MOZART & BRAHMS

PREMIERES

NOV 13 | 8 PM

DOWNTOWN SERIES
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ANTOINE PLANTE, CONDUCTOR

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)
String Quintet No. 5 in D major, K. 593

I. Larghetto - Allegro
II. Adagio
III. Menuetto: Allegretto
IV. Allegro

INTERMISSION

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)
String Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Op. 18

I. Allegro ma non troppo
II. Andante ma moderato
III. Scherzo. Allegro molto
IV. Rondo. Poco Allegretto e grazioso
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Praised by audiences and musicians alike for his conducting verve and innovative programming, Antoine Plante has garnered praise for bringing music to life. “Plante led his orchestra, the choir and the soloists in an impressive account of the Requiem: authoritative, vigorous, emotionally intense, at times utterly gripping,” writes Charles Ward of the Houston Chronicle.

Plante is a founder of Mercury Chamber Orchestra, a Houston, Texas-based orchestra that has experienced remarkable audience growth over its twenty-year history. In that capacity, Plante has become known for his deftness in balancing a great works repertoire with lesser-known and unknown pieces. His exciting musicality has made him an audience favorite, as evidenced by Mercury’s fast-growing audience.

He is also a passionate supporter of classical music education and has led Mercury’s educational outreach program, a significant effort that includes classroom music education in underserved schools, master classes for school orchestras, and performances for school children.

Plante is extremely versatile. At ease with the great romantic and modern composers, he also loves to perform Classical and Baroque music with period instrument orchestras. Experienced in directing orchestral pieces as well as staged works, he has conducted several operas and ballets. He collaborated with noted French director Pascal Rambert to produce a modern staged version of Lully’s Armide, which was performed to critical acclaim in Paris and Houston. He worked with Dominic Walsh Dance Theater to create a score for Dominic Walsh’s ballet Romeo and Juliet. An innovative artist, he has premiered new works such as The Crimson Prince with Director Denis Plante, and Loving Clara Schumann with Director Tara Faircloth.

Under his leadership, Mercury has grown to be an important arts organization in Houston, offering over 50 concerts per season in many different venues, making great music accessible to the whole community.

Plante has been invited to perform as guest conductor for the San Antonio Symphony, Oregon Bach Festival Orchestra, Chanticleer, Ecuador National Symphony Orchestra and Atlanta Baroque.
The old habit inherited from the 17th century of categorizing musical genres according to venue – church, chamber, and theater – had evolved by the 19th century to include music for the concert hall. That venue typically featured symphonies and concertos among instrumental genres, that is, large works for public consumption. This stood in contrast to a revised concept of chamber music, which connoted not secular genres, as it originally had, but instead music for smaller ensembles meant for private, even domestic settings. Among instrumental genres, the sonata and string quartet most frequently come to mind as chamber music, but Mozart’s String Quintet, K. 593 (1790) and Brahms’s String Sextet, Op. 18 (1860) feature less common ensembles but easily fit the parameters of chamber music. Each piece originating in the circumstances from the lives of their composers, both reflect distinctive domestic contexts. Mozart can be seen responding to new possibilities afforded him as the recently appointed Kammermusikus (chamber musician) to the Hapsburg Emperor Joseph II. Brahms, in seeming retreat from the main trends in mid-19th-century concert music, seems to have drawn inspiration from his teaching and conducting duties among musical amateurs and professionals at the provincial court of Detmold in northern Germany. In both cases, the design of the pieces themselves reflect the settings for which they were conceived.

It is hard to imagine Mozart’s final years without contemplating his untimely death, and scholars have sometimes described his late works as if Mozart had some foreknowledge of his own looming fate. He didn’t. To the contrary, Mozart’s final years were almost miraculously productive, during which his professional circumstances were steadily improving. One reason was his appointment as “chamber musician” to the imperial court, as recorded in a decree of December 7, 1787:

Our most gracious sovereign, concerning Wolfgang Mozart, graciously appended: that it has been His Imperial & Royal Apostolic Majesty’s pleasure to do him the most signal honor of appointing him His Majesty’s Kammermusikus in view of his knowledge and ability in music and the approbation he has earned thereby.

This and the patronage of the wealthy and music-loving Baron Gottfried van Swieten left Mozart sanguine about his prospects in spite of his poor finances. As he insisted in a postscript to a letter begging for money from his friend and creditor, Michael Puchberg (March or April, 1790), “I now have more cause to be hopeful than ever before – I now stand at the gateway to my fortune.”

