Senior Recital:  Xu Xiao, Viola

20th April, Friday, 6pm,
Conservatory Concert Hall

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Brahms' Sonata For cello and piano No. 1 in E minor, Op. 38
(Viola Transcription)

I. Allegro non troppo

II. Allegretto quasi Minuetto

III. Allegro

INTERMISSION (10’)

PAUL HINDEMITH (1895-1963)

Der Schwanendreher

I. "Zwischen Berg und tiefem Tal"

II. "Nun laube, Lindlein, laube!"

III. "Seid ihr nicht der schwanendreher"
Program Notes:

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Brahms' Sonata No. 1 in E minor, Op. 38 is the first of two sonatas for piano and cello. It was begun in 1862 during Brahms' stay in the mountain village of Bad Munster am Stein-Ebernburg, where he wrote the first two movements and an Adagio movement, which was later dropped. After the existing finale was added in 1865, Brahms dedicated the completed sonata to his friend Josef Gansbacher, an amateur cellist and professor at the Singing Akademie in Vienna.

The deep sonorities and the haunting melodies of the Allegro non troppo create a mood throughout the movement that is melancholic and sometimes wistful. The opening theme is a beautiful melody which rises from the depths of the cello's low E, soars for a few moments, then wanders its way back down the G and C strings to give way to the piano entrance.

Brahms uses chromaticism to charm in the Allegretto quasi Minuetto. Chromatic melodies in F-sharp minor and A major sweep through the cello line, creating appropriately edgy dissonances on the strong beats of the measure. Sighing figures played three times in succession make up the only asymmetrical phrases in the entire piece.

The finale, begins with a three-voiced fugue. The movement is indebted not only to Bach, but also to the fugal finale of Beethoven’s Cello Sonata, Op. 102, No. 2. The fugal subject strongly resembles that of Contra\punctus XIII from Bach’s Art of Fugue. The four-bar subject is stated in the piano, with the reply from the cello in the dominant. It is played for the third and final time in the right hand of the piano. Brahms goes on to have all three fugue voices playing versions of the theme simultaneously, leading into a brief Piu Presto, which drives recklessly through previous motives straight into the final chord of the piece.
Paul Hindemith (1895-1963)

Paul Hindemith wrote Der Schwanendreher, his third and most popular viola concerto, during a period of political hostility in Germany. The concerto was finished on 13 October 1935 in Berlin. The Concertgebouw Orchestra conducted by Willem Mengelberg and Hindemith himself playing the solo premiered it in Amsterdam on 14 November 1935. The concerto’s unusual name comes from the folk tune that inspired the last movement: Seid ihr nicht der Schwanendreher? In fact, every movement is inspired by one or two medieval German folk tunes. Hindemith’s interest for folk song stems from his desire for bridging a stronger connection between the composer and the listener by drawing from material that is familiar to everyone.

The first movement of the concert is titled “Zwischen Berg und tiefem Tal”: Langsam – Mäßig bewegt, mit Kraft,” which translates to “Between mountain and deep valley.” It begins with solo viola. Afterwards the orchestra enters with a pronounced dotted rhythm which is key to the rhythmic structure of the piece. Then comes a faster section in sonata form, followed by a return to the opening material.

The second movement features the German tune “Nun Laube, Lindlein, labue” (Now Shed Your Leaves, Little Linden!). This lyrical opening paints a picture of leaves falling from the trees. This movement is in ABA form. The B section is a fugue labeled “Der Gutzgauch auf dem Zaune saß” (The Cuckoo Sat on the Fence). The fugue interrupts the beautiful lyrical section with a cheery melody, and the movement ends with the peaceful subject matter from the opening.

The last movement is a set of twelve variations on the cheerful tune Seid ihr nicht der Schwanendreher? (Are You Not the Swan Turner?). The swan turner was the person in charge of turning the swan when it was being roasted on a spit. It is remarkable in how many different ways Hindemith presents the theme. The variety of instrumentations, textures, and rhythmic re-interpretations of the theme creates very playful and colorful sonorities.