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**Program Notes for CMSFW January 4, 2014, Concert**  
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**“Levinson & Friends: Strings with Flair”**

**JEAN-MARIE LECLAIR (1697-1764)**

**Sonata in A Major for Two Violins, Op.3, No.2**

The violin has many roles: as leader of the orchestral strings, as solo instrument, and as chamber music participant. The classic chamber combination with violin is, of course, the string quartet. The pairing of two violins without benefit of viola or cello has its own proud tradition. Violin duos flourished most brilliantly in 18th-century France, notably in the works of Jean-Marie Leclair.

A key figure in the French Baroque violin tradition, Leclair was the son of a Lyonnais master lace maker. He studied both violin and dance as a young man, and traveled to Turin, Italy in 1722 to further his career, apparently as a ballet master. The prominent Italian violinist Giovanni Battista Somis convinced Leclair to focus on violin.

Somis himself had studied with Arcangelo Corelli, and his own music was an important link between the Baroque and Classical styles in Italy. During his study with Somis, Leclair absorbed some Italianisms. His best music merges the melodic lyricism of Italian song with the mannered elegance of the French style. From 1728, Leclair lived primarily in Paris, where he performed at the Concert Spirituel and was eventually appointed to the Chapel Royal. He later served as principal violinist and director of the Duke de Gramont's orchestra.

Although he wrote many stage works, Leclair's most significant contribution is in the violin repertoire. His 49 solo sonatas, twelve violin concertos, and dozens of trio sonatas are of uniformly high quality. His duo-sonatas match the exceptional standards of his other instrumental compositions.

The Sonata in A comes from a set of six published in Paris in 1730. The title page reads "Sonatas for two violins without Bass [meaning no harpsichord or *basso continuo*]. One may play these sonatas for two viols." The absence of continuo broke from the custom of the time, and meant that the violin lines were more independent. The reference to viols is somewhat archaic; these predecessors of the modern stringed instruments were still being played in the mid-18th century, but were going out of vogue. Leclair's publishers were seeking the largest possible market for the duo-sonatas.

The A major sonata opts for three movements rather than four, thus anticipating the newer *galant* style. The violins are equal partners, often exchanging lower for upper part when repeating a phrase. Both players must be highly accomplished to match articulation in exchanged phrases, and to control the frequent echo effects.

Double stops in the central Sarabande give the impression that more than two instruments are playing. Leclair's predominantly chordal texture contrasts with the light counterpoint of the outer movements. The refinement of his ideas is impressive, given the limited resources he selected for this sunny music.

**LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)**

**String Trio in D Major, Op.9, No.2**

Beethoven eased his way gradually into writing for strings. The string trio, to some extent an outgrowth of the 18th-century divertimento or serenade, was an excellent proving ground. Beethoven published an early trio in E-flat as Op.3; the piece was probably written before 1794, but Beethoven was still proud enough of it to present it to the Viennese public. He did the same with a Serenade in D for String Trio, composed in 1796-1797 and published in 1797 as Op.8. The crowning glory of these early efforts preceding the Op.18 quartets is his Opus 9, three string trios written in 1797 and 1798 and published in 1798. In his dedication to Count Johann Georg von Browne, Beethoven called them "the best of his works," and most critics agree that they were the finest he had written up to that time.

The D major trio has taken a back seat to its siblings, perhaps because it is not so overtly dramatic. Nevertheless it shares with them a symphonic-style four movement structure, rather than the multi-movement serenade style of the earlier string trios. Still, the D major is the most relaxed and endearing of the Opus 9 set. One has a clear sense that this music is as much for the pleasure of the performers as it is for the listeners.

The pianissimo opening for violin is unusual for Beethoven this early in his career. It is a ploy to which he would return in many later works, and allows for the sudden dynamic contrasts so characteristic of his style. The opening *Allegretto* punctuates its gestures with effective use of *ff* emphasis, syncopations, and occasional unison passages. Three distinct themes make the movement's architecture easy to discern. At one point toward the end, Beethoven sends the cello to its uppermost register, playing above the violin (he does this elsewhere in the Opus 9 trios).

The *Andante quasi allegretto* has a gentle melancholy in keeping with the lighter character of this trio. Beethoven's ingratiating Menuetto is clearly related to the analogous movement in the splendid Piano Sonata Op.10, No.3, on which he worked at the same time as the string trios.

