

## FREIMANN 4 – A Closer Look

Wednesday, May 8, 2024 – History Center

Sunday, May 12, 2024 – Rhinehart Hall

To conclude the 23-24 Freimann series we present works by Beethoven, Joan Tower and Brahms. All three works fit nicely into our seasonal theme “Brahms and the Romantic Spirit.” Beethoven was the key musical figure who helped usher in the Romantic era, and the music of Joan Tower is some of the most evocative and approachable of our time, if rather austere in its romanticism. The music of Brahms then closes out the concert and the series.

Beethoven’s Wind Sextet in E-flat major, Op. 71 was composed in 1796 during his early years in Vienna. He was becoming recognized primarily as a piano virtuoso, having only made a public debut of his compositions the year before. His studies of counterpoint with Haydn are well documented, and he was quite familiar with the music of Haydn and Mozart. While his early works fit into the Classical Viennese mold, his dramatic personality and musical innovations are already quite in evidence in the Sextet.

A stately “Adagio” opens the piece with upward triadic motion ending with an unusual forte-piano held chord. Then the “Allegro” ensues, as the first clarinet proclaims a downward triadic theme. Thus Beethoven establishes his creative originality at the very outset, while still writing in the accepted style of the Classical sonata form. All six players enjoy contrapuntal interplay in various permutations, occasionally interrupted by flashy virtuosity from the first clarinet, and later the first bassoon. Towards the end of the movement, all of a sudden the second horn—having mostly supported the ensemble with pedal tones and brief thematic gestures—blares forth with its own virtuosic arpeggio. One can just imagine the young composer chuckling to himself: “Wait ‘til they hear this!”

The sublime “Adagio” that follows presents the first bassoon in the leading role, answered by one, then both clarinets. With little thematic development, the tender melodic dialogue ends all too soon. It is in the “Menuetto” movement, heralded by hunting calls from the horns, that Beethoven presages his invention of the Scherzo. While still in the guise of the elegant Viennese dance, this Minuet leaves behind the sedate 1-2-3 tempo and demands a one-to-the-bar feel. The Trio section is built on gentle syncopation and fugal textures. E-flat major having been established during Baroque times as the key representing royalty, the Sextet concludes with a regal “Rondo,” characterized by fanfare-like dotted rhythms and subservient, scurrying triplets.

Joan Tower was born in 1938, educated at Bennington College and Columbia University, and has been a leading American composer since the 1970’s. Active throughout her career as a pianist, she was a founding member of the award-winning Da Capo Chamber Players. She has served as composer-in-residence with several major orchestras and dozens of her symphonic and chamber works are frequently performed.

“Rising” begins by doing just that, as a three, then four-note theme is sounded by the flute. This theme reappears throughout the work, in between rhapsodic sections of alternating intensity and relaxation. More often than not, the texture contrasts the solo wind with the four strings, although all players are in turn given leading roles. While the “Rising” idea predominates, there is much variety and inventiveness in the different sections of the work, especially in regard to rhythmic manipulation. Towards the end, the music comes to an abrupt halt, and an extended soliloquy from the flute leads into a non-stop race to the finish—one of the most exciting endings in all of chamber music!

And now—finally, to end the season—the glorious music of Brahms! A fascinating contrast to the early Beethoven Sextet, his third and final piano quartet shows us Brahms’ mature style. Although the first movement is marked “Allegro non troppo,” to the listener it appears to begin with a slow introduction, harkening back to the time-honored tradition as we heard in the Beethoven work. Brahms achieves this contrast ingeniously by writing slower note values within the “Allegro” tempo. The stark opening double C in both hands of the piano is answered by longing sighs and chromatically meandering lines in the strings. Repeated a step lower, the music gradually slows, then abruptly charges into the Allegro tempo proper with furious downward scales from the strings, their previous sighing two-note phrases becoming declamations by the piano. Soon the music again slows through rhythmic manipulation and leads into the second theme, a flowing melody from the piano. A lengthy development through many changes of harmony and key recalls the two-note idea, alternately longing and declamatory, until the movement ends quietly with an echo of the opening music.

Also in the home key of C minor, the “Scherzo: Allegro” exhibits the slightly fiendish character typical of the late 19th-century scherzo, its first theme introduced by the piano and answered by a gentler second theme in the strings. Pairs of notes in both themes and frequent harmonic shifts subtly recall the opening movement. Driving energy continues until the brief coda surprisingly shifts to C major.

A year after the C minor Piano Quartet, Brahms finally declared his First Symphony finished, having withheld and re-worked it over several decades, intimidated by following in the “giant footsteps of Beethoven.” As in the C minor Symphony, he chose the distant key of E major for his Quartet’s slow movement. This time, the cello sets the mood with an extended solo passage and the movement plays out filled with Brahmsian beauty, gentle syncopation and his rhythmic hallmark of two-against-three.

The Finale, “Allegro comodo,” returns to C minor as the violin sings the tender first theme over a perpetual motion of faster notes from the piano. A forceful variation from all the players then leads into the quiet chorale-like second theme in the strings over a more subdued yet still active piano accompaniment. As in previous movements, Brahms develops these ideas and gradually returns to the opening music. The Quartet, and our season-long tribute to this great Romantic master, comes to a quiet close capped by two forceful C major chords.

FREIMANN 3 – At A Glance

Wednesday, May 8, 2024 – History Center

Sunday, May 12, 2024 – Rhinehart Hall

Beethoven – Wind Sextet in E-flat major, Op. 71

- One of his early chamber works, written in 1796
- Beethoven’s dramatic personality and creativity already in evidence
- The six players share melodic material and occasional virtuosity

Joan Tower – Rising for Flute and String Quartet

- She has been a leading American composer since the 1970’s
- The “Rising” idea characterizes the theme and many sections of the piece
- Constantly changing rhythmic and melodic ideas lead to an exciting finish

Brahms – Piano Quartet in C minor, Op. 60

- His third and final piano quartet, written in 1875
- Shares key relationships with his First Symphony which debuted a year later
- Luscious Romantic music concludes the 23-24 Freimann season

— Adrian Mann