Visiting Artist Series:
Shlomo Mintz Recital
Wednesday, 13 November 2019, 7.30pm
Conservatory Concert Hall

Programme

SCHUBERT
Arpeggione Sonata, D821 (arr. for viola)

BRAHMS
Viola Sonata in E-flat major, Op. 120, No. 2

MILHAUD
Le bœuf sur le toit, Op. 58b

PIAZZOLLA
The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires
Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Arpeggione Sonata in A minor, D821
Allegro moderato
Adagio
Allegretto

Timing – 27:00

"What", you must be asking yourselves, "is an Arpeggione?" After all, it appears to have had, in the words of Gerald Hayes an authority on string instruments, just one "professional exponent", a man called Vincenz Schuster who was, according to the International Guitar Research Centre based at the California State University; "An amateur guitarist living in Vienna, Austria during the first part of the 19th century". The instrument itself, which has been described as either "a bass viol with guitar tuning" or as having "the shape and tuning of the guitar but the size of a small cello and played with a bow", was developed over a 10-year period and presented to the public in 1823 by a Viennese violin maker called Johann Georg Staufer who called it a "guitar d'amour". It had no value as an ensemble instrument, had little to commend it as a solo instrument and was extremely difficult to play, and within a few years had passed into oblivion. That we remember it today is due entirely to the fact that Schuster was
an acquaintance of Schubert and, as was his habit, Schubert happily wrote some music to seal, as it were, their friendship.

However, it was not just friendship which prompted Schubert to write this unusual and unique work; he was driven to it by disappointment and professional rejection.

Those commentators who write about Schubert frequently observe that he produced masterpieces in every musical genre except opera. That is certainly true, but it masks a major failure in Schubert’s career; encapsulated by Robert Winter’s statement in Grove that “In no other arena of Schubert's artistic life did he encounter more frustration than in dramatic music. Opera, in particular, remained the surest path in Vienna (and throughout most of Europe) to fame and fortune”, and, naturally, Schubert wanted a slice of that cake. Brought up in a Vienna where musical was dominated by Salieri, Schubert took the perceived supremacy of opera for granted. And while, during the 1820s, Vienna’s opera-going public were obsessed with Rossini (the “Rossini Craze”, as it was dubbed) Schubert naturally felt he could restore the primacy of home-grown opera. From 1820 Schubert composed almost a dozen stage works, including in 1822 one full-scale, three-act opera, *Alfonso und Estrella*, which he tirelessly touted around the opera houses and impresarios of the city and beyond, believing it to be the finest work he had ever composed. After three years of rejection, he finally handed it to a soprano desperate to make her name on stage in the title role of a new opera.
When she, too, decided it was not worth the effort, Schubert gave up and for a time decided to concentrate his efforts on purely instrumental music.

That was in mid-1824, when Schubert’s misery was compounded by a further deterioration in his health; he had contracted Syphilis some years earlier, and was approaching the final, terminal stages of that dreadful illness. He composed the Arpeggione Sonata in November and it was given a performance a short while after. Like the arpeggione itself, Schubart’s Sonata then disappeared from view.

Jump forward almost half a century to 1867 and to the person of Sir George Grove. Famous for his eponymous dictionary of music, Grove was also an avid proponent of Schubert, and during his researches into the composer’s life and works he made an important discovery: “At the library of the Musik-verein, besides the autograph of the great Symphony in C, I saw a copy of a sonata by Schubert for Piano and Arpeggione (whatever that may have been) which, being dated as late as 1824, ought to possess some value”. Four years later it was published, but by that time the Arpeggione was long gone and, as one modern-day publisher has put it, there has since been "a free-
for-all for just about any pitched instrument that could handle the composition’s range; today it is played most frequently on the viola, cello, double bass and classical guitar, but performances on the flute and clarinet are not uncommon.

