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FRIDAY, AUGUST 2, 2019 ■ 7:30 P.M.

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND FINE ARTS CENTER CONCERT HALL

WELCOME BACK HILARY!

SPONSORED BY THE MARY LEMOINE POTTER FUND
AT THE RHODE ISLAND FOUNDATION
AND SAM AND LYNDIE ERSAN

BARBER *Adagio for Strings, Op. 11*

Molto allegro e appassionato

Adagio

Molto allegro (come primo)

VIOLINS: HILARY HAHN, JULIETTE KANG

VIOLA: CHE-HUNG CHEN

CELLO: CLANCY NEWMAN

BEETHOVEN *String Quartet in A Major, Op. 18, No. 5*

Allegro

Menuetto

Andante cantabile

Allegro

VIOLINS: ZACH DEPUE, AYANO NINOMAYA

VIOLA: REN MARTIN-DOIKE

CELLO: PRISCILLA LEE

INTERMISSION

BRAHMS *Piano Trio in B Major, Op. 8*

Allegro con brio — Tranquillo — In tempo ma sempre sostenuto

Scherzo: Allegro molto — Meno allegro — Tempo primo

Adagio

Finale: Allegro

VIOLIN: HILARY HAHN

CELLO: CLANCY NEWMAN

PIANO: NATALIE ZHU

THE BRAHMS PIANO TRIO IS SPONSORED BY A SPECIAL GIFT
FROM ERIC WIDMER AND MEERA VISWANATHAN

Adagio for Strings, Op. 11 (Original Version for String Quartet)

SAMUEL BARBER (1910–1981)

The great American composer Ned Rorem famously said, “Even as you read these words, somewhere in the world Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* is being played. As the most performed ‘serious’ piece by an American, the *Adagio* dispels two notions of conventional wisdom: that what is popular is necessarily junk and that the late improves upon the early.”

In 1936, on a Pulitzer traveling scholarship, the 25-year-old Barber composed his String Quartet, Op. 11, of which this *Adagio* forms the middle movement. A year later, he arranged its 69 bars for string orchestra, and from the time Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony performed the work in 1938, it has become almost a symbol of American music. It was played for Franklin Roosevelt’s commemorative service in 1945, for the funeral of Princess Grace of Monaco in 1982, and for other solemn occasions including for Barber himself in 1981.

The first three bars of the work are its signature, moving from long sustained tones to rising notes, in groups of three, that are accompanied by slow suspended chords. Its soulful and expressive mood has made it a standard choice for many ceremonial occasions, often sad ones. Its elegiac climb to a searing and dramatic climax at the utmost limits of the string ranges, and its quiet postlude seal its status as a moving testament to the composer’s gift of melodic development.

Once again we turn to Ned Rorem’s words, which always offer deep insight. After Barber’s death, he said, “If Barber, twenty-five years old when the *Adagio* was completed, later aimed higher, he never reached deeper into the heart...”

String Quartet in A Major, Op. 18, No. 5

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

Beethoven composed all six quartets of Op. 18 in 1800 as a commission from one of his Viennese patrons. The fifth quartet has become the most prominent, not so much because of a breakthrough from the looming tradition of Mozart, but possibly because of its adherence to that tradition. Beethoven had been moved by Mozart’s six quartets. He copied the last two movements for his own study, and evidently used them as a model, at least in his search for extreme craftsmanship, in his own A Major Quartet. Mozart’s spirit makes this work unique, as it includes a graceful, undramatic allegro, a ‘classical’ minuet, variations on a relatively ordinary scalar theme, and a lively finale full of counterpoint.

The opening movement begins with two themes, which Beethoven states but develops mostly through subsidiary fragments and transitional sections before returning to restate the opening, ending with an A Major scale in the first violin, somehow disconnected from the other strings. Instead of placing the minuet in the typical third position, Beethoven places it as the second movement and gives it a sweet, waltz-like feel. It includes a central trio and repeats the opening. The third movement was marked ‘pastoral’ by the composer, and consists of a simple rising and falling scale and five variations on it; its long coda restates the theme with a double-time figure accompanying it, and winds to a quiet conclusion.

A four-note theme, more utilized than a following, formal one, makes up the major development of the remarkable finale. We hear that first theme in many kinds of elaborations throughout the movement and, after a full stop, it recalls the opening and states that motif again in the powerful coda.

Piano Trio in B Major, Op. 8

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)

Written in 1854 at age 21, Brahms' Op. 8 Piano Trio was the first chamber piece he allowed to be published, after dozens of earlier attempts had only made it into the fire. Still, a dissatisfaction nagged at him until, thirty-six years later, he revised the work — and allowed the earlier version to remain in print. Shorter by almost a third, the more polished (and possibly less urgent) 1890 work is most often played today, though comparisons between the two are standard in composition classes to help students appreciate the skilled decisions and logic of a master.

After completing the now-standard revision, retitled Op. 108, Brahms wrote to his friend Clara Schumann, "I have written my B Major trio once more... It will not be so wild as it was before — but will it be better?" And, to his friend Julius Grimm, the composer wrote, "I did not provide it with a wig, but just combed and arranged its hair a little." Curiously, the first performance of the original was given in New York in 1855, and the revised version, with Brahms at the keyboard, was given at a Vienna concert in 1890.

The opening main theme is retained in the revision, but from there on the development is more skillfully reworked. The scherzo is hardly changed, but the adagio and finale are tightened and more terse in their powerful utterances. In an act of homage that was common at that time, Brahms camouflaged a Schubert melody in the second movement and a song by Beethoven in the finale.

An emphatic initial piano statement, picked up by the cello and then emphasized powerfully by the trio, provides an insight into Brahms' sturdy expressions and forceful statements. The constant motion urges toward resolutions we intuitively sense, but must await until Brahms decides he has transformed the themes to his satisfaction — and ends quietly as if he has said everything he meant to tell us.

The scherzo alternates whisperings of a tune with dramatic outbursts, with a waltz-like trio in the center, returning to a roller-coaster ride of exuberant drama. An adagio becomes a dialogue between the piano and strings. A gorgeous cello melody, continued by the violin, begins a complex mixture of near-conversational writing until the placid ending.

The cello again announces the initial finale theme, agitated and unsettled, until a powerful second theme is stated by the piano. Brahms' mastery at embroidering the three lines in majestic combinations is an exciting journey, with the initial theme reiterated in a thrilling final few bars.

Notes by Tom Di Nardo