

SATURDAY, JUNE 22, 7:30 PM

Pieter Wispelwey, *cello*

Pei-Shan Lee, *piano*

Benjamin Bowman, *violin*

SONATA IN E-FLAT MAJOR FOR PIANO AND CELLO,
OP. 120, NO. 2 (1894) (TRANSCR.)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Allegro amabile

Allegro appassionato

Andante con moto

SONATA FOR VIOLIN AND CELLO (1920-22)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Allegro

Très vif

Lent

Vif, avec entrain

:: INTERMISSION ::

SONATA FOR CELLO AND PIANO, L. 135 (1915)

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Prologue: Lent

Sérénade: Modérement animé –

Finale: Animé

SONATA IN E MINOR, FOR PIANO AND CELLO,
OP. 38 (1862-5)

Johannes Brahms (1833-97)

Allegro non troppo

Allegretto quasi Menuetto

Allegro

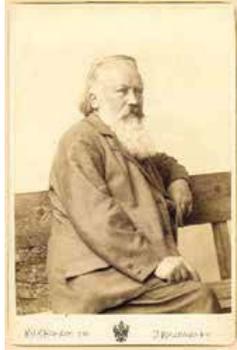
This concert is sponsored in part by the generosity of Susan and Bill Wagner.



SONATA IN E-FLAT MAJOR FOR PIANO AND CELLO, OP. 120, NO. 2 (transcr.)

Johannes Brahms (b. Hamburg, Germany, May 7, 1833; d. Vienna, Austria, April 3, 1897)

Composed 1894; 21 minutes



Brahms in Vienna, ca. 1894

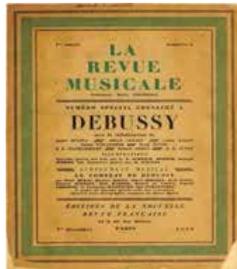
Brahms took his chamber music seriously and re-energized the medium for the latter 19th century, raising it to the highest level of achievement. His original plan was to bookend a rich catalog of 21 widely varied chamber compositions, spanning four decades, with the two versions of the B major piano trio that he wrote more than a quarter of a century apart—and then retire. He was just 57 when his friend, the surgeon Theodor Billroth reported: “He rejects the idea that he is composing or will ever compose again.”

Musicians, however, were eager to hear more from a composer whose musical bloodlines reached back through German romanticism and the great Viennese classical composers to Bach, almost a century and a half earlier. But honorary degrees and medals were no incentive for Brahms to create more. Then, in 1891, on a visit to Meiningen to hear the orchestra, Brahms discovered something new and stimulating in the playing of the court clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld. He was taken by the beauty of the young musician’s sound and eager to discuss technique with him. Their conversation and music-making led Brahms to write the beautiful, autumnal Clarinet Quintet and then a Clarinet Trio for Mühlfeld during the summer of 1891.

Three years later, when Brahms again heard Mühlfeld, the musical fallout was a

pair of sonatas that provided clarinetists with two of the finest works in the repertoire. Brahms also made them double as viola sonatas, giving viola players the first substantial works for their instrument. But he clearly wanted even more from his final chamber sonatas. He arranged them for violin and piano and authorized his publisher to issue a two-piano version. Following the composer’s cue, other instrumentalists (flute, trumpet, saxophone [sic]) have gone where still others fear to tread. The mellow sound of the cello, however, is a natural fit for the late sonatas. “Brahms has this endless lyrical quality and that’s attractive to a cellist,” Pieter Wispelwey says.

The two sonatas are strongly contrasted—like Beethoven before him, Brahms had made a practice of working on two contrasted compositions simultaneously. The music flows seamlessly in the opening movement of the E-flat Sonata, the more relaxed of the two, with a good deal of lightly-worn technical craft masking the seams in this lyrical sonata-form movement. The middle movement is Brahms’s final scherzo and is, perhaps consciously, written in the same key and tempo as his first, over four decades earlier. There’s no slow movement as such, since the finale is a set of variations on a slow, understated but noble theme. Four ever fluid variations lead to an exhilarating fifth, which takes on the character of the traditional finale.



1915 first edition of Debussy’s Cello Sonata promising “Six Sonatas.”