In this context, the String Quintet in D Major, K. 593, illustrates Mozart’s contribution to chamber music repertory as Chamber Musician to the Emperor, and its features are revealing. Challenging, experimental, and virtuosic, Mozart’s quintet reveals a musical style tailored to the sophisticated audience of the imperial court. The opening movement stands out formally for reprising its Larghetto introduction – itself characterized by strange and unpredictable harmonies.
- as part of the coda to the movement. Within the sonata form of the opening movement’s Allegro, a concentration of diverse ideas make up the first theme: a march-like beginning, syncopations emphasized by rapid dynamic contrasts, cascading triplets in the first violin, jolting chords in cadencing, and then an added phrase in dotted rhythms. The many ideas - marked by frequent trills, changes of dynamic, and a near constant change of texture among the five string instruments - emphasize the underlying design and quality of this piece as connoisseur’s music. The Adagio second movement in G major offers a sonata form whose transitions are so quick and smooth as pass by almost unnoticed. Perhaps more remarkable is its tonal plan in which the second theme appears in minor in both exposition and recapitulation. A return to major at the end of the exposition seems a return to stability, possibly a cadencing gesture, but it actually initiates a motivically saturated, harmonically daring development. In its parsing of the themes and motives, this movement also varies the sub-groupings among the five players continuously: one against four; two against three; three against three (in which the first viola pivots between upper and lower voices); and, eventually in the midst of the development, stretto between all five parts.

That same quality of textural variety continues in the Menuetto and Trio, whose syncopations are intensified as in the opening movement with sudden dynamic contrasts. The finale adds contrapuntal intricacies to the quintet. Mozart again uses sonata form, but this is hardly obvious because of the way that fugal imitation (fugato) is woven into the movement. The first theme, itself cast as a rounded binary form, begins with a descending chromatic motif. The bridge section that will connect the first theme to the second begins with that same chromatic motif, but played in unison by all five strings. This leads to a second theme, at first hard to recognize because it is presented, unusually, in five-part imitation from top to bottom voices. A return of the chromatic theme in unison begins the development, which features not only tonal instability, but also motivic instability in the form of that chromatic motif in inversion. Mozart follows this with yet a new theme played by the cello that initiates another fugato, this time from low to high voices. The return of the chromatic motif signals a recapitulation, but one whose second theme presents all three of the movement’s main themes (first and second themes, plus the new theme from the development) in combination. A coda plays with the first theme in original and inverted form to bring the movement and the whole of the quintet to a finish.

If Mozart’s tour-de-force quintet represents an imperial courtly form of private chamber music, Brahms’s sextet illustrates the domestic ideal of a different time and place. This is music both performed by and enjoyed by friends who include both amateur and professional musicians, who otherwise interacted as social equals, such as those he knew in Detwold. In a letter to Brahms dated May 4, 1866, his close friend Theodor Billroth gives us a sense not only of the social context of this music, but also of its style:
Yesterday we played your new sextette at my home, partly with professionals, partly with amateurs, and I wish to tell you what an extraordinary joy we had in the playing of it ... This is due not only to the ease with which the stream of melody flows and in which one charming motif after the other associates itself, but also to the entire construction of this work of art, to the crescendo of the emotions and the harmonic entity of the whole ... Please accept a thousand thanks for the beautiful hours which you prepared for us.

Billroth was actually writing about the composer’s Sextet № 2, Op. 36, but his reaction also illuminates crucial features of the Sextet № 1, Op. 18. Specifically, the design of the opening movement’s sonata form and the finale’s rondo form privileges long melodious themes. There is little motivic development, and the development section of the sonata form is quite short. The rondo theme of the finale – almost a pastoral idyll – is also long and lyrical. Its episodes, rather than presenting developmental departures from the main theme, simply offer contrasting themes. The theme and variations form of the second movement, on a theme derived from the folia tune of the Renaissance and Baroque recalls long-ago music, and the energy of the Scherzo brings to mind folk dancing, as if to complement the contemplative lyricism of the outer movements with evocations of distant places in the inner movements.

Brahms wrote this piece shortly after the unsuccessful premiere of an early version of his First Piano Concerto, and at a time when it seemed that Franz Liszt’s tone poems and program music in general, both distasteful to Brahms, represented the future of symphonic composition. Brahms had yet to make his mark as an orchestral composer, and we can get a sense of his alienation at this time from his reaction to the death of the composer Louis Spohr, whom he admired. In a letter written a few days after Spohr’s (October 22, 1859), Brahms proclaimed,

Spohr is dead! He may well be the last one who still belonged to a more beautiful era of art than the one we are suffering through. In those days, one could eagerly keep a look out every week for what new and even more beautiful work had come from this or that person. Now it is different. In a month of Sundays, I see hardly one volume of music that pleases me, but on the other hand many that make me physically ill.

This was around the time that Brahms began his Sextet, Op. 18, which is significant in two ways: first, the only 19th-century sextet that Brahms could have looked to as a model was that of Spohr, his Op. 140 in C Major (1850); second, Brahms’s sextet shows him to be finding his compositional voice away from the concert hall and in the domestic setting among friends playing chamber music.

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## VENUES AROUND HOUSTON
### NEIGHBORHOOD SERIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Purcell &amp; Couperin</td>
<td>Feb 24-27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mozart Camerata</td>
<td>Apr 28-May 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tango Quartet</td>
<td>June 2-4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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EINE MASKE TRAGEN