Monday, August 8  
8:00 p.m., The Center for Performing Arts at Menlo-Atherton

PROGRAM OVERVIEW
Clarinetist David Shifrin makes his Music@Menlo debut with a program illustrating the autumnal quality of Brahms’s late works. As a complement to the festival’s “Farewell” program (see p. 27), the season’s third Carte Blanche Concert centers on Brahms’s discovery of the clarinet at the end of his life. Alongside the immortal Clarinet Quintet offered on Concert Program VI, Brahms’s f minor Clarinet Sonata and the Clarinet Trio reveal the composer at his most introspective. Max Bruch’s Pieces for Clarinet Trio, composed more than a decade after Brahms’s death, evoke Brahms in their pathos and deeply felt lyricism.

SPECIAL THANKS
Music@Menlo dedicates this performance to Michèle and Larry Corash with gratitude for their generous support.

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)
Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, op. 120, no. 1 (1894)
- Allegro appassionato
- Andante un poco adagio
- Allegretto grazioso
- Vivace
David Shifrin, clarinet; Jon Kimura Parker, piano

JOHANNES BRAHMS
Clarinet Trio in a minor, op. 114 (1891)
- Allegro
- Adagio
- Andante grazioso
- Allegro

INTERMISSION

MAX BRUCH (1838–1920)
From Eight Pieces, op. 83 (1909)
- Nachtgesang (Nocturne): Andante con moto
- Allegro con moto
- Andante con moto
- Allegro vivace, ma non troppo
David Shifrin, clarinet; Wu Han, piano; David Finckel, cello
JOHANNES BRAHMS
(Born May 7, 1833, Hamburg; died April 3, 1897, Vienna)
Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, op. 120, no. 1
Composed: 1894
Published: 1895
Other works from this period: String Quintet no. 2 in G Major, op. 111 (1890); Trio for Clarinet, Cello, and Piano in a minor, op. 114 (1891); Clarinet Quintet in B minor, op. 115 (1891)

By late 1890, Johannes Brahms had effectively retired, having “rejected the idea,” according to close friend Theodor Billroth, “that he….would ever compose anything again.” Circumstances happily changed during a trip to Meiningen in March 1891, when the Court Conductor, Fritz Steinbach, introduced Brahms to his Principal Clarinetist, Richard Mühlfeld. The depth of Mühlfeld’s artistry (which, in addition to his virtuosity as a clarinetist, included considerable skill as a violinist and conductor) inspired Brahms to once again take up his pen. That summer, he composed the Trio in a minor for Clarinet, Cello, and Piano, op. 114, and the Clarinet Quintet, op. 115. Brahms’s Two Sonatas for Clarinet and Piano, op. 120, likewise intended for Mühlfeld, followed three years later and were premiered by Mühlfeld with Brahms at the piano. So fond was the composer of his muse—and so grateful for the newfound creative impulse of his final years—that Brahms ceded to Mühlfeld his share of the fees from their many joint performances of the sonatas.

No instrument is better suited to the autumnal quality of Brahms’s late works than “Fräulein Clarinette,” as the composer lovingly called it. The first sonata stretches the expressive limits of the clarinet’s range from the brooding opening bars of the first movement. Throughout the work, Brahms treats the piano as an equal collaborator. The second movement, marked Andante un poco adagio, demonstrates Brahms’s brilliant treatment of melodic material, taking full advantage of the clarinet’s timbral and dynamic range. The Allegretto grazioso is a gentle waltz evocative of an Austrian ländler. In the middle section of the movement, the rather restless and stormy quality of the first movement returns. The final rondò movement begins with a burst of youthful energy and juxtaposes interestingly with the introspective quality of the preceding three movements. The Opus 120 sonatas have become a cornerstone of the clarinet repertoire and are representative of Brahms’s finest works.

Isaac Thompson

JOHANNES BRAHMS
Clarinet Trio in a minor, op. 114
Composed: 1891
Published: 1892
Dedication: Richard Mühlfeld
First performance: Detailed in the notes below

Brahms’s Opus 114 Clarinet Trio—the first of four late masterpieces composed for the clarinettist Richard Mühlfeld—received its premiere at the hands of Mühlfeld with cellist Robert Hausmann (a member of the Joachim Quartet and the dedicatee of Brahms’s Second Cello Sonata, op. 99) and the composer at the piano in Berlin on December 12, 1891; Mühlfeld and the Joachim Quartet premiered the Opus 115 Quintet on the same program. Cast in the dolorous key of a minor, the trio favors restraint over Sturm und Drang, calling to mind Brahms’s other great a minor chamber work, the Opus 110 Number 2 String Quartet. The trio’s path—its four expertly wrought movements compress much sophisticated material into a mere 677 measures—likewise epitomizes Brahms’s mature craft.

The first movement Allegro’s opening measures herald the trio’s introverted character: instead of a forceful tutti, the work begins with a plaintive utterance by the cello alone, a yearning upward arpeggio tapered by a resigned scalar descent.

