

Program Notes
By Chris Morrison

Afternoon Sonatas No. 2 – Violin Showcase
Thursday, December 31, 2:00 p.m.
Nightingale Concert Hall, UNR

Schulhoff: Duo for Violin and Cello
(Composed 1925, 18 minutes)

After completing studies at the Prague Conservatory and following his service in World War I, Erwin Schulhoff quickly absorbed most of the important musical trends of his day. He found inspiration in Arnold Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School, but was also attracted to Dada and wrote some absurd, often anti-establishment, and quite funny music. Then, in the early 1920s, Schulhoff encountered jazz, and the rhythms of jazz and more popular dance styles started creeping into his music (as he once told Alban Berg, he suffered from “a wild passion for mundane dance”). Then, after a visit to the Soviet Union in 1933, Schulhoff embraced Stalinism and his music became much more accessible and plainspoken. For years he experienced persecution by the Nazi regime – his music was among that labeled “Entartete Musik” (degenerate music) – and the German occupation of Czechoslovakia resulted in his arrest and imprisonment in 1941 in the Wülzburg concentration camp. Within a few months he was dead, depending on the source, of tuberculosis, typhoid fever, or torture.

Schulhoff dedicated his Duo for Violin and Cello, composed in early February 1925, “to Master Leos Janáček, in deep admiration!” Janáček’s dedication to the folk music of his native land finds expression in Schulhoff’s Duo, along with hints of Claude Debussy’s later, more austere style, the neoclassicism of Igor Stravinsky, a contrapuntal sense that seems to look back to Johann Sebastian Bach, and a playful sense of humor. The influence of Janáček and Bohemian folk music are evident in the first movement, with its five-beat meter, and in the Gypsy fiddling style of the second movement. Janáček’s technique of repeating short melodic phrases with slight variations each time can be heard in the lovely third movement and in the hectic Finale, which recalls the opening theme of the first movement.

Strauss: Violin Sonata in E-flat major, Op. 18
(Composed 1887, 28 minutes)

Richard Strauss is remembered nowadays for his ambitious, large-scale orchestral works like *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1896) and *Ein Heldenleben* (1897-8), as well as for forceful operas like *Salomé* (1903-5) and *Elektra* (1906-8). While orchestral music and opera dominated Strauss’s extensive compositional output, he also produced a number of lovely chamber compositions, especially early in his career. Strauss was a very talented prodigy: at the age of sixteen he was labeled “by far the most striking personality since Brahms” by the famous conductor Hans von Bülow, and by twenty Strauss had already produced over seventy compositions, including two symphonies and concertos for violin and horn.

But of all the music he wrote after 1900, only six pieces are for chamber ensembles, and those are mostly arrangements or miniatures. The last major chamber work from his pen is the Violin Sonata, roughly a contemporary of his famous early symphonic poem *Don Juan*. During this same time Strauss was also in the process of falling in love with singer Pauline de Ahna, whom he wed seven years later, and it isn't much of a stretch to hear both some of those feelings of love, and some of Don Juan's swagger, in portions of the Violin Sonata. There is a rhapsodic feeling and heroic stride to the opening theme of the first movement. Two other lovely, lyrical ideas are presented by the violin in the course of the movement, but most of it is dedicated to that opening idea. The second movement carries the appellation "Improvisation," and there is a feeling of spontaneity in the movement's elegant, flowing song. The violinist performs with mute on in part of the movement's central section. Beginning with a few bars of slow introduction from the piano, the Finale moves forward with energy, virtuoso display, and an almost symphonic breadth of argument.

**Busoni: Violin Sonata No. 1 in E minor, Op. 29
(Composed 1890, 26 minutes)**

Ferruccio Busoni was one of the legendary pianists of his time, a teacher of notable figures like Kurt Weill and Claudio Arrau, an intellectual and visionary who in his "Sketch for a New Esthetic of Music" of 1907 anticipated many of the modernist techniques from decades later (like the use of microtones and electronics), and an influential composer who produced much piano music, several operas, and other works, including two violin sonatas. His knowledge of music was comprehensive, and along with his original compositions, he often worked with music by other composers, editing, rearranging and expanding on music by Bach, Mozart, Liszt, Paganini, and Bizet, among others.

