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BRAHMS
PIANO QUINTET IN F MINOR

DVOŘÁK
PIANO QUARTET IN E FLAT

SOLOISTS INCLUDE
Ralph Kirshbaum (cello) Wu Han (piano)
Colin Carr (cello) Ian Swensen (violin)

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THIS MONTH’S COVER CD

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
PIANO QUINTET IN F MINOR, OP. 34

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)
PIANO QUARTET IN E FLAT, OP. 87

This month’s cover CD features two major chamber works from the late 19th century, recorded at the stateside Music@Menlo festival in California. Misha Donat explains the story behind both works.

'I can't tailor my work according to fashion, as people would like,' Brahms said. 'What's new and original arises by itself, without having to think about it.' Unlike his more overtly progressive contemporaries Liszt and Wagner, Brahms was content with subtly subverting the musical forms he had inherited from Beethoven. His symphonies, concertos and chamber works stand as the greatest monuments of their kind in the second half of the 19th century.

In 1862 Brahms completed a Quintet in F minor for two violins, viola and two cellos – the same ensemble that Schubert had used for his great C major String Quintet. Although Clara Schumann was unreservedly enthusiastic about the piece ('What inner strength and what riches there are; she told Brahms, 'and what an Adagio, rapturously singing right to the last note!'). the composer’s other musical mentor, the violinist Joseph Joachim, had doubts about the effectiveness of the music’s scoring. ‘Without vigorous playing,’ warned Joachim, ‘it will not sound clear.’ This criticism led Brahms to withdraw the work and – with typical thoroughness – to destroy his manuscript.

Early in 1864, Brahms rewrote the quintet as a sonata for two pianos, and it was eventually published in this form as his Op. 34b. But still his closest friends and advisers felt the result was less than satisfactory, and at the suggestion of the conductor Hermann Levi he refashioned the work yet again – this time as a Piano Quintet. This definitive version attempts to have the best of both worlds: there’s no doubt, for instance, that the mysterious slow introduction to the Finale benefits from the sustaining power of the stringed instruments, while the presence of the piano lends greater weight to such moments as the grandiose second theme of the Scherzo. The work in both its surviving forms was dedicated to Princess Anna von Hessen, who had been so taken with it that Brahms gave her the manuscript score of the two-piano version. In gratitude, she presented him with the most precious addition to his collection of musical autographs – the manuscript of Mozart’s great G minor Symphony No. 40.

Brahms’s Piano Quintet shares its key of F minor with Beethoven’s Appassionata Sonata, and a few of its most striking ideas seem to hark back to that famous work: the notion of beginning with a smooth and quiet main theme followed by a dramatic flurry of semiquavers; or the manner in which the theme returns much later in the opening movement, above a drum-like repeated note.

The latter moment is the start of the recapitulation, and so mysterious.
is the music that the listener becomes aware that this structural landmark has been reached only after the main subject is already under way.

There are more quiet drum-taps at the beginning of the Scherzo third movement, with its pizzicato cello part. The Scherzo’s shadowy opening bars are followed by a triumphant march-like theme – not a completely new idea, but a broadened form of the music that has preceded it, transformed from minor into major. As for the idea of prefacing the Finale with a sombre slow introduction, it is one Brahms also used in his First Symphony. Here, the introduction manages to be both mysterious and impassioned, and its final bars work their way round to an anticipation in slow-motion of the main theme of the Finale itself.

While Brahms never wrote a stage work, Dvořák’s main ambitions lay in the field of opera. But of his dozen or so works of the kind only Rusalka still has a toehold in the international repertoire, and his reputation rests largely on his orchestral and chamber works. Dvořák’s great achievement

Dvořák fused the Czech nationalist style with the symphonic tradition of Brahms

was to fuse the Czech nationalist style established by his elder contemporary Smetana with the symphonic tradition of Brahms. In his late years another influence made itself felt, with protracted visits to New York and Iowa between 1892 and 1895 leaving their mark on such works as the New World Symphony and the American String Quartet.

