

**Program Notes – Adaskin String Trio  
with Thomas Galland, oboe  
November 9, 2010**

**J. C. Bach**

**Quartet in B-Flat Major for oboe and strings**

This charming work written by the youngest son of J. S. Bach was once thought to have been written by Joseph Haydn. Arnold Dolmetsch, a pioneer in the revival of classical music at the beginning of the 20th century, received the score from a friend who claimed he had copied it from Haydn's original manuscript. When it was first published it was attributed to Haydn. Many composers in the classical era wrote for this combination of oboe and strings including Mozart, Krommer, Vanhal, and Boccherini.

**Benjamin Britten**

**Phantasy Quartet for Oboe and Strings, Op. 2**

Benjamin Britten wrote the Phantasy Quartet while still a student at the Royal College of Music. Before entering the Royal College he had already written several strings quartets, piano sonatas and a symphony. A "Phantasy" or also called sometimes "Fantasy" or "Fantasia" refers to a work with a free form and imagination that is somewhat spontaneous. It is a term often used in early English music particularly in the Renaissance era. Fantasies for viols were commonly written in England in the 1600s. The Phantasy quartet was written for a competition specifically for one movement works sponsored by Walter Wilson Cobbett, a wealthy amateur musician and writer on chamber music. Previous winners of the competition included John Ireland and Frank Bridge, both of whom were teachers of the composer. Britten did not win the prize with this work but in the previous year he won for his Phantasy string quintet.

Benjamin Britten's Phantasy Quartet was composed in 1932 and is in one continuous movement. It is one of the first works that established his reputation in England and abroad and it was first performed by Leon Goosens and the International String Quartet on a BBC radio broadcast in 1933.

*Notes by Thomas Galland*

**Ernst von Dohnányi**

**Serenade for Violin, Viola and Cello, Op. 10 (1902)**

Ernő Dohnányi, or Ernst von Dohnányi as he is known outside of Hungary, was the foremost Hungarian composer of the generation before Bela Bartók (in fact he was a frequent champion of Bartók's music), as

well as a brilliant pianist and a conductor. Although spared the horrors of being a child prodigy by his musician father, Dohnányi blossomed early as a gifted pianist, and was blessed with the friendship of Brahms, and that of Brahms' best friend, the violinist Joseph Joachim.

Dohnányi played in chamber music continually during his student years at the Budapest Music Academy. So it is no coincidence that his first published work was a Piano Quintet. When Brahms played the young Dohnányi's Quintet with some friends in 1895, the not-easily-impressed old master declared, "I could not have written it better myself."

Dohnányi's music is only now being rediscovered by appreciative players and audiences. As a composer in the Austro-Hungarian style we know from Haydn through Brahms, Dohnányi was more traditional, and though he used folk materials, he did not produce the kinds of almost astringent new soundscapes that we associate with Bartok. During the recent "dark ages" of 12-tone music, Dohnányi's music was completely neglected, scorned by academics and seldom performed in public. Now that the people who made us listen to Berg and Webern and Schoenberg are in nursing homes or confined to madhouses, the rest of us can get back to the business of playing and hearing the lost gems of 20th century chamber music. And this is one of them.

Dohnányi's early but masterful string trio, titled "Serenade," seems to evoke the concept of "miniature." The players: less than a quartet. The span of time: brief. The development: just enough to get your imagination going, like a "sampler" on a buffet table. The mood: a teasing, easeful beauty, as if to say, "This much I give away: you must ask for more."

Like the serenade of Mozart's time, which was "dinner music," Dohnányi offers a preliminary March. The dotted-note march theme, interspersed with fast, rising chromatic scale passages, seems very traditional, something that anyone from Beethoven through Johann Strauss might have penned. The second subject goes for color, however, with the viola playing gypsy-sounding open chords while the cello introduces a melody, tossed to the violin. Then the violin goes gypsy, letting the viola and cello interplay. The march already seems forgotten in this improvisatory interplay of harmony and timbre. Then, like a dreamer awakening to recall a forgotten promise, Dohnányi repeats the march theme in a whisper, only five bars crescendoing up to a big C Major chord.

The *Romanza* puts the viola to the fore, with the violin and cello doing harp-like pizzicati. The melismatic theme has a Persian scent

about it, too exotic to be Romeo and Juliet balcony music. Whatever those chromatic doodling yearn for, you can be sure it is something, or someone, not permitted. From here forward the viola goes mad, a roller coaster ride of arpeggiated 32<sup>nd</sup> notes. Then everything goes mysterious and the viola slows its figurations by half, while violin and cello pursue two independent lines based on the main theme. The harmonies and timbres created by the viola hold it all together, quite a tour de force. The *Romanza* fades away, like a dragonfly's daydream, slinking back into C Major.

The skittering Scherzo (in 6/8 time, D minor, then D Major) harkens back a little to Mendelssohn "fairy music," but the delayed and overlapping entry of voices makes this listener think of squirrels frolicking in a field or scampering in the treetops. It is the most accomplished movement in the Serenade.

The Theme and Variations presents a G minor chorale-style theme, which, although beautiful, seems unpromising as a subject for variations since it lacks a distinctive rhythmic hook on which to base variations. Instead, a spooky mid-theme crescendo becomes the awaited marker in each variation: gloomily chromatic with the viola singing; the violin and cello each get a turn with it; a scurry of repeated notes and arpeggios; a gorgeous viola line between tremulous violin and pizzicato cello; then a kind of palpitating, trembling, hysterical final variation, slowed and pulled, unraveled to near nothingness. Hearing this music is like tasting a mango for the first time, and then trying to remember the next day what it was like.

