

SCHNITTKÉ. CHERUBINI. BRAHMS.

Ethan James McCollum, piano
Drew Sarette, violin · Jody Hurt, horn

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998)

Suite in the Old Style for violin & piano

A listener who has never before encountered the music of Alfred Schnittke—a Russian composer active in the late twentieth-century—might well be surprised by the sounds they hear on this evening’s program. Yet, someone familiar with Schnittke but not his *Suite in the Old Style*, might be surprised too. This work, composed in 1972, is unlike many of Schnittke’s compositions, for even where there is quotation or allusion in those, the references are often made in jest. They are made to conceal Schnittke’s feelings toward the oppressive Soviet government, a regime which proscribed personal expression and demanded that a composer’s artistic products represent the state and its supposedly happy citizens. In these more typical works by Schnittke, their cheerful surface texture shields a much darker, despaired interior. This is not the case, however, for *Suite in the Old Style* in which Schnittke more authentically takes on the mannerisms of the vanished Baroque era. Broadly speaking, Schnittke truly identified with the eighteenth-century masters—Bach especially, but also Vivaldi, Haydn, Mozart, and others. He was an active participant in Russia’s early music movement which, in the 1960s and 1970s, had allied itself with new music, particularly the Soviet underground to which Schnittke belonged. It should not be surprising then, at least in this one composition, that he would honor the older tradition without using its elevated status to critique the current political disorder.

Suite in the Old Style is, in this way, more like Grieg’s suite *From Holberg’s Time* or Respighi’s *Ancient Airs and Dances* in its honest application of past centuries’ musical conventions. Also unusually for Schnittke, it is largely anonymous in its appropriation, for there is no particular composer with whom Schnittke is engaging; he is quite specific in other works. *Suite in the Old Style* is in five movements, each with a generic title and a tempo

marking. The first movement is marked, *Pastorale. Moderato*. Its tranquility and gentle lyricism summon rustic imagery, sheep and their shepherds, a familiar trope to anyone who knows either Bach’s aria, “Sheep may safely graze,” or the *Pastorale* movement which concludes Corelli’s *Christmas Concerto*. Its 6/8 meter, trills, and dotted rhythms also lend to this impression. The second movement, *Ballet. Allegro*, is quite joyous, to the point where its imagined dancers almost sound like they are clumsily, tripping over themselves. There is respect between its players, nevertheless, and the violin will often drop-out to let the piano have a turn as soloist. The imitative texture and sequential gestures contribute to a musical landscape which reminds this listener of Bach’s *Italian Concerto* or one of the keyboard sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti.

The central, third movement, *Minuet. Tempo di Minuetto*, is oddly melancholic for a minuet. It has the 3/4 meter and ABA form characteristic to that genre, but lacks the folksy zest. Instead, it sounds like a barcarolle—a Venetian boat song—with its conspicuous, yearning melody; more than any Baroque model, Schnittke’s *Minuet* seems reminiscent of Mendelssohn’s barcarolles in *Songs without Words*. The piano is given an extended solo at this movement’s opening which is then reiterated later. The fourth movement, *Fugue. Allegro*, is much more characteristic of its genre than the third. Imitative lines whirl around as the piano replaces chordal voicings with melodic lines, one for each hand. Much of the writing is rhythmically-steady, equipping the movement with a propulsive quality. The fifth movement, *Pantomime. Andantino*, would seem to restore the tranquility of the first movement after the melancholic third and impassioned fourth, if not for the stinging harmonies toward its end. Though the double and triple stops in the violin give us some warning of what is to come, the dissonant minor second Schnittke presents next remains unexpected, if not altogether unwelcome. The frustrated piano returns to familiar material after this interruption, and, as we approach this moment again, both instruments fade-out without providing any kind of tonal resolution.

Suite in the Old Style was premiered in Moscow in 1972 by violinist Mark Lubotsky and pianist Lubov Yedlina. Much of the music was derived from film scores Schnittke had composed around that time, and, admittedly, film scoring allowed Schnittke and other Soviet composers greater freedom of expression than concert music, for here the censors were more

concerned with the visual content and spoken dialogue. Indeed, Schnittke would write over sixty film scores through the course of his career. The violinist Francisco Fullana who recently recorded *Suite in the Old Style* for Orchid Classics has commented that, not only does this work give us a window into the Baroque era, but also into performance practice as it existed in the 1970s.

