

CLAREMONT TRIO

Sunday, January 22, 2023

Program notes by Connie Mayo



Piano Trio No. 1 in G Minor, Opus 11

Cécile Chaminade (1857 - 1944)

I. Allegro

II. Andante

III. Presto leggiero

IV. Allegro molto agitato

French composer and pianist Cécile Chaminade was extremely famous during her lifetime and nearly forgotten after her death. Her popularity was at its peak during La Belle Epoch, an exciting period of prosperity and cultural development paralleling The Gilded Age in America. Paris was the hub of the avant-garde where the arts flourished and salons became the center of musical life.

Born into a wealthy Parisian family, Chaminade described her childhood as, “perpetually under the influence of music.” She began composing early, and Georges Bizet, a neighbor, recognized her talent and recommended that she be given a formal music education. Her father thought it unsuitable for a woman of her class to attend a public institution although he agreed to engage professors of the Paris Conservatory to give her private instruction in piano, violin, counterpoint, harmony and composition.

After making her professional debut in Paris as a pianist at age 18, she concertized extensively and composed her larger works, comprising a highly successful ballet, several symphonies, concertos and a comic opera. In a style rooted in French and Romantic tradition, these were generally well received and praised for “dense, taut workmanship, mastery of harmony and of elegant and delicate design.” But as a woman in a male dominated field, she encountered persistent gender bias, and her compositions were often slighted by critics for perceived feminine qualities of sentimentality, grace and pleasingness.

Following her father’s financial ruin and subsequent death, her family looked to her for support. Thus Chaminade’s musical trajectory shifted when she was 30. She turned to writing shorter, lighter, commercially lucrative pieces which she showcased in recitals throughout Europe, England and America. Though lacking the sophistication of her earlier compositions, these “salon pieces” were hugely popular and became her legacy. In America alone, over one hundred Chaminade Fan Clubs were formed.

Written when she was 22, Piano Trio no. 1 was Chaminade’s first chamber piece. Having a romanticism typical of the time, it is beautifully crafted, virtuosic, full of charm and characteristic of her early period. Cecile played the piano at the premiere in 1880.



Piano Trio No. 1, Queen of Hearts

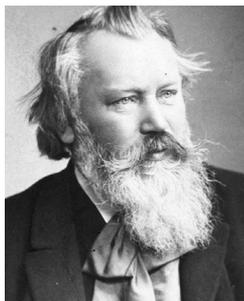
Kati Agócs (b. 1975)

Kati Agócs (Kuh-tee Ah-goch) was born in Windsor, Canada, of Hungarian and American background. Seen as one of the brightest stars in her generation of composers, her diverse and growing body of work is commissioned and performed worldwide. She studied with Milton Babbitt at The Juilliard School where she earned both a Masters and Doctoral degrees. A Guggenheim Fellow and winner of the lifetime achievement award in music from The American Academy of Arts and Letters, she serves on the New England Conservatory’s composition faculty and spends time at her work studio in the fishing village of Flatrock, near St. John’s, Newfoundland.

When writing about her creative process, Agócs states, “It is vital to me to create a sonic landscape where both tonal harmonics and dissonant ones can coexist healthily, symbolically, infused with rhythmical life.” Listening to Queen of Hearts, a work of fluid and austere beauty, one hears such a sound space. The work was composed in 2017, commissioned by Chamber Music Northwest for the Claremont Trio.

Agócs writes about Queen of Hearts:

“The piece is a piano trio cast in variation form that is played without pause in a single fourteen minute trajectory. It begins with a chaconne (a repeating pattern in the bass) followed by a lyrical melody. These two complementary ideas are varied over the course of seven sections and a coda, generating an ever evolving dialogue. They remain separate, alternating continuously as a dialectical pair, until they finally sound simultaneously at the work’s culmination. The variations flow into each other—there are no separate movements. This work celebrates spiritual resilience and strength. The title Queen of Hearts is a whimsical reference to the “mother of higher love” card in a deck of playing cards. This card symbolizes magnetism, resilience, nobility, empathy, decorum, a flair for the dramatic and feminine power.”



Piano Trio No. 1 in B Major, Opus 8

Johannes Brahms (1833 - 1897)

- I. Allegro con brio
- II. Scherzo: Allegro molto
- III. Adagio
- IV. Finale: Allegro

Brahms B Major piano trio is a magnificent work. Its warm lyricism, soulful passion and infinite depth are expressed in gloriously layered sound, balanced beautifully between three instruments. Two versions of the trio exist. One an early work seldom played and a mature work which The Claremont Trio will perform. Oddly, both share the same opus number.

As a young composer, Brahms got a considerable “leg up” from Schumann who was then a dominant figure on the musical scene. Brahms had just begun work on this trio when he was introduced to the Schumanns at their home in Düsseldorf in 1853 by his friend, the famous violin virtuoso, Joseph Joachim. During the visit, Brahms played many of his compositions for the couple, prompting Robert Schumann’s famous article in the music journal “Neue Zeitschrift für Musik,” in which he proclaimed young Brahms to the world as a genius and heir to the legacy of Beethoven. The Schumanns encouraged Brahms to complete the trio and recommended it to their publisher, Breitkopf und Härtel. Notoriously self-critical and a perfectionist who destroyed any compositions he deemed not good enough, Brahms admitted to Joachim that he wasn’t yet satisfied with the trio which he felt still needed reworking.

Thirty-five years later the publisher Simrock, who was now Brahms’ principal publisher, bought the rights to his early works from Breitkopf. Brahms eagerly claimed the opportunity to revise the trio that he now viewed as a work of youthful passion and exuberance. Applying his mature compositional style, the revision virtually created a new piece. Brahms joked that it might as well be called his Op. 108. He streamlined the entire trio, shortened it by a third of its original length, condensed development sections, removed themes and ornamentation and generally tightened it up. The Scherzo is the only movement left relatively unchanged.