

Program Notes
By Chris Morrison

Family Concert
Tuesday, December 29, 2:00 p.m.
Nightingale Concert Hall

This year's Nevada Chamber Music Festival Family Concert is an introduction to the brass family of instruments, including a retelling of a Mexican folk tale in words and music, "The Day it Snowed Tortillas," written in 2005 by San Antonio composer Alice Gomez.

Masterworks Concert No. 2
Tuesday, December 29, 7:00 p.m.
South Reno United Methodist Church

Joaquín Turina: Piano Trio No. 2 in B minor, Op. 76
(Composed 1932-33, 15 minutes)

Turina's music is a fascinating blend of Spanish and French influences. Born in Seville, his early studies took place there and in Madrid (where he became friends with composer Manuel de Falla). He then moved to Paris for a decade or so, working with Vincent d'Indy at the Schola Cantorum, receiving the encouragement and friendship of composers like Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, and soaking in the sounds of French Impressionism. But Turina returned to Spain, convinced that he needed to work in a more self-consciously Spanish idiom.

Both of these major strains in Turina's style are evident in the Trio No. 2 – the textures call to mind the music of Gabriel Fauré as well as Ravel's own Trio in A minor, while the themes and rhythms are distinctly Spanish. After a slow introduction, the main body of the serious-minded first movement is based on two themes, one full-bodied, the other slower and more languorous. The emphatic second movement is related to the Basque dance form the "zortzico," with its characteristic 5/4 rhythm. Turina himself described the third movement as "a chorale interrupted by two episodes with ever increasing energy." The main theme from the first movement makes a brief return before the work's dramatic conclusion.

Brahms: String Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Op. 18
(Composed 1860, 36 minutes)

Despite the praise that Robert Schumann had heaped on the twenty-year-old Brahms when they first met in 1853, and friendships with many famous musicians like violinist Joseph Joachim, even by 1860 Brahms was still some time away from success in the wider musical world. He was then dividing his time between his hometown of Hamburg, where he led a choir, and the court in the small town of Detmold, where he had part-time employment as a teacher and conductor. The String Sextet No. 1 – Brahms's first chamber work for just strings, scored for pairs of violins, violas and cellos – was written during a summer vacation from those two jobs spent on the banks of the Elbe River.

While a number of composers wrote string sextets in subsequent years, very few – Luigi Boccherini and Louis Spohr are the only two remembered today – had written in the form before Brahms wrote his two Sextets in 1860 and 1864. The sextet format gave Brahms increased compositional freedom, for instance when he wanted to use the cello as more of a melodic than a bass instrument, as in the first theme of the opening movement (Brahms had originally given this melody to the violin, but moved it to the cello at Joachim's suggestion). This movement has many other memorable themes – a waltz-like second, an expressive third from the first cello, and still another in the violins and first viola – and the way in which Brahms uses motives from, and slight variations of, these melodies gives the music both cohesion and richness of texture.

The slow second movement is a set of six variations on a theme in the minor introduced by the viola. More than one commentator has remarked on the Gypsy-like quality of the theme, even hearing a hint of the Hungarian cembalom in the accompaniment. Momentum seems to grow through the first three variations, with the fourth providing a calm interlude. Note the bagpipe-like drone of the violas in the fifth variation, which leads to a restatement of the theme by the cello in the final variation. The short third movement is a rustic, energetic scherzo. While Brahms didn't make his first visit to Vienna until two years after the completion of this Sextet, the influence of the city's music, particular Franz Schubert's, is evident in the concluding Rondo.

Suk: Piano Quintet in G minor, Op. 8
(Composed 1893, duration 30 minutes)

An important figure in the history of Czech music, Josef Suk is remembered to a large extent because of his connection with Antonín Dvořák: Suk studied with Dvořák at the Prague Conservatory, and in 1898 married his daughter Otilie. Suk served as the second violinist of the famed Czech Quartet for forty years, while also composing a great deal of music and serving as a mentor to many later Czech composers. His early works – such as his best-loved composition, the Serenade for Strings, Op. 6 – are in a Romantic style that owes much to Dvořák's tutelage. But after the deaths of Dvořák in 1904 and Otilie the following year, Suk's later compositions grew darker and more introspective.

In its first concerts, the Czech Quartet was frequently joined by pianist Josef Jiraneck, a teacher at the Prague Conservatory. His presence inspired Suk to compose several chamber works combining piano and strings, including the Op. 8 Piano Quintet. Written during the summer of 1893 and dedicated to Johannes Brahms, the Quintet was given its premiere that November. In 1915 Suk revised the work, finding its original form a bit too grandiose and showy, and that version is the one generally heard today. The forceful first movement features extended, eloquent melodies, and constant movement of the melodic materials amongst the instruments. Its momentum calms only occasionally, as in an extended passage in the key of G major just before the rhythmically lively coda, with its imposing final gesture. The second movement opens and closes with a hymn-like melody in which rich chords from the strings alternate with piano arpeggios, framing a central section led by the cello. The influence of Dvořák's famous Piano Quintet in A major, Op. 81 emerges in the remaining two movements: an energetic, extended Scherzo, and the Finale, with its contrapuntal central section and the transformed reappearance of the first movement's main theme.