Luigi Cherubini (1760-1842)

Sonata No. 2 in F major for horn & piano

Luigi Cherubini, if a lesser-known name today, was regarded by his contemporaries as one of Europe's preeminent composers. In fact, Beethoven considered him to be their era's greatest living composer, and his operas were an inspiration to both Beethoven and Brahms. Cherubini was born in Florence, receiving his first musical training from his father who was harpsichordist at the *Teatro della Pergola*. He had already gained international renown as a composer of opera while still in his twenties, giving important premieres in Italy, London, and Paris. Settling in Paris just before the Revolution, Cherubini survived to win further success under Napoleon and later the restored monarchy. Then, from 1822 to 1842, Cherubini served as director of the Paris Conservatoire. His musical style was largely Classical, which meant old-fashioned approaches dominated during his tenure at the Conservatoire, in direct conflict with the radical, extreme vision offered in the public sector by Berlioz around this same time. It is the Classicist and composer of opera that we hear in Cherubini's Horn Sonata in F major.

The present composition is in two sections with the first marked *Largo* and the second *Allegro moderato*. This setup of a slower introduction with its declamatory feel followed by a faster, freer, more lyrical main section is reminiscent of an opera aria, though without the clichés of recitative. Throughout, the horn is given moments of private reflection where the piano drops-out and the score is marked *ad libitum* as if a cadenza. Though there are darker moments, the mood overall is confidence and contentment, as is particularly evident in the soaring melodies of the faster section. The Sonata in F major is the second of two works, originally for horn and string orchestra, published as etudes in 1802. Since then, however, they have become known as sonatas, although they have little resemblance to either Classical-era sonata principle or the sonata genre. The two works, regardless of their genre, have become a valued part of

the horn repertoire, especially the second which is highly-regarded for its virtuosic demands. Some credit for this must be given to the celebrated Australian hornist, Barry Tuckwell, whose 1977 edition of the sonatas for horn and piano is well-known among horn players and who was first to record the Sonata in F major.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Trio in E-flat major, Op. 40 for piano, violin, & horn

The Austrian composer Johannes Brahms is sometimes considered a musical reactionary, a composer more interested in exploring past idioms than pursuing a music of the future. This assumption is not wholly untrue, for Brahms did, in fact, take inspiration from the past, looking to the music of Beethoven, Bach, and the German tradition for guidance, with more assuredness in this tradition than most of his contemporaries. Yet, what he borrowed from the past, he integrated into a personal and innovative aesthetic, if not progressive in the same way as say Wagner or Liszt, his chief rivals. Indeed, Brahms was adamantly opposed to the literary direction in which Liszt wished to take music, drafting with Joseph Joachim in March 1860 a manifesto denouncing program music, which claimed to find its musical logic in literary narratives. And, although he respected Wagner personally and even enjoyed his music dramas, Brahms himself avoided writing opera, instead focusing his compositional activities on absolute music, a lineage Wagner would proclaim had ended with Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

Brahms's contribution, therefore, was to extend and reinvigorate the tradition of absolute music, i.e. music without explicit, extramusical references. Absolute music—the cornerstone of Viennese Classicism, of composers like Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—had become endangered by the second half of the nineteenth century as composers like Liszt and Wagner advocated for the extramusical. Few German composers of significance were writing symphonies, chamber music, or sonatas by 1860 when Brahms authored his manifesto. It was even believed that these once esteemed genres had lost their value in contemporary composition. Brahms, however, through his principle of developing variation and engagement with chromatic harmony, showed there was still much left uncharted in absolute music. He would ultimately write four vital symphonies and twenty-four chamber works over the course of his career. His example would motivate

nineteenth and twentieth-century composers alike, including Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, Elgar, and Schoenberg.

If, when provided with this context, it becomes possible to see Brahms as more than merely reactionary, it must still be admitted that his decision to score the Horn Trio, Op. 40 for *natural horn*, and not the new valve horn, was actually quite backward-looking. The valve horn was patented in April 1818 by Heinrich Stölzel and Friedrich Blühmel, more than a decade before Brahms was born. Its addition of valves allowed horn players to more easily and accurately control pitch through the use of these buttons placed on the side of the instrument. Previously, on natural horn, players would have to place their hand into the instrument's bell to approximate pitch. The invention of valves made it possible to play chromatically in any given key or register. Though orchestral hornists, whose training allowed them to adequately navigate the natural horn and who preferred the greater timbral possibilities of the older instrument, were albeit slower to adopt the new instrument than less-skilled hornists, most had converted by the 1840s as the publication of method books shows. Yet, Brahms, who wrote his Horn Trio two decades later in 1865, was insistent on the natural horn and even demanded that the German term, *Waldhorn*, be printed on the published score.