SONATA FOR VIOLIN AND CELLO

Maurice Ravel (b. Ciboure, France, March 7, 1875; d. Paris, December 28, 1937)

Composed 1920-22; 21 minutes

Ravel’s Sonata started life as a single-movement Duo for a special *Tombeau de Claude Debussy* issue of a music magazine, marking the two-year anniversary of his death. Several other leading composers also contributed, including Bartók, Falla, Satie and Stravinsky. The single-movement Duo was performed in January 1921 and then became the opening movement of the Sonata.

The remaining three movements, however, were to cause Ravel almost two years of work and to confront major challenges. The 1920s were a time of tremendous change in European music and, since Ravel lived within easy traveling distance of

Paris, he was aware of what was happening all around. With instrumentation stripped down to just two instruments, he was able to focus on two equal but strikingly independent lines and the tension between these lines. While the two instruments may imitate one another, what they have to say is quite different, and their opinions differ throughout. They play in different keys—at one point Ravel writes the violin part in two sharps while the cello is written in four flats.

They are often in different meters—2/8 against 3/8, for example. Their conversation ventures towards musical languages spoken by Schoenberg and Stravinsky, without shaking off the classic French hallmarks of elegance, craft and logic.

“I believe this Sonata marks a turning point in my career,” Ravel would eventually say. “Economy of means is here carried to the extreme. The allure of harmony is rejected and, increasingly, there is a return of emphasis on melody.” The melodies are all related and continue to evolve throughout the Sonata. The Scherzo, which Ravel totally re-wrote and compressed, explores the tension between plucked and bowed notes. It also uses different tonalities simultaneously and offers clear proof that Ravel was familiar with the most recent string writing of Bartók. Ravel’s pupil and biographer, Alexis Roland-Manuel, vividly describes this music as bristling with virtuosity and a lyricism that “spits like an angry cat.” The slow movement is the closest that the Sonata comes to offering a conventional elegy to Debussy. Here, the music is largely reflective, though it builds to an anguished climax. Ravel said that he once pictured the slow movement printed mostly in black ink, which would then change to poppy red ink for the central section. The finale hints at Bartók and Ravel’s own volatile *Tzigane*, which he wrote immediately after the Sonata. Shortly after completing the work, Ravel referred to the Sonata as a “truly symphonic work for two instruments” (and his music has, indeed, been subsequently arranged for string orchestra). He also called the score, with some irony, a “machine for two instruments.”

SONATA FOR CELLO AND PIANO, L. 135

Claude Debussy (b. St. Germain-en-Laye, France, August 22, 1862; d. Paris, March 25, 1918)

Composed 1915; 12 minutes

When Brahms wrote his E-flat Sonata, Debussy was completing the central work of his artistic life, the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Two decades later, the First World War was to prove a miserable time for the French composer. He was in his early fifties, weakened by cancer, anxious about his son and other family members who were on the battlefield. For a year he was unable to compose. Then, in the summer of 1915, staying in Pourville, by the sea, he began again to “think in music” and composed “like a madman.” “I have finished *Douze Études* for piano, a cello sonata, and another sonata for flute, viola and harp in the ancient, flexible mold with none of the grandiloquence of modern sonatas,” he wrote to a friend. “There are going to be six of them for different groups of instruments.”

Of these six planned sonatas, only three were completed. All consciously reject the Austro-German romanticism that Debussy found so distasteful during the war. In them, he discovered his heritage in the music of the French keyboard composers of the 18th century. To emphasize the connection with tradition, he signed the sonatas, with national pride,

SONATA IN E MINOR, FOR PIANO AND CELLO, OP. 38

Johannes Brahms (b. Hamburg, Germany, May 7, 1833; d. Vienna, Austria, April 3, 1897)

Composed 1862-5; 26 minutes

The ghost of Beethoven hovered over Brahms’s writing table for many years, nowhere more so than in Vienna, where he was to spend most of his working life. He wrote the E minor Cello Sonata in his early thirties, still traveling on concert tours a good deal, but increasingly finding a reason to return to Vienna. Beethoven and Bach were the inspiration for this first of two cello sonatas, thereby indelibly linking Brahms’s name (in the mind of conductor Hans von Bülow and succeeding generations of music lovers) as one of the Three B’s: Bach, Beethoven and Brahms.