Some role reversal opens the finale. The cello, once again in its upper register, announces the first theme, while violin anchors the bass line and viola provides syncopated commentary. As they exchange and discuss this initial idea, their interplay provides a graceful trajectory as Beethoven guides us through two new themes and a couple of surprising modulations.

## **HANDEL-HALVORSEN**

### **JOHAN AUGUST HALVORSEN (1864-1935)**

#### ***Passacaglia* for Violin & Viola**

One of the great war-horses of the violin-violita duo repertoire, the Handel-Halvorsen *Passacaglia* is probably the best known composition by the Norwegian violinist and composer Johan Halvorsen. In his own country Halvorsen is considered a worthy heir to the tradition of Edvard Grieg (whose niece he married) and Johan Svendsen. Outside Norway, however, his original music is rarely heard, excepting an occasional pops performance of the *Entry March of the Boyars* (1893).

That fate has not befallen the *Passacaglia*, Halvorsen's best known chamber work. Freely based on a movement from Handel's Seventh Harpsichord Suite (1720), the duo adheres fairly closely to the Baroque model in its early variations. The second half of the Halvorsen adaptation plumbs Handel's original in greater depth, presenting rhythmic, harmonic and technical challenges for both players. At the same time it permits the Norwegian composer to impose his own musical personality on the rich material of the theme. Halvorsen's experience and expertise as a violinist are admirably reflected in his rich and idiomatic writing for both instruments, often making us believe that a third or even fourth player is present.

## **ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841-1904)**

### **String Quintet in G, Op.77**

The string quintet has a fascinating and proud history among chamber music genres that amounts to a tug-of-war with regard to instrumentation. How to augment the traditional string quartet? Mozart, whose string instrument of preference was the viola, expanded it with a second viola for his wonderful late quintets. Schubert, in his immortal Quintet in C major, D.898, opted for a second cello. These are the works against which other string quintets are generally measured. Beethoven's Op.29 adheres to the Mozartean model, doubling the viola.

There are many other examples in the 19th-century literature. Notable works by Mendelssohn, Bruckner, and Brahms spring quickly to mind, as well as some lesser known gems by Louis Spohr and especially the French composer Georges Onslow (1784-1853), who composed an astonishing 34 string quintets. Most of Onslow's quintets adhere to the Schubertian model of a second cello; however, they were published in flexible versions that included a second viola or even string quartet plus double bass.

The latter combination attracted Antonin Dvořák when he began work on this Quintet in January 1875. Indeed, so many ideas filled his mind that he had completed five movements by March. Eventually he published the first of them, an *Andante religioso*, he eventually published separately as a *Nocturne* for string orchestra, Op.40. The remaining four movements remained intact as a string quintet. They belong chronologically to the same period as Dvořák's Piano Trio, Op.21, Serenade in E, Op.22, and Piano Quartet in D, Op.23. (Dvořák's publisher Fritz Simrock issued the Quintet in 1888. By rights it should have been assigned Opus 18, but Simrock knew that Dvořák's music was in great demand, and published the Quintet as Opus 77, thereby implying that it was a new work.)

Placed in its appropriate context among other works of the mid-1870s, the Quintet emerges as a transitional work. 1875 was the year during which Johannes Brahms and Eduard Hanslick first became acquainted with Dvořák's music. Brahms's championing of his younger Czech contemporary was to prove very important in the furtherance of Dvořák's career. Dvořák was beginning to abandon Austro-Germanic models in favor of a specifically Bohemian style. Part of the Quintet's charm is its lightheartedness, which surely derives from the folk flavor of its lilting melodies. Both outer movements are regularly compared to operatic overtures. Gervase Hughes has written:

All four movements . . . are characterized by a tripping operetta-like delicacy that is comparatively rare in Dvořák's instrumental music. The whole affair might almost have been contrived by the Sullivan of *Trial by Jury* (also dated March 1875) had that composer subsequently taken a spring holiday in Bohemia and developed an interest in the national idiom.

Dvořák was himself an accomplished violist who earned his living for a dozen years as an orchestral musician. His intimate understanding of string playing transfers to all four members of the string family, though the writing is not always

idiomatic and presents challenges to the five players. The double bass, far from being an afterthought, is an integral part of the ensemble, occasionally lending a momentary darkness to the music through the depth of its sound. One can draw parallels to the Rossini string sonatas and Schubert's "Trout" Quintet, both of which enrich the chamber repertoire for the string bass. Dvořák's rich gift for ingratiating melody is certainly in keeping with the admirable examples set by Rossini and Schubert before him.

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