Brahms though likely had his reasons for using the natural horn. As a child, he had learned natural horn (in addition to piano and cello), and his father was a hornist with the local militia band. Furthermore, it has been remarked just how astutely Brahms wrote for natural horn, both here and in his choruses, Op. 17, of a few years earlier. His rustic surroundings at Lichtenthal, the village in the Black Forest where he composed the Trio, might also have played a part. The second and fourth movements each invoke the hunting associations of the horn, and perhaps Brahms felt he could better illustrate these through the use of the older, natural horn. Lichtenthal proved a necessary retreat for Brahms, whose mother had recently died, and here he found renewal in the companionship of his friend Clara Schumann who owned a cottage there. This was also the period of the *German Requiem*, written in direct response to his mother's passing but also composed in honor of Clara's late husband, Robert, who had been a mentor to Brahms. The third movement of the Horn Trio has often been interpreted as a lament for Brahms's mother, though the relaxed tempo of the first movement might also have something to do with his pastoral surroundings.

The Horn Trio is in four movements which follow a formal pattern not far removed from that of Brahms's Viennese predecessors, Beethoven and Schubert. Brahms, however, opts for a slow first movement in rondo form, an atypical decision even among his own compositions where in every other case the first movement follows sonata form. The marking here is *Andante – Poco più animato*, and we hear the first theme three times with interludes by the secondary themes. The relationship between the instruments changes often. Though the melody of the first theme is introduced by the violin over a piano accompaniment, the horn soon joins as a melodic echo. At later restatements of the first theme, the horn becomes the melodic voice, and, occasionally, the two instruments play as equal partners. Although the piano often acts as accompanist in this movement, it too has its opportunities to capture our interest as listeners. Overall, the mood of the first movement is melancholic and contemplative, dwelling for long intervals on its lilting melody.

The second movement, *Scherzo. Allegro – Molto meno allegro*, is striking in its exuberance. The solo piano opens with quarter notes played *staccato*, an element which soon becomes thematic and not unrelated to the pairs of *staccato* eighth notes which punctuate phrases in the first movement. When the violin and horn enter, it is as partners with a flowing melody which soars over the detached rhythms of the piano. All three instruments then playfully chase after one another, a familiar trope of hunting music, with melodic and motivic statements often echoing between instruments. The central trio is contemplative like the first movement with its darker character. There is something much more personal and intimate here. The piano seems to guide the others, and, after they have finished their contributions, it is the piano which through its solo returns us to the scherzo material.

The third movement, *Adagio mesto*, is of a solemn character, and again it is the piano which guides the musical discourse. The violin and horn empathize with the piano, and for a while there seems the possibility of hope. After a climatic moment where the violin and horn reach the height of their registers, the piano again plunges deeper and darker into despair to conclude the movement. The form here is largely free with the piano introducing the first theme with various diversions provided by the violin and horn. The second main theme is introduced by the horn and quickly echoed in

counterpoint by the violin. The piano's initial theme returns at the movement's end. The fourth movement, *Finale. Allegro con brio*, returns us to the atmosphere of the second movement with all its joy and exuberance. The *staccato* figures have returned as has the chase, now answered by true hunting calls from the horn. There are lyrical moments with the intimacy of the first and third movements, but their darker moods are now replaced by a sense of contentment.

The first public performance of the Horn Trio was given at Karlsruhe on December 7, 1865, with Brahms at the piano. It was published in Vienna by Simrock the following year. As the first work to combine the sonorities of piano, violin, and horn, it has remained a popular choice for players of these instruments when looking to collaborate; regardless, Brahms later suggested the viola as a possible substitute for horn. It is also the final piece in what Donald Tovey has called Brahms's "first maturity," a series of seven chamber works which show the young Brahms attaining the distinctive voice which would stay with him throughout his compositional career. Few composers have followed Brahms's example of writing for the combination of piano, violin, and horn, with the notable exception of György Ligeti whose Horn Trio of 1982—which also stipulates the use of natural horn—signified a new engagement with tradition for this composer who had previously engaged chiefly with modernism. Today most performances of Brahms's Horn Trio do, in fact, employ valve horn, though the work loses little of its resplendent beauty or gravitas with this alteration.

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About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer is a master's candidate in musicology at the University of Louisville where he has been awarded the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship. His current research focuses on French spectral music and the compositions of Kaija Saariaho, exploring the aesthetic ramifications of timbre, harmony, and melody in this new music. He has recently shared this research at the American Musicological Society South-Central Chapter's annual meeting in Asheville, NC and at the University of Tennessee Contemporary Music Festival in Knoxville, TN. Previously, Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars' College in Natchitoches, LA following the completion of his undergraduate thesis, "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers." Then, from 2014 to 2016,

Jackson served as director of the successful chamber music series, Abendmusik Alexandria. Since that time, he has remained concert annotator for presenters of classical music across Louisiana. Also a composer, his music has been performed at the Sugarmill Music Festival and New Music on the Bayou.

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