Aside from the four large operas that dominated Busoni's attention in the last decade of his life, the large majority of his music is for piano. He didn't compose much chamber music, and almost all of it dates from before his twenty-fifth birthday. In 1890, Busoni won a teaching post at the Helsinki Conservatory. There he met and became friends with Jan Sibelius, and composed the Violin Sonata No. 1. Not long afterwards, in St. Petersburg, the Sonata was one of the works with which Busoni won the Rubinstein Prize for piano and composition. The Sonata's first movement contrasts two themes, one forceful, the other more pensive. Their development is reminiscent of Brahms in the way the rhythms and harmonies of the two themes are reworked. The music builds to a climax with the first melody, which also returns in the restless coda. Schumann and Beethoven are often cited in describing the eloquent slow movement. The finale begins with a fast-paced violin melody over active piano accompaniment. It and a second theme are passed quickly between the two instruments as they are developed, heading towards the Sonata's decisive conclusion.

**Masterworks Concert No. 4 – New Year's Eve Celebration
Thursday, December 31, 7:00 p.m.
Nightingale Concert Hall, UNR**

Haydn: Piano Trio in E-flat major, H. XV:29

(Composed 1797, 17 minutes)

It is always worth remembering the sheer amount of Franz Josef Haydn's music. His catalog includes 104 symphonies, around 60 piano sonatas, 23 operas, 83 string quartets, 12 masses, and any number of works in other genres. He also wrote about 45 piano trios, the last three of which, H. XV:27-29 (the H. refers to Anthony van Hoboken's catalog of Haydn's music, where group XV is dedicated to the piano trios), were written for and dedicated to Therese Jansen. A student of the great pianist and pedagogue Muzio Clementi, Jansen was a native of Germany who had settled in London, where Haydn had met her during his trips there in the 1790s.

Jansen must have been a fine pianist, because these three trios, particularly the E-flat major, are quite challenging for the pianist – who largely dominates the proceedings. As was typical in Haydn's time, the other two instrumental parts have a relatively secondary role, with the violin sometimes taking the melody, the cello almost always doubling the bass notes in the pianist's left hand. The E-flat major Trio's lively opening movement, with a march-like main theme that is subjected to several variations, provides quite a workout for the pianist. The violinist often shares the melodic lead as the music heads into somewhat darker areas in its central development section. Haydn later rearranged the lilting, songlike middle movement for voice and piano, and the triple meter rhythms of the boisterous German Dance finale, with its pronounced folk music flavor, are marked by sparkling textures from the piano. Scholar and pianist Charles Rosen described Haydn's last three trios nicely: "Haydn's imagination is particularly luxuriant in these trios. Unconstrained by considerations of public effect, as in the symphonies, or by impressive refinements of style as in the quartets, Haydn wrote them for the sheer pleasure of the solo instrumentalists." And that of the listening audience, it might be added.

Mendelssohn: Sextet in D major, Op. 110
(Composed 1824, 30 minutes)

Mendelssohn was one of the most remarkable prodigies in music history. He composed the Sextet at age 15, in just two weeks in April-May 1824, having already produced twelve symphonies for strings, several chamber works, and three operas (he was also just months away from writing the miraculous Octet for strings). As was the case with so much of this early music, the Sextet remained unpublished until years after Mendelssohn's death, hence the high opus number. It was probably designed to be performed at Mendelssohn's home, perhaps during one of the family's regular musical gatherings, which encompassed everything from solo and song recitals to full orchestral performances.