The gentle second theme inverts the contour of the first, tranquilly descending before again rising. Following an emotionally fraught development section, the clarinet recapitulates each theme, with the first theme significantly transformed, followed by a subdued remembrance of the second.

The lovingly executed melodic writing for both clarinet and cello in the Adagio betrays Brahms’s equal affection for Mühlfeld and Hausmann. His freedom in utilizing each instrument’s complete range—from the burnished bass of the cello to its expressive tenor voice and from the clarinet’s sweet high register down to the evocative chalumeau—testifies to the great facility of Brahms’s colleagues.

The Andante grazioso takes the form of a ländler, the pastoral precursor to the Viennese waltz. Taking the place of an expectedly harried scherzo, this movement instead is all effortless charm.

The concluding Allegro’s propulsive energy disrupts the serenity of the third movement’s final cadence. The wide leaps in the cello that begin the movement recall the triumphant opening of another work entrusted to Robert Hausmann, Brahms’s Opus 99 Cello Sonata. A sense of uneasiness permeates the movement, abetted by meters constantly shifting between 2/4, 6/8, and 9/8. The bravado of the opening measures quickly yields to a more contemplative music: abrupt silences punctuate fragmentary, questioning utterances by the cello and clarinet; the piano answers with a turbulent transition back to the theme. The unsettled dynamic between these two expressive modes precipitates the concise finale to the trio’s stirring close.

MAX BRUCH
(Born January 6, 1838, Cologne; died October 2, 1920, Berlin)
From Eight Pieces, op. 83
Composed: 1909
Published: Berlin, 1910
Other works from this period: Osterkantate (Easter Cantata), op. 81 (1908), and Das Wessobrunner Gebet, op. 82 (1910), for
chorus, organ, and orchestra; Konzertstück for Violin and Orchestra, op. 84; Romance for Viola and Orchestra, op. 85; Six Lieder, op. 86 (1911)

Like his more celebrated contemporary Johannes Brahms, the German composer Max Bruch was a product and steadfast devotee of nineteenth-century Romanticism. He staunchly resisted the progressive language of Wagner and Liszt, preferring instead to explore traditional Classical forms; his music reflects a special penchant for Mendelssohn and Schumann. Bruch’s stylistic position, combined with the unlucky circumstance of living and working in Brahms’s shadow, ensured the general under-recognition of his music during his lifetime. He became, and remains, primarily known for his first orchestral publication, the ravishing Opus 26 Violin Concerto—much to the composer’s chagrin, as the staggering popularity of this early work doomed him to one-hit wonderdom despite an oeuvre of more than one hundred compositions. Bruch’s predicament remains: much of his music—across numerous genres, including opera, lieder, and choral, chamber, and orchestral works—still lies peripheral to the standard repertoire.

Like many works from Bruch’s unjustly little-known catalog, the Eight Pieces for Clarinet, Cello (or Viola), and Piano, op. 83, deserve a closer listen. Each exhibits a keen melodic instinct on par with the enchanting slow movement of the Opus 26 Concerto. They are quintessentially Romantic vignettes, impassioned yet introspective; a sense of nostalgia, ideally suited to the clarinet’s particular warmth, pervades the set. Befitting the ensemble’s dark palette, all but one of the Eight Pieces are in minor keys.

The clarinet’s dark chalumeau and middle registers foster in the poetic Nachtgesang (Nocturne) an enigmatic quality. Likewise, the Allegro con moto (no. 2) resembles Brahms in its pathos and deeply felt lyricism. (It moreover shares the key of b minor with Brahms’s Clarinet Quintet of 1891—a work with which Bruch was surely familiar.) The piano’s restless triplet accompaniment provides a backdrop of Romantic anxiety to the sweeping, expressive lines in the clarinet and cello.

Evoking the expressive dichotomy personified by Schumann’s alter egos Florestan and Eusebius, the Andante con moto (no. 3) presents a dialog between two distinct tempers. An angular cello soliloquy propels the opening section, emphatically punctuated by rolled chords in the piano. The mood changes with the entrance of the clarinet, the cello’s stilted gait yielding to a lyrical, legato passage. Bruch marks the clarinet’s wistful melody sempre piano e dolce. The contrary moods reconcile at the movement’s conclusion, with the clarinet soothing the cello’s agita.

The effervescent Allegro vivace (no. 7), the brightest of the Opus 83 pieces, sets the clarinet dancing spiritedly above the staff. The movement’s gleeful air hearkens back to the scherzos of Weber and the early Romantics. At the dawn of a musical era marked by the defiance of Classical precedents—Bruch completed his Opus 83 more than a decade after Debussy’s Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune and less than three years before Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring and Schoenberg’s Pierrot lunaire—even the most buoyant of the Eight Pieces suggests Bruch’s nostalgic longing for a bygone time.

—Patrick Castillo

The Stanford Park Hotel is proud to play a role in supporting the community and the arts through our partnership with Music@Menlo.