To reinforce a strong respect for tradition, Brahms puts the piano first in the title of his new sonata—and was to do so even 30 years later when composing his final chamber work, which opened tonight’s concert. This is in emulation of the cello sonatas of Beethoven and the accompanied sonata of the classical era in general. By honoring tradition, Brahms was able to make his peace with the past and begin the process of laying to rest the ghost of Beethoven. The finale of the sonata is fugal, just as was the finale of Beethoven’s fifth and final cello sonata—in Brahms’s eyes, its most important predecessor. Moreover, the uncompromising, robust theme of the finale bears an uncanny resemblance to Contrapunctus 17, one of the fugal movements in Bach’s *The Art of the Fugue*.

Working backwards from this combative, fugal finale comes a gentle *Allegretto*, whose melancholy dovetailing of piano and cello functions somewhat like an intermezzo between the two weighty outer movements. Its tentative, rather whimsical piano opening, which is echoed later at the beginning of the Trio, provides much of the material for the entire movement. The E minor Cello Sonata does not have a slow movement. Brahms made the beginnings of one in an earlier draft, but then destroyed it. The mellow theme of the opening movement seems to highlight the entire range of the solo instrument: noble and resonant in its lower notes, rising to a high, lyrical upper register. It reminds us that in feeling, if not, broadly speaking, in musical structure, Brahms was at heart a romantic.

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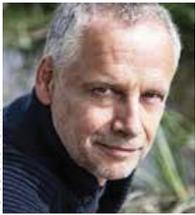
PEI-SHAN LEE, *piano*



Pianist Pei-Shan Lee has become one of the most sought-after pianists on the concert circuit today, with performances at The Kennedy Center, Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher and Alice Tully Hall, Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall, and Boston's Jordan Hall. Ms. Lee has collaborated with some of America's most important musicians, including Donald Weilerstein, Ani Kavafian, Stefan Jackiw, Kim Kashkashian, and Andrés Díaz, as well as the Jupiter, Harlem, and the Formosa quartets. A member of the Collaborative Piano and Chamber Music faculty at the New England Conservatory, Ms. Lee recently created a new master's degree in Collaborative Piano at the California State University Northridge. The Cleveland Institute awarded her the Rosa Lobe Memorial Award in recognition of the highest level of artistic achievement in Collaborative Piano.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

PIETER WISPELWEY, *cello*



Cellist Pieter Wispelwey has enjoyed a long, lauded career built upon his ease with both period and modern works. He enjoys many fruitful chamber music collaborations, with regular duo partners like pianists Cédric Tiberghien and Alasdair Beatson, and

appears as a guest artist with a number of string quartets including the Australian String Quartet. Wispelwey's career spans five continents appearing as soloist with many of the world's leading orchestras, and his conductor collaborations include performances with Ivan Fischer, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Herbert Blomstedt, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, and Jeffrey Tate. With regular recital appearances at some of the world's finest halls, including Wigmore, the Concertgebouw, the Châtelet and Lincoln Center, Wispelwey has established a reputation as one of the most charismatic recitalists on the circuit. He plays on a 1760 Giovanni Battista Guadagnini cello and a 1710 Rombouts baroque cello.

BENJAMIN BOWMAN, *violin*



American-Canadian violinist Benjamin Bowman was recently appointed concertmaster of the Metropolitan Opera by maestro Nézet-Séguin. He is also a member of the Orchestra of St. Luke's. Most recently, he was nominated for a 2017

Grammy for his recording with the ARC (Artists of the Royal Conservatory) Ensemble (*The Chamber Works of Jerzy Fitelberg*) and was also featured on the 2013 Juno-winning album *Levant* with the Amici Chamber Ensemble. Other collaborative work includes extensive immersion in contemporary music, improvisation and performance with singer/songwriters. Bowman received his Bachelor of Music degree from the Curtis Institute of Music.

FAMILY CONCERT

DANNY KOO, *violin* & KEVIN AHFAT, *piano*

Saturday, June 29 :: 10 AM

Enjoy a kid-friendly classical program that will be fun for all!
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