

Huntsville Chamber Music Guild presents

Yakov Kasman, piano

with **Aleksandra Kasman, piano**

April 26, 2013

Program Notes

Johannes Brahms composed his *Klavierstücke* (Piano Pieces) Op. 118 in 1893, towards the end of his life. With the similarly-sized short piano pieces contained in Opp. 116, 117, and 119, these are Brahms's final thoughts on writing for the piano. In temperament, they are a world apart from his epic, fiery sonatas (Opp. 1, 2 and 5), from his charming, melodious waltzes (Op. 39), and from his grand, virtuosic cycles of variations on themes by Handel and Paganini; rather, these late pieces are introspective—often tender, occasionally tragic, always thoughtful. In every detail we find evidence of Brahms's craftsmanship—he was the most technically-accomplished (and, not coincidentally, historically-learned) composer of his generation, especially in the realm of instrumental music. But, more significantly, not a phrase goes by that isn't deeply emotional, with the peculiar Brahmsian tug of autumnal yearning; this is music that is wise, that expresses a mature awareness of the inevitability of loss.

The titles of the individual pieces—"Intermezzo," "Ballade," "Romance"—give us only hints about the music's character. Whereas the first "Intermezzo" is sweeping and broad, the second is intimate and song-like. This A major "Intermezzo" has become the most popular of the late pieces, and for good reason—its arching melodies, colored here and there by melancholy, are an epitome of Brahms's unique language. The third piece, the "Ballade," is the most energetic in the set, and its title, singular among the late works, glances back to his early *Ballades* Op. 10. Perhaps this is an effort to recapture that youthful swagger; if so, the way the piece dissipates towards its close is surely symbolic.

The next "Intermezzo" is mysterious: a hushed canon, almost whispered, that is driven ahead by a disquieting inner agitation. The "Romance" is a wonderful contrast—it is perfectly poised and serene, almost Classical in its stately gait. This, however, is not the last word in Op. 118: the final "Intermezzo" is one of the most relentlessly dark pieces Brahms ever penned. Is there a truer musical depiction of loneliness than the opening of the piece, where the melody hovers in emptiness, its only accompaniment an eerie blur rising from the depths of the piano?

During the nineteenth century, four-hand piano music played a central role in musical culture. It was the favored medium for home music-making—music lovers would amass large libraries of original works by Schubert, Mozart and Schumann as well as transcriptions of all the famous symphonies, overtures, quartets and operas of the day. Domesticity is part of the history of the genre: Mozart and his sister Nannerl would play duets together, and Schubert intended his duets for the intimate evenings of music and poetry among friends that were nicknamed *Schubertiades*. By presenting four-hand music with his daughter this evening, Mr. Kasman is keeping this beautiful and rich tradition alive.

Franz Schubert's *Fantasie* is his most beloved four-hand work. It has several distinct sections that flow directly into one another. The overall effect is of a long single movement with many contrasting episodes: some dance-like and charming, some jagged and dramatic. All of these are book-ended by a haunting tune—a gorgeous example of Schubert's unparalleled gift for melody.

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The piano music of **Sergei Rachmaninoff** is known for its virtuosity, its richness and density of texture, its heartfelt melodies and its massive expressive scope. All of these qualities are on display in the *Second Sonata*—especially in the original 1913 version that Mr. Kasman will perform tonight, which exceeds the more often-played revised version (1931) in length and technical complexity.

The 1913 version of the sonata is from Rachmaninoff's greatest period of productivity, 1901-1917. The years leading up to 1901 had been troubled by creative crisis and depression; once freed from that state, Rachmaninoff wrote fluently, quickly composing three extroverted, tuneful, and ever-popular works: the *Second Piano Concerto*, the *Cello Sonata*, and the *Second Suite* for two pianos. The *Second Sonata* comes later, but still a few years before the Russian Revolution of 1917 uprooted Rachmaninoff's life. After leaving Russia, he continued composing, but at a much slower pace. He had the disheartening sense of living in exile, and his musical attention was divided between composing and his flourishing career as a concert soloist.

Although in three movements, the sonata is highly integrated: the movements share material, and they are linked via short bridges—wandering passages that give us some sense of what an improvisation by Rachmaninoff may have sounded like. The flamboyant opening gesture, a great downward cascade of notes answered by two chiming chords, establishes the dramatic and turbulent character of this music; indeed, it's often on the brink of hysteria, with technical hurdles galore, rapid figuration filling up the piano, and thunderous chords. Leading the listener through this cluttered sonic landscape is a daunting task requiring the greatest musicianship and pianism.

There are moments of relief along the way—although they are more bittersweet than sweet. The second theme of the first movement might seem like a glimpse of a more innocent time; but all of its lines have a falling contour, lending even this gentle music an elegiac quality. Another moment of relative quiet is the slow movement: it begins with a simple but heartfelt tune—a reminder that Rachmaninoff, like Schubert, was a wonderful melodist.

The third movement returns to the intense level of activity that characterized the first movement, but this time the mood is heroic, almost triumphant. We hear a great rush of orchestral color—great swells in the strings, fanfares in the brass, rich *tutti* scoring of long lyrical phrases; but somehow all of these sounds are coming from the piano, from a single solo instrument. This style of writing for the piano is among Rachmaninoff's great achievements.

After this grand gesture, the three pieces for four hands have the charming effect of a suite of encores—an afterthought. They are lighter in texture; in lesser hands, they could have easily been salon music bonbons. After all, romances, barcarolles and waltzes were among the popular genres of the day. But Rachmaninoff's mastery of emotional shading infuses every phrase of these miniatures with melancholic intensity.

Notes by Daniel Pesca