořák follows the fifth variation with an energetic stretta—then, finally, as if he were simply biding his time throughout the five lugubrious variations, he allows wild elation to burst forth like a wound-up jack-in-the-box, and the sextet gallops excitedly to its blistering conclusion.

—Patrick Castillo