**Sonata in A minor**

"Arpeggione"

D. 821

for viola and piano

F. Schubert (1797-1828)

The piano opens the Sonata with a solemn theme, but once the solo instrument appears, it assumes a dominant role relegating the piano to a mere accompanimental function throughout the work. The music, charming rather than profound, seems primarily interested in exploiting the unusually wide pitch range which was a characteristic (apparently) of the Arpeggione. The 1st **movement** also includes a theme which, with its robust and dancing humour is the complete antithesis of the opening idea. The 2nd **movement** is a lyrical song emphasising the instrument’s label as a "guitar of love", and leads by means of a brief cadenza into the 3rd **movement**, with its innocuous main theme punctuated by various episodes some of which possess a strangely Hungarian character; perhaps acknowledging that a rival to the Arpeggione also appeared in 1823 designed by the Hungarian instrument-maker called Peter Teufelsdorfer.
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Viola Sonata No.2 in E flat, Op.120 No.2
Allegro amabile
Allegro appassionato; Sostenuto
Andante con moto – Allegro – Più tranquillo

The catalogue of Brahms’ music contains 122 opus numbers and it is interesting to note something of a sea-change come over his output in the last of those. His very final work was a set of 11 organ preludes; remarkable inasmuch that Brahms had previously shown little awareness of the organ’s existence and by basing them on Christian hymns he was undertaking an astonishing volte face for a lifelong agnostic. Then there are the five songs (Op.121) written for bass voice – a voice range (and sex) Brahms had hitherto avoided musically – while Op.120 comprises two sonatas for another instrument Brahms had ignored (certainly in a solo capacity) in half-a-century of composing, the clarinet. What brought on the interest in the organ, religion and bass singers is not relevant here; what inspired this sudden interest in the clarinet most certainly is.

With his String Quintet (Op.111) of 1890, Brahms declared that he was retiring from composing; “I have worked enough; now let the young folks take over”. He even went so far as to draw up his will. But in March 1891 he visited Meiningen to hear the famous orchestra under its new conductor, Fritz Steinbach, and was totally captivated by a performance of one of Weber’s Clarinet Concertos in which the soloist was the orchestra’s principal clarinet, Richard Mühlfeld (1856-1907). Brahms described
Mühlfeld’s playing as possessing “polish and almost feminine sensitivity” (he jokingly referred to the bearded Mühlfeld as “Miss Clarinet” and “my Prima Donna”). Such was Brahms’s admiration that his resolve to retire from composing was thrown out of the window and he promptly produced a Quintet and a Trio for Mühlfeld in 1891, following this with two Sonatas in 1894.

Mühlfeld clearly re-awoke more in Brahms than just his composing spirit; in 1892 Brahms fell in love with a young singer, Alice Barbi (apparently quite a doll) who was his constant companion for a while. He also re-drew his will, which he forgot to sign; resulting in a protracted legal dispute which was only resolved in 1915.

The two Clarinet Sonatas were composed while Brahms was taking his summer holiday in the spa resort of Bad Ischl. Fritz Steinbach was there too and helped Brahms write out the clarinet parts before Mühlfeld joined them on 19th September. The three then moved to the palace of Duke Georg II of Meiningen and his wife Helene (another
of Brahms’s passionate admirers) where they worked on the Sonatas, probably giving their first performance privately sometime towards the end of the month.

This was to be Brahms’s final chamber work, but that is not quite the end of the story. Aware that Mühlfeld’s was an exceptional talent and that the musical world was not so well endowed with excellent clarinettists that the Sonatas would make a viable commercial proposition, Brahms produced a parallel version for viola. This required minimal changes to the original yet, with such little effort, Brahms was breaking new ground, creating the first major Sonatas for the viola, an instrument largely overlooked in solo repertory yet one which he himself declared to be his particular favourite amongst the string family. The two Sonatas were published as being for either clarinet or viola) in June 1895.
The 1st movement of the Second Sonata was to be the last music Brahms ever wrote in sonata form, and he defines the two main subjects by their mood; the first possesses a sense of relaxed contentment, and seems perfectly described by its direction amabile (“loving”), while the second has a more animated, disturbed quality. The 2nd movement takes on the character of a heroic waltz, full of the little rhythmic quirks and thick piano textures which are such obvious characteristics in the music of Brahms.