Brahms and Dvořák met for the first time in Vienna, in December 1878, but Brahms had already been championing the younger composer’s cause for several years: as a member of a committee that oversaw an Austrian government grant for talented artists, Brahms was instrumental in ensuring that Dvořák received an annual stipend. The committee was headed by the critic Eduard Hanslick; and in November 1877 Hanslick suggested to Dvořák that he should submit some of his compositions to Brahms. Brahms was particularly taken with Dvořák’s Moravian Duets, and persuaded his publisher, Fritz Simrock, to issue them. The following year Simrock commissioned Dvořák’s Slavonic Dances – the pieces that made his name internationally famous.

It was Simrock, too, who urged Dvořák to compose a piano quartet. He first raised the idea with the composer in 1885, but despite further prompting from the publisher over the following three years, it wasn’t until 1889 that Dvořák turned his attention to the commission. His Piano Quartet Op. 87 was completed in July and August of that year and scarcely was the ink dry than he embarked on his famous Symphony No. 8.

Some two years earlier Dvořák had written his well known Piano Quintet in A. The new Piano Quartet (Dvořák had composed another

CZECH MATES: a couple dancing the Bohemian Polka (above); Fritz Simrock (below), who published Dvořák’s Slavonic Dances

CD KEY MOMENTS

BRAHMS PIANO QUINTET
FIRST MOVEMENT (Track 1)
Brahms disguises the return of the main theme by showing it as fragments against a series of sustained piano chords falling off the main beat of the bar, and a pulsating repeated on viola and cello (6:00). The emergence of the semiquavers and the fortissimo restatement of the theme at 6:27 show the listener that the recapitulation is under way.

FOURTH MOVEMENT (Track 4)
In the Finale’s long coda the tempo quickens and the main theme has a rhythmic transformation, with fragmentary phrases separated by brief pauses (8:08). As it reaches a climax, the rondo’s quiet but angular theme, first heard at 2:56, reappears in an intense fortissimo (8:54).

DVOŘÁK PIANO QUARTET
FIRST MOVEMENT (Track 5)
The main theme returns in its original form at 2:47, creating the impression that the movement’s opening will be repeated. But the music changes direction, and Dvořák develops the theme’s rising tail-end, transforming it into a lyrical statement unfolding over a limp piano (3:16). At the movement’s close the theme appears in a tremolo (7:38), before the music’s forceful conclusion.

SECOND MOVEMENT (Track 6)
The slow movement consists of an unbroken chain of contrasting themes that unfolds twice during the course of the piece. The gentle second theme (1:53), with the alternating piano and strings, leads to an impassioned outburst in the minor at 2:36. As the storm clouds disperse, Dvořák introduces the last theme – an idea based on a tiny turn-like figure from the second theme, with the piano playing in simple octaves and the strings contributing a ‘sighing’ accompaniment (3:18).

THIRD MOVEMENT (Track 7)
The graceful waltz tune of the opening bars is followed by a more plangent folk-like melody in the minor (0:30). Its modal inflections are ironed out when it returns in the major at 1:14.
piece of its kind in 1875) is much darker in mood than that genial work: no sooner has the assertive opening figure been heard than the music turns to the minor, and so long is the shadow cast by those minor-mode tinges that Dvořák takes the unusual step of casting the work's entire Finale in the minor, with the music only turning to the major for its closing pages. This was something he may have learned from Brahms's Symphony No. 3, a work he is known to have admired. The sound of the minor seems to have lingered on in his mind beyond the work's ending; his G major Symphony No. 8 begins with a melancholy cello tune in the minor.

Another feature Dvořák probably borrowed from Brahms was the manner in which the Piano Quartet's opening movement bypasses the traditional repeat of the opening section. As Brahms did on more than one occasion (in his turn modelling his procedure on Beethoven's example), Dvořák makes a return to the work's opening bars as though to suggest that the repeat is about to unfold in full, before very soon striking off along new paths instead. This, too, was an idea that rubbed off onto his Eighth Symphony.

Ralph Kirshbaum, who plays the cello in the Brahms Quintet on this recording, pays his tribute to Mstislav Rostropovich on p28.