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**CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF FORT WORTH PRESENTS
A Virtual Concert
Saturday 12 September 2020 - Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2020**

**Slavonic Dance in E minor, Op.72 No.2
Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)**

The friendship between Brahms and Dvořák is one of the most heartwarming in music history. Mutual admiration and influence enriched both men's music. Brahms was a mentor to the younger Czech composer, recommending Dvořák to his publisher Fritz Simrock.

An astute businessman, Simrock asked Dvořák in 1878 to compose a series like Brahms's popular Hungarian Dances. Dvořák complied with the Slavonic Dances, Op.46, originally for piano duet, like the Brahms. At Simrock's behest, he orchestrated them soon after. The set was a triumph in both versions, making a fortune for Simrock and establishing Dvořák's international reputation.

The Slavonic Dances were surprisingly successful in Germany, which looked upon Bohemia as a provincial hinterland. Despite that, they were soon arranged for various instrumental chamber combinations and orchestrated. The German critic Louis Ehlert observed, "a heavenly naturalness flows through this music." Their beauty lies in variety, authenticity, and a light touch. The music is all original. Dvořák was adept at molding folk-like material while preserving the integrity and wit of its ethnic spirit.

Capitalizing on their overwhelming success, Dvořák composed a second series of Slavonic Dances in 1886; Simrock published them as Op.72. Once again, the initial version was for one piano, four hands; the orchestral version followed. The second set is more international, with representatives of dances from Poland, Serbia, and Ukraine as well as Bohemia and Moravia. The E minor dance we hear has elements of both the Polish *mazurka* and the Ukrainian *dumka*, a ballad type of melancholy, thoughtful mood. Dvořák slides gently from minor mode to major and back again, leaving us in wistful reverie.

**Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
Hungarian Dance No. 5 in G minor, from Op. 65a**

The familiar and beloved music of Brahms's Hungarian Dances is inextricably associated with the great German master. Thus it comes as a surprise to many listeners to learn that Brahms specifically denied authorship of their melodies. He looked upon these dances as arrangements, yet his own personality is so evident in them that they beg for consideration as original compositions. But if we deem them to be authentic Brahms, do we categorize them as music for one-piano four-hands, solo piano, or orchestra? Versions for all three exist in Brahms's hand. Other arrangements for a wide variety of instrumental combinations have followed, including

some by such luminaries as Joseph Joachim (whose arrangement we hear this afternoon) and Fritz Kreisler. These circumstances make the Hungarian Dances unique among Brahms's compositions.

The Hungarian Dances consist of 21 individual pieces in four books. They were published in two groups, the first in 1868 (parts 1 and 2) and the balance in 1880 (Parts 3 and 4). All the first editions were for one-piano, four hands. Brahms issued the first ten for solo piano in 1872, then orchestrated three of them the following year. (Antonín Dvořák's well-known orchestrations of Nos. 17-21 appeared in 1881.) The composition of these dances was an even more complex and drawn out affair than this publication history indicates. The earliest of the Hungarian Dances may have originated as far back as 1853. We know Brahms had begun playing them for friends by the mid-1850s, for tales of such impromptu performances occur in memoirs and letters of his contemporaries.

His fascination with Hungarian gypsy music undoubtedly grew out of Brahms's friendship and professional association with the Hungarian violinist Eduard Reményi, with whom he toured in 1853. Reményi was responsible for introducing Brahms to Joseph Joachim, another Hungarian violinist with whom Brahms was to have a more lasting and fruitful relationship. Nevertheless, before Brahms and Reményi parted company, the young composer absorbed the flavor and panache of the gypsy style that was Reményi's specialty.

Like most 19th-century musicians, Brahms made no distinction between the folk music of Hungary and Gypsy music. Not until Bartók and Kodály undertook their ethnomusicological research in the early 20th century did the differences become clear. Thus Brahms described these melodies in a letter to his publisher, Fritz Simrock, as "genuine Gypsy children, which I did not beget but merely brought up with bread and milk." He seems to have been delighted by the nourishment process. The Hungarian Dances allowed him to sidestep the stringent requirements of sonata and symphony. Their lurching momentum and three-bar phrases are markedly different from Brahms's customary style; so too is the episodic structure, with its abrupt changes in tempo, mood, and thematic material.