Throughout his composing career Brahms wrote themes and variations, and the Sonata’s 3rd movement is his final outing in the form, the theme chosen being suitably nostalgic in that it harks back to the refined and graceful idioms of the Classical age. It has, however, some unusual aspects; at 14 bars long it has a certain uneven feel, while there is a peculiar rhythmic lilt to it which is taken up with enthusiasm by the viola in the second of the variations. The third variation is the musical equivalent of bubbles rising to the surface in a glass of champagne, but only in the fifth and final variation does any level of virtuosity creep in as the piano kicks things off full of nervous energy. A valedictory Coda finds both instruments leaping about exuberantly; the last genuinely happy music Brahms ever composed.

**Darius Milhaud (1892-1974)**

**Le Bœuf sur le Toit, Op.58**

If commentators suggested that Schubert excelled in *almost* every musical genre, those who write about Milhaud have no such reservations. Jeremy Drake writes; “There is scarcely a genre not represented in Milhaud’s output. From grand opera to children’s piano pieces, everything seems to be there in extraordinary profusion”. Indeed, there are items in Milhaud’s extensive work catalogue (stretching to 443 opus numbers) which defy categorisation, including what appears to be the only instance in the whole history of serious music where a composition has been honoured by having a bar named after it. *Le Bœuf sur le Toit* (“The Ox on the Roof”) is a popular drinking venue in Paris whose name is derived from the fictional American speakeasy which provides the setting for Jean Cocteau’s “pantomime or farce with music in one act”
first staged in Paris on 21st February 1920. That name, itself, comes from a Brazilian popular song of the early 1900s, the title of which so attracted Darius Milhaud that when he wrote a short orchestral piece incorporating, as he described it, “a few popular melodies, tangos, maxixes, sambas, even a Portuguese fado” which he had heard on the streets of Rio de Janeiro, he gave the same title to his new piece.

A couple of years ago the New Yorker ran an article on Milhaud which began, “Darius Milhaud, the great but excessively prolific French composer, wrote hundreds of works, many of which you don’t need to know about”, and went on to suggest that “multiplicity in unity is the key to Milhaud’s music. With his family’s ancient roots in the Comtat Venaissin region of Provence, he was a man both profoundly Jewish and forever French. Growing up amid the sounds of singing workers in his father’s almond business, he acquired a tolerance for sonic simultaneity”. Milhaud himself described his earliest musical experiences as being driven by the “soft sound of fruit falling into the baskets and the monotonous and soothing drone of the machines”. Grove tells us that in his music there is “much (sometimes too much) going on at the same time”. His life was equally full. Born and brought up in the south of France, he studied in Paris, spent some time in Belgium, and in 1917 served as the cultural attaché to the French legation in Brazil. There he came into contact with Brazilian music and dances, and on his return to Paris he wrote his exuberant La Bœuf sur le Toit. The product of the general atmosphere of high spirits then pervading the French capital – shortly after his return Milhaud had witnessed the great celebrations in the city marking the end of the First World War - he realised the music had no real purpose or shape, but thought it might be appropriate to go with a Charlie Chaplin (silent) movie. So he added a part for solo violin – which depicts Chaplin going through his customary assortment of humorous, pathetic and sometimes rather sad exploits - and gave it the sub-title “Cinema-Fantaisie on South American Themes”. It never made it to the big screen.
Jean Cocteau was so taken by Milhaud’s music that he constructed a staged pantomime around it set in a bar in which the customers include a huge, cigar-puffing Negro boxer who is knocked out by a diminutive but flashy bookmaker when he tries to seduce a woman with paper hair, and a tall, thin transvestite in a dazzling red evening gown who picks up a black dwarf and carries him bodily into the billiard room (for purposes other than billiards, we are led to assume). A policeman enters to make sure no alcohol is being served (it has been hidden by the alert bartender used to such things during the period of prohibition in America) and, after dancing a tango, is beheaded by a falling ceiling fan. The bartender gives the policeman’s head to the transvestite but when the dwarf refuses to pay his bill the bartender retrieves the head and puts it back on the policeman’s body, who promptly revives.

