

Program Notes for Sunday, August 14 Musicians' Choice Chamber Music Concert

- Mahler Piano Quartet in A Minor
- Poulenc Sextet for Piano and Winds
 Allegro vivace
 Divertissement: Andantino
 Finale: Prestissimo
- Spohr Octet in E Major, Opus 32
 Adagio – Allegro
 Menuetto: Allegro
 Andante con variazioni: Thema di Handel
 Finale: Allegretto

Piano Quartet in A Minor (1876) Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

In 1863, Brahms had moved to Vienna largely prompted by the enthusiastic reception of two of his own piano quartets there the previous year. Pianist Julius Epstein at the Vienna Conservatory was a friend of Brahms and had worked hard to convince the reluctant Hellmesberger Quartet to premiere the works of the then little known composer from Hamburg. Brahms quickly became a fixture on the Viennese musical scene where he was viewed as the heir to Beethoven, especially after the premieres of his two Op. 51 string quartets in 1873. The young Mahler came to the Conservatory in 1875—then directed rather autocratically by quartet founder Joseph Hellmesberger—to study piano with Epstein, and following the footsteps of his predecessor, Mahler focused on chamber music in his student compositions. With all but this single movement Piano Quartet now lost, the piece represents the only surviving composition of Mahler's that is not a symphony or a song. In truth, we are lucky to have it: Mahler himself believed the work to have been lost, and the manuscript was only found among his files after the death of his wife Alma in 1964.

Given the context of its composition, it is not surprising to hear shades of Brahms flowing in and out of this music. The movement is in sonata form (as Brahms consistently used) and the melodies flow broadly over undulating accompaniment. However, Mahler treads loosely over the skeletal pillars of the form here, reordering themes and varying key areas not as a challenge to the formal confines of the tradition, but as a means to suit his expressive needs. The melodic fluidity here, with its inclination to constantly push forward without break, strikingly presages his characteristic mature style. It is fascinating to hear Mahler struggling at times to find a way to reconcile his inclination for broad expression with the necessarily sectional nature of the form. While the effort leads to abrupt transitions at times, Mahler finds creative solutions at others, as with the brief violin cadenza in the recapitulation section.

Sextet for Piano and Winds (1930-32, 1939) Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Poulenc had a wonderful sense of how to write for wind instruments. Although he attempted to write chamber music for strings alone a number of times, he ended up destroying most of these manuscripts before they saw the light of day. Chamber music scholar Arthur Cohn writes, "[Poulenc] seemed to assume, quite correctly, that a fresh assortment of timbres could well

inject some new blood into the quiescence of chamber music.” The use of winds also seemed to support his own inclination towards wit and irreverence in his scores, inspired by the work of Erik Satie, the artistic mentor to Poulenc’s group of young French composers dubbed *Les Six*.

In addition to the present Sextet, he composed sonatas for oboe, flute and clarinet (each with piano), one for two clarinets, one for clarinet and bassoon, and a trio for piano, oboe, and bassoon. After completing the Sextet in 1932, Poulenc remained dissatisfied, so he altered it considerably in 1939, as he explained to legendary French pedagogue Nadia Boulanger: “There were some good ideas in it but the whole thing was badly put together. With the proportions altered, better balanced, it comes over very clearly—very fast and fiery.” With these changes, the sparkling work has become one of Poulenc’s best-known pieces.

The outburst that begins the first movement sets up the energetic chase that dominates its first section. A relentless pulse in the piano underlies short, humorous gestures in the winds until a very surprising bassoon solo transitions the music to the expressive and sustained middle section (whose sincerity—in typical Poulenc style—is constantly called into question). The initial material then returns, capped with a kind of disconnected coda.

The second movement begins as a clever homage to Mozart’s famous C major Piano Sonata, learned by many during childhood piano lessons (here a half step up, falling on many of the black notes). The middle section is a carefree departure, and when the original theme comes back, it ends rather tentatively on the “wrong” chord, as if our child performer lost her way and had to quickly invent an ending.

The finale is a loosely structured rondo with a joyfully bright main theme accompanied by murmuring piano figuration. After a spirited episode and return, the music comes to a sudden halt reminiscent of the first movement’s approach to the coda. After a short bassoon solo that again recalls the opening movement, Poulenc affirms the connection with a completely transformed version of the opening of the sextet. That “burst” is now a nostalgic *pianissimo* reflection, marked “expressive, very sweet and melancholic”. In the final bars, however, the music builds to an impressive C major climax marked with a *ffff* dynamic.

Octet in E Major, Opus 32 (1814) Louis Spohr (1784-1859)

The music of both Mahler and Poulenc went through intervals of neglect after their deaths, but both composers have found their way back into the pantheon of “Masters” after a period of re-assessment. Such a phase of renewal has passed by the 19th century composer Louis Spohr. Spohr was actually a celebrated composer, violinist and conductor during his lifetime, when he was considered one of the greats along with Mozart, Beethoven and Bach. Spohr was a prolific composer, making his reputation on his nearly 20 violin concertos, and solidifying it with his early success in opera, eventually composing ten. He completed over 60 chamber works over the course of his lifetime, including five “octets”, four for double string quartet and the mixed wind and string octet we hear this evening.

Spohr traveled from Gotha to Vienna in 1812, intending to stay only briefly, but after making some connections, he was offered a three-year directorship of the prestigious Theater an der Wien on the spot. As news spread around the city that he had accepted the position, businessman and musical connoisseur Johann Tost arranged a meeting with Spohr, offering a rather bizarre proposal. Spohr would grant him possession of any score he composed during the three year stint, Tost would lend them out for performance at his discretion, and he would return them to Spohr at the end of the time period. Spohr was baffled by this offer, but arranged a fee

schedule that provided payment amounts directly proportional to the number of instruments included in the each score. Tost was delighted and the two quickly became friendly, with Tost luxuriously furnishing Spohr's new apartment in Vienna for a song. The Octet, with its highly unusual scoring that includes two violas and two horns, was composed on special request from Tost, as Spohr explains:

By wish of Herr von Tost, who then had been contemplating a journey to England, I took up a theme from Handel, varied and carried it out thematically. Tost was of the opinion it would on that account excite great interest in that country. I ended up playing this composition very frequently, as myself [on violin], the clarinetist..., and the hornist..., found special opportunities to distinguish ourselves.

By the time Spohr completed the Octet in late 1814, Tost's financial position had completely disintegrated, and he could not afford to pay the composer. Spohr generously released him from his obligation and ultimately left his beloved Vienna before his contract with the Theater was up due to a serious falling out with the owner. Nevertheless, Vienna seemed to inspire Spohr: during his short time there, he produced a large body of chamber music that is considered to be his finest work.

The opening movement begins with a slow introduction in minor that is surprisingly transformed into major by the horn and clarinet at the beginning of the Allegro. This theme along with the decorative upper neighbor dotted rhythms unifies much of the material in the movement.

The clever Minuet is in 3/4, as all minuets are, but the syncopations and repeating melodic patterns create the impression of pairings of notes in twos, making an odd metric clash. The horns take center stage in the contrasting trio section.

The third movement is the one Spohr based on Handel, closely hewing to the theme from the "Harmonious Blacksmith" movement of the composer's Suite No. 5 for harpsichord. Like Handel, Spohr writes variations on the tune, beautifully showcasing the individual instruments of the ensemble.

The piece ends with a pastoral rondo. Carefree and light, the movement caps off the work with sparkling use of the ensemble's colors as the instruments' parts weave in and out of melody and accompaniment.