Once published, the Hungarian Dances became hugely popular. More than any other work except perhaps *A German Requiem*, these dances helped to enhance Brahms's reputation. The lively G minor Hungarian Dance is arguably the most celebrated in the set, delivering Hungarian Gypsy character with style and panache.

Piano Quintet in A major, Op. 81 **Antonin Dvorák**

Dvořák's music is accessible, melodic, well-crafted, and enduring. One could argue that, despite Dvořák's undeniable success in orchestral and vocal music, his greatest achievement lies in the rich legacy of chamber works he left to us. There are dozens of examples, for all size and measure of the traditional ensembles, ranging from violin sonatas and piano trios through to string quartets and quintets. Sentimental favorites among them will certainly include the Terzetto, Op.74, the "Dumky" Trio, Op.90 and the "American" Quartet, Op.96. Connoisseurs may prefer the fine Piano Quartet in E-Flat, Op.87. But the crown jewel of them all is the

incomparable Piano Quintet that anchors today's program.

This work is on a par with Schubert's "Trout" Quintet and the great piano quintets of Schumann, Brahms and Franck. Within Dvorák's own *oeuvre*, it shines with the effortless polish of his classic form, artfully merged with the Slavonic and nationalistic elements that make his music so distinctive and memorable. The Quintet was composed between August and October 1887, but its real history dates from 15 years prior. In 1872, Dvorák began work on a quintet for piano and strings in A-major. Dissatisfied with his efforts, he made extensive cuts, then began pasting together and writing transitional passages and other revisions in an effort to rework that piece into something satisfactory. Unable to meet his own standards, he eventually started afresh, still in the same key, to produce the masterpiece we hear today. Thus the catalogue of his chamber works includes two quintets in A: Op. 5 and Op. 81.

The second try clearly flowed more smoothly than the first; indeed, its path was eased by a stream of melodic genius from the late summer moment he began work on it. Alec Robertson has noted that "a joyous springtime happiness flows through the music" of the Quintet. In fact, it also blooms with the luxuriant and abundant richness of late summer: a bountiful harvest of emotions and moods, a cornucopia of luscious melodies woven together with stunning, magical skill. These four irresistible movements occasionally reveal the sad corners of the composer's soul, often cloaked in Czech garb. Ultimately, however, Dvorák's was a resolutely positive spirit, and the overall impact of the Quintet is upbeat: unbridled good cheer, with a healthy dash of Bohemian sentiment thrown in for good measure.

There is a spontaneity to his composition in this work that makes it very endearing; nothing seems contrived. One reason for its success is the skillful piano writing, which is among the most effective in all Dvorák, particularly in the inner movements. Another is the skill with which he combines piano and strings, and the ecumenical manner in which he distributes his ideas among the five players.

Musically, the quintet is distinguished by a duality between major and minor. From the opening measures, where the warm, languid cello melody in A-major is challenged by an aggressive response in A-minor from the other strings, we feel a rhetorical pull. Probing questions prompted by such abrupt switches from major to minor throughout its four movements provide much of the narrative impetus of this music. The slow movement is entitled *Dumka* (Lament), a dance of Ukrainian origin that became quite popular in 19th-century Bohemia. *Dumkas* are characterized by rhapsodic, slower sections that may be interrupted by livelier sections with a distinctly brighter mood. In this instance, Dvorák alternates two themes and sets them in a type of variations.

Next comes the Scherzo, one of the most brilliant in all chamber music. This one is a *furiant*, another Czech dance favored by Dvorák. Here he avoids the customary switches between duple and triple time, maintaining the pace of a whirling waltz. He preserves a delicacy and sprightliness more often associated with Mendelssohn's scherzi. To close the quintet, he takes us to the Bohemian countryside, introducing yet another dance rhythm, this time a relative of the polka. The folksy spirit is Haydnesque; the personality definitely Dvorák, with intricate counterpoint building to a breathless, blazing and jubilant conclusion.