BRAHMS & FRIENDS

PROGRAM NOTES

This concert is entitled BRAHMS & FRIENDS, because the composers Robert Kahn, Joseph Rheinberger and Clara Schumann all engaged Brahms musically, as well as personally.

ROBERT KAHN (1865-1951) was born and raised in Mannheim, Germany. He first met Brahms in 1886 in Mannheim, where Brahms came to conduct his own Fourth Symphony and perform his own Second Piano Concerto. Following the concert, Kahn’s family held a reception in Brahms’ honor. After this initial meeting Kahn went to Vienna for several months, where he was in close contact with Brahms. Kahn had already been a great admirer of Brahms’ music, as his family belonged to a “Brahms Circle” that met regularly in Mannheim. These meetings were devoted to the study of Brahms’ works. Brahms offered to teach Kahn, but Kahn was too modest to accept. Kahn wrote a book called “Recollections of Johannes Brahms”, which was published posthumously. Incidentally, Kahn was a student of Rheinberger.

Kahn’s TRIO SERENADE IN F MINOR Op. 73 was written in 1923, originally for oboe, horn and piano. However, the publisher asked Kahn to write an additional version for another combination of instruments, in order to sell more copies. Kahn complied, by adapting the oboe part, to be played by clarinet, violin or viola. The horn part was also adapted to be performed by viola or cello. Thus, the versatility of this work extended to 12 different configurations.

JOSEPH GABRIEL RHEINBERGER (1839-1901) was born in Liechtenstein but spent most of his life in Munich. He started out as a child prodigy, becoming a composer and a virtuoso organist already at the age of seven. During his lifetime he was mostly known as a composer and a teacher of composition. Rheinberger and Brahms first met in 1864. Rheinberger retained Brahms’ friendship by avoiding the Wagner vs. Brahms debate. He had contacts with composers and musicians in both camps but was able to maintain good relations, although his music was heavily influenced by Brahms. One of Rheinberger’s operas was conducted by Brahms in Vienna, and Rheinberger dedicated his “Zwei Klaviervorträge Op.45” to Brahms. After Brahms’ death Rheinberger dedicated his G-Minor Mass to Brahms’ memory.

Rheinberger’s SONATA FOR HORN AND PIANO IN E FLAT MAJOR Op. 178 was written in 1894, composed in just six days. It is dedicated to Bruno Hoyer, who was Principal Horn of the Munich Opera for 40 years. (Hoyer was a pupil of Franz Strauss, the father of Richard Strauss.) Hoyer gave the premiere performance of Rheinberger’s Horn Sonata in December 1894, just a few months after Rheinberger finished composing it.

CLARA WIECK SCHUMANN (1819-1896) has often been misleadingly referred to as just the wife of composer Robert Schumann, and as one of the leading pianists of her day, rather than as a composer in her own right. Since the last quarter of the 20th
century however, her stature as a composer finally became recognized. Her relatively small output notwithstanding, she nonetheless wrote significant compositions in both the keyboard and vocal realms. Had she been able to devote more time to composition—she was occupied by maternal matters much of the time, having given birth to eight children—she might well have risen to the artistic heights of her husband, Robert Schumann. (Some of her later works—the Six Lieder, Op. 23, for instance—demonstrate considerable subtlety and depth.) Born in Leipzig, Clara Wieck began studying the piano with her father (a piano teacher of high repute) and gave her debut concert in Leipzig at the age of 7. At 12 Clara toured Europe, achieving great success. By 1837 - at age 18 - she was already recognized as one of the leading virtuosos in Europe, and her career as a composer was blossoming as well. Her first compositions date from 1830, which was also the year when Robert Schumann became a student of Mr. Wieck - Clara’s father – and that’s when Clara and Robert first met. In 1837 she and Robert Schumann became engaged, with boisterous objections from her father. Three years later Clara would marry Robert Schumann. They would have eight children, and Clara would slowly watch her sensitive husband lose his sanity. The couple at first lived in Leipzig, where both taught at the University. After moving to Düsseldorf in 1853, Clara and Robert Schumann finally lived in a house large enough for Clara to practice and compose without disturbing her nervous husband. During that summer, she produced several works, among them the THREE ROMANCES FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO, Op. 22. In nineteenth century Germany, the vague term "romance" often meant simply a short piece for piano, or for another instrument with piano accompaniment. The Three Romances are quite striking for their attractive lyricism. It is clear from the intricate piano writing that Clara Schumann possessed an exceptional performing technique. The violin writing is equally effective and idiomatic. Clara Schumann dedicated her Three Romances to the great virtuoso violinist Joseph Joachim (1831-1907), who became a life-long friend of Brahms. It was Joseph Joachim, who introduced the 20-year old Brahms to the Schumanns (just shortly after Clara wrote the Three Romances in 1853, a year before Robert Schumann’s mental collapse and 3 years before his death). This introduction to the Schumanns, which Joachim initiated, turned into an event with profound influence on the life and career of JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897), who is exalted as one of the “Three Bs” of classical music: Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. In September 1853 Brahms presented himself at Robert and Clara Schumann’s home, where they received him and listened to his works with the utmost interest. That evening Robert Schumann wrote in his dairy, “visit from Brahms, a genius.” Schumann saw a sort of musical messiah in Brahms, and he described him as such in an article published in the periodical Neue Zeitschrift für Musik. Thanks to Schumann’s help, just a few months later (by the end of 1853) six of Brahms’s works were published. Brahms felt indebted to the Schumanns, and in February 1854, when he learned of Schumann’s suicide attempt, the young man rushed back to Düsseldorf from Hamburg to assist Clara, then expecting her seventh child. After this event, Robert Schumann himself requested that he be committed to an asylum; he subsequently died there in July 1856. During that two-year period, Brahms devoted himself entirely to the Schumann family. Through his constant support of Clara, a close relationship developed between the two of them. He admired her courage, her devotion as a spouse and as a mother, her tremendous musical gift, and admittedly, fell in love with her. Clara was invigorated by his fresh spirit, his talent, and his complete
dedication. Yet, no matter the exact nature of their relationship (subject to much scholarly speculation), they both remained loyal to Robert Schumann. After his death, they parted, rather than growing closer to one other. Brahms probably felt the need to focus on his own work. As for Clara, celebrated since childhood as one of the most brilliant concert pianists of her time, she devoted herself to her career and to supporting her children. Nonetheless, a special bond between the two artists endured throughout their lifetimes.

Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim supported Brahms greatly by using their status as leading performers to defend and promote his works. Joseph Joachim, to whom Clara Schumann had dedicated her Three Romances shortly before he introduced Brahms to her, was also the subject and the inspiration of the SCHERZO “SONATENSATZ” IN C MINOR FROM THE F-A-E SONATA FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO.

The F-A-E Sonata, a four-movement work for violin and piano, is an interesting example of a collaborative effort by three composers. It was composed in Düsseldorf in October 1853 by Robert Schumann, the young Johannes Brahms (who had become known to the Schumanns just days prior) and Schumann’s pupil Albert Dietrich. The Sonata was Robert Schumann's idea and was intended as a gift and tribute to Joseph Joachim, with whom all three composers had entered into friendship relatively recently. Joachim had taken the Romantic-sounding phrase Frei aber einsam ('free but lonely') as his personal motto, and the idea was for all of the movements of the sonata to make prominent use of the musical notes F-A-E, echoing this motto as a musical cryptogram, and for Joachim to have to guess the composer of each movement. To Dietrich was assigned the substantial sonata form first movement; Robert Schumann followed with a short 'Romanze' taking the place of a slow movement; the Scherzo “Sonatensatz” was by Brahms, who had already proved himself a natural master of this form in his E flat minor Scherzo for piano and the scherzi of his first two piano sonatas; and Robert Schumann provided one more movement - the finale. The work was presented to Joachim on October 28; on it Robert Schumann had written the following dedication:

F.A.E.: In Erwartung der Ankunft des verehrten und geliebten Freundes Joseph Joachim schrieben diese Sonate R.S., J.B., A.D ('In expectation of the arrival of their revered and beloved friend, Joseph Joachim, this sonata was written by R.S., J.B., A.D.')

Joachim played the work in the Schumann household with Clara Schumann at the piano, and identified the authors of the movements without difficulty. (He had been presented with the music earlier in the evening.) The work thereafter remained unpublished as an entirety during the composers' lifetimes. Robert Schumann proceeded to incorporate his two movements into his own Violin Sonata No. 3. Joachim retained the original manuscript, from which he allowed only Brahms' Scherzo Sonatensatz to be eventually published in 1906, nearly ten years after Brahms's death. The sonata was only published in full in 1935. Whether Dietrich made any further use of his sonata-allegro is not known. All three composers separately wrote violin concerti for Joseph Joachim; Robert Schumann's was completed in October 1853, just before the F-A-E sonata was begun. Joachim never performed it, unlike the concertos of Brahms and Dietrich.
At age 33 Brahms witnessed the separation of his parents due to their increasing differences, and a few months later suffered the loss of his mother Christiane, who passed away after a stroke. Terribly affected, Brahms could find comfort only in his work. He composed his TRIO FOR HORN, VIOLIN AND PIANO IN E FLAT MAJOR, Op. 40, in 1865, to commemorate the death of his mother. The work as a whole represents the stages of mourning, from grief to consolation. The death of Christiane was also a major factor for Brahms to complete his German Requiem. Musically, the German Requiem marks a turning point in compositional technique, by which Brahms influenced the entire world of music. The work had been started years earlier, when Brahms was severely shaken by the illness and death of his friend Robert Schumann. Inconsolable after the death of his mother in 1865, Brahms resumed work on the requiem, which had already progressed far before she died. Music historians point out that the added fifth movement can be associated directly with her death: “As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you”. The finished work was dedicated to Robert Schumann, Brahms' mother, and the whole of humanity. Three years later, in 1868, the requiem was given its first complete performance at the cathedral of Bremen under Brahms’ direction. The performance was a resounding success. Over a decade earlier, Robert Schumann had written, “When he will lower his magic wand toward the powers of the masses, choir and orchestra, and make his their energy, then we will be allowed even more wonderful glimpses on the secrets of the world of spirits.” For all present, the requiem had fulfilled Robert Schumann’s prophecy about Brahms at once. The work propelled Brahms to the pinnacle of his career and his reputation as a leading composer was never again doubted.

Having performed concerts until she was 72 years old, Clara Schumann suffered a stroke 5 years later in 1896 and died. After her passing, Brahms’s typical good health seemed to progressively abandon him. It seemed that the composer had developed a cancer of the liver, the disease that had taken his father. In March 1897 he became unable to leave his bed and died on April 3, at age 64.

During the last twenty-four years of his life, Brahms was honored with countless awards, prestigious titles, and concert series in his honor. Even his native Hamburg finally acknowledged his talent. Brahms, however, was embarrassed by public praise. Once, during a dinner given in Brahms’s honor, when Joachim raised his glass and began a toast, “To the greatest composer,” Brahms interrupted and said, “Quite right, here’s to Mozart!”