Mendelssohn made some unusual scoring choices in the Sextet: the inclusion of a bass might conceivably have been influenced by Franz Schubert's "Trout" Quintet (although there's some doubt as to whether Mendelssohn knew that work at the time), and the presence of two violas further darkens the texture of the ensemble, setting off the display of the pianist that much more. Both Mendelssohn and his sister Fanny were talented pianists, and it is likely that one of them performed the Sextet's truly virtuosic piano part – the work often sounds practically like a piano concerto. The first movement starts with deceptive ease, but soon the music is off and running in a sequence of memorable themes, the pianist pretty consistently taking the lead with the other instruments providing backing. The tender second movement, with its muted strings, provides a

nice moment of repose before the short, turbulent little minuet (in an unusual, for a minuet, 6/8 rhythm). The finale, however, returns to the high spirits of the first movement, with an especially exciting coda that briefly recalls the third movement – a device Beethoven used several times, for instance in the famous Fifth Symphony, and employed here by a young composer then very much in the older master’s spell – before a triumphant ending.

**Martinu: Piano Quartet
(Composed 1942, 24 minutes)**

Martinu is justly hailed today as one of the greatest Czech composers of the twentieth century. He studied at the Prague Conservatory (where he was expelled at one point for “incorrigible negligence”), and served for a time as violinist in the Czech Philharmonic. While he always retained a connection with the music of his homeland, he ended up living quite a peripatetic life, spending most of his life in Paris, Switzerland, Italy, and the United States. After fleeing the Nazi occupation of Paris in 1941, he and his family made their way, with difficulty, to a new home in the United States, settling initially in Jamaica, New York. Over the years he spent in the United States, Martinu served on the faculties of Princeton University, the Mannes College of Music, and Philadelphia’s Curtis Institute (among his students were Alan Hovhaness and Burt Bacharach), eventually becoming an American citizen in 1952. He also composed extensively and enjoyed many of his greatest musical successes here – in fact, there were so many American premieres of new Martinu works in 1944 that it was dubbed “The Martinu Year.”

The Piano Quartet was written not long after Martinu’s arrival in America. Its first movement is marked by substantial syncopation, a Martinu hallmark. The music moves quickly and easily between a short three-note motif, a more substantial theme in the strings (that also returns in varied form in the final movement), and a folksong-like idea in the cello. The central Adagio, the Quartet’s longest movement, begins and ends with long, doleful, heartfelt passages for just the strings only. Only several minutes into the movement does the piano enter, and even then simply provides a gentle backdrop. There is a jazzy feeling to much of the final movement; its opening melody provides the basic material for most of what follows, in a quasi-variation format. An ascending scale similar to that which opened the work also closes it.

**Fauré: Piano Quartet in C minor, Op. 15
(Composed 1876-1879, 32 minutes)**

In the early part of his career, Fauré made his living as an organist. He was writing music as well, primarily songs. Chamber music wasn’t a priority for him, largely due to the lack of opportunities for performance – especially within France, where opera remained king. This changed, however, in 1871, when Camille Saint-Saëns (with the help of many others, including Fauré, Cesar Franck, and Jules Massenet) started the Société Nationale du musique (National Music Society) specifically to perform works by young French composers. Encouraged by this development, Fauré started to write some of his first masterpieces, including the First Violin Sonata, the Ballade for solo piano, and the first of his two Piano Quartets, composed over the years 1876-79 and given its premiere at a National Music Society concert on February 11, 1880. Despite its public success, Fauré decided that he wasn’t quite satisfied with the Piano Quartet

No. 1 and revisited it in 1883, making several smaller changes in scoring and entirely rewriting the final movement.

The first movement combines robust forward momentum and a relaxed lyricism, with the harmonic and textural richness familiar from later Fauré compositions. With its swirling motion and frequent string pizzicati (plucked notes), the second movement, a kind of perpetuum mobile that combines elements of waltz and march, evokes the great eighteenth century French harpsichord masters like Rameau and the Couperins, François and Louis (whose music was starting to emerge from decades of obscurity during this very time). Many feel the slow third movement – at times solemn, at others serene, always underlain by deep emotion – to be the highlight of the Quartet. The passion that is constantly threatening to erupt there actually does so in the grand final movement, with its swells of dynamics and colors, which brings the Quartet to a powerful close.