Today’s performance will (sadly) be in sound only.
Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992)

The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires
Otoño Porteño
Invierno Porteño
Primavera Porteña
Verano Porteño

Timing – 19:00

If Milhaud was prolific with his "hundreds of works", so too was Astor Piazzolla. Indeed, he wrote so much he himself had no idea how many works he had actually composed, telling one of his biographers; "Let others do the counting. I'll go on composing". In the words of the great jazz trumpeter Dizzie Gillespie, Piazzolla was "the best musician in the world today and the best arranger", while the man who wrote the words for the enormously popular hit song *The Girl from Ipanema* went even further; "Piazzolla is the best popular musician in the world today".

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Argentinean by birth, Astor Piazzolla emigrated with his family to the USA in 1924. He was something of virtuoso player of the Bandoneón – a square, box-like accordion with buttons at either end, invented in Germany in the 1840s but much favoured by the tango bands of Buenos Aires because of its easy portability – and so was invited by the great tango singer, Carlos Gardel, to accompany him during his tours of New York and the USA during the 1930s. Returning to Argentina Piazzolla soon established a reputation as an arranger for tango bands and in 1941, keen to develop his skills as a composer for the concert hall, he started taking lessons with Ginastera. His works were considered too complex for most of the Argentinean tango orchestras, so in 1946 Piazzolla formed his own with which he experimented with what he described as "formal tangos". With increasing interest in serious composition, he disbanded his orchestra in 1949 and even, for a time, abandoned the bandoneón, while he sought around for a more serious compositional voice. In 1953 the first performance of his concert work *Sinfonia Buenos Aires* dissolved into an outright brawl when members
of the audience reacted strongly against his integration of the tango and the symphony orchestra, but the work earned Piazzolla a scholarship to go to Paris to study with the doyenne of composition teachers, Nadia Boulanger.

In his first lessons with Boulanger during 1954, Piazzolla attempted to suppress his musical background in the hope of being able to concentrate on the musical styles drawn from the European Classical tradition, but when, at her request, he played his tango-based bandoneón work, Triunfal, she told him; "Astor, your classical pieces are well written, but the true Piazzolla is here, never leave it behind". Taking that advice, he returned to Argentina and devoted himself to promoting the tango, writing well over 300 individual works virtually all of which are tangos, arrangements of tangos or based on tangos. Not for nothing is he described today as the "King of Tango". The precise origins of the tango are uncertain. Some suggest it originated in Africa (one source maintains that the word “tango” means “African Dance”), others that it comes from Spain and gets its name from a word meaning “to play a musical instrument”. What is more certain is that the tango became hugely popular as a street dance in the slums of Latin American cities and an essential ingredient in the street carnivals popular at festival times in the Argentine capital, Buenos Aires.

The four Tangos which, together, are named after the four seasons of the year were originally composed for Piazzolla’s own five-piece tango band between 1965 and 1969, and while, in Piazzolla’s original, there are loose references to Vivaldi (whose own Four Seasons should need no introduction to tonight’s audience) there is none of the distinct character defining the four seasons in the titles (the term porteño meaning anything or anyone associated with Buenos Aires); rather it seems that Piazzolla is saying that whether it is Otoño (Autumn), Invierno (Winter), Primavera (Spring) or Verano (Summer), it is always tango season in Buenos Aires.