The racing Rondo-Finale, in duple time, is heir to the Haydn-Beethoven finale tradition. It is accomplished but unsurprising, with the expected nod to counterpoint ("See, I can write a fugal passage, too!"). The work ends in a resounding C Major chord spanning three octaves.

*Note by Brett Rutherford*

## **Max Reger**

### **String Trio in A minor, Op 77b (1904)**

Max Reger (1873-1916) was a big name in German music in his time, rivaled only by Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss. With his vast output – in less than 25 years – of over 1,000 instrumental and orchestral works, he sought to be the 20th Century's Bach. Quite a few musicians, including Bartók, Schoenberg, Berg, Hindemith, Honegger, and Prokofiev, were willing to accord him that honor. The intervention of two world wars have placed an almost insurmountable barrier between us and musical world Reger inhabited. Reger's death was also the

culmination of a long dissolution by alcohol: the oft-told tale of Reger passing out over the keyboard during a concert, is, alas, not apocryphal.

Today, a handful of Reger's large-scale piano works are still heard, and a few of his orchestral pieces have been recorded. There is a smattering of a Reger revival on CD as adventurous record labels like Naxos begin to explore the edges of the repertory. Reger wrote more organ works than anyone since Bach, and today's organists confront his vast, dense fugues with trepidation. For those who like that sort of thing, all of his organ works are available on CD.

Many listeners find the big Reger works claustrophobic and humorless, which makes it all the more surprising to learn that the composer did have a lighter side, and was capable of writing chamber music that delights both players and listeners. Reger composed 11 sonatas for solo violin, nine for violin and piano, eight for cello and piano, six string quartets, and a number of works for other combinations of instruments. Tonight's work is one of only two compositions by Reger for String Trio.

Max Reger in a classical mode, writing cheerful and relaxed music? Could the composer of hundreds of vast, almost suffocating organ works have a light side after all? We'll find out as our performers launch into this piece, which has been compared to Mozart's Divertimento in E-flat or Beethoven's handsome Op. 9 String Trio. Written with conscious simplicity and a backward-looking style, the Reger trio was a hit at its 1804 premiere, the audience demanding an encore of the Scherzo.

After nine bars of rather somber and introspective introduction, Reger launches his *Allegro agitato* in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time, a nicely striding theme. The motif of the introduction very soon works its way into the theme, interrupting, echoing, enriching the goings on, as if to say, "I am out to entertain you, but I am, after all, a German, and there are always at least two other things on my mind." Violin and cello introduce a wistful second subject over pizzicato cello notes. The introductory theme returns with an almost ghostly calm, and then the development goes scurrying off. Here, Reger's Bachian inclination to break off his main theme contrapuntally is nicely balanced with the more romantic restatement of the second theme. Even if this is composition "by the rules," Reger keeps you guessing about which will have the last word.

The Larghetto slow movement moves us in to world of A Major, and presents a soulful theme that brings Brahms to mind. Reger sustains a dream-world atmosphere throughout the movement, a kind of neoPlatonic romance where what is meant is always hinted at rather than proclaimed.

The delightful Scherzo, with its accent marks and big chords, has as much beer hall as ballet. Less than three minutes in duration, it must be as much fun to play as to hear.

The finale, marked *Allegro con moto*, is mostly in A Major, and its frolicking theme is varied with considerable wit. I hear echoes of the opening movement's wistful second subject, and a return to the Larghetto, as welcome asides to the merriment. Reger was loath to say farewell to interesting musical ideas, so this finale, satisfying as it is on a visceral level as exit music, will also reward those who come back to this work a second time.

*Program note by Brett Rutherford*

## **W. A Mozart** **Oboe Quartet in F Major, K. 370**

Mozart composed his Oboe Quartet in 1781 while on a trip to Munich, where he was composing the opera *Idomeneo* for the carnival celebration at the invitation of Elector Carl Theodor. Mozart of course was anxious to take a break from his post as violinist and organist to the Archbishop Colloredo in Salzburg, who often treated him poorly and whom Mozart despised. While in Munich he worked with the Mannheim Court Orchestra which was considered one of the best in Europe and included his friend, the oboist Friedrich Ramm.

Ramm was one of the few virtuoso performers of the time on the oboe. Mozart had worked with the other prominent oboe virtuosos of the time including Guiseppe Ferlendis, for whom he wrote the concerto (K. 314) and with the Viennese oboist Franz Joseph Czerwenka, for whom he started another concerto that was never finished. Unlike the oboe of today which is outfitted with all sorts of keys and mechanisms, the oboe of Mozart's time was very simple with only a few keys. Friedrich Ramm must have been an astonishing player since the work even today is one of the most demanding works ever written for the oboe.

The work begins with a light hearted and sparkling theme by the oboe and is joined by the strings with imitative passages throughout.

The brief second movement is much like an opera aria with the oboe as the singer in the leading role and includes a brief cadenza. Although the movement is short, it has an extraordinary amount of emotional range.

The final movement contains one of the first instances of polyrhythm with the strings performing in 6/8 meter while the oboe performs in 4/4 meter. The work contains many florid and very difficult passages for the oboe that encompass the entire range of the instrument,

frequently using some of the highest notes, which were rarely heard at the time.

*Note by Thomas Gallant*