Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble

SAT / OCT 12 / 7:30 PM

Tomo Keller
VIOLIN
Harvey de Souza
VIOLIN
Jennifer Godson
VIOLIN
Martin Burgess
VIOLIN
Robert Smissen
VIOLA
Fiona Bonds
VIOLA
Stephen Orton
CELLO
Will Schofield
CELLO

PROGRAM

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)
String Sextet No. 2, Op. 36 (1864–5)
  i. Allegro non troppo
  ii. Scherzo: Allegro non troppo
  iii. Poco Adagio
  iv. Poco Allegro

Sally Beamish (b. 1956)
“Partita” for String Octet (2019)
  i. Prelude
  ii. Fugue
  iii. Chaconne

Intermission

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)
String Octet, Op. 20 (1825)
  i. Allegro moderato ma con fuoco
  ii. Andante
  iii. Scherzo. Allegro leggierissimo
  iv. Presto

Pre-show Spotlight Talk with Santa Monica College Music Faculty James Bergman, 7:00 PM

Classical Music Series at The Broad Stage made possible in part by generous support from the Colburn Foundation.
The Academy’s work in the US is supported by Maria Cardamone and Paul Matthews together with the American Friends of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields.

The Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble appears by arrangement with David Rowe Artists, www.davidroweartists.com

The Academy Chamber Ensemble was formed in 1967, drawing its membership from the world-renowned chamber orchestra the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, which was itself founded by Sir Neville Marriner in 1958 and is currently led by Music Director Joshua Bell. The purpose behind the formation of the Chamber Ensemble was to perform the larger scale chamber music repertoire with players who customarily worked together, instead of the usual string quartet with additional guests. Drawn from the principal players of the orchestra and play-directed by Academy Director/Leader Tomo Keller, the Chamber Ensemble now performs in multiple configurations from wind trios to string octets. Its touring commitments are extensive and include regular tours of Europe and North America, whilst recording contracts with Philips Classics, Hyperion and Chandos have led to the release of more than thirty CDs.

The Academy Chamber Ensemble’s October 2019 tour of the United States is supported by Maria Cardamone and Paul Matthews, together with the American Friends of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. The American Friends was founded in 1998 to support the work of the Academy around the world, particularly in the USA. Find out more at www.asmf.org

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SoundCloud: /asmf
Instagram: @asmf_orchestra

PROGRAM NOTES

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)
String Sextet No. 2, Op. 36 (1864–5)

“I love you! I must see you again! But I cannot wear fetters.” With these words in a letter to the soprano Agathe von Siebold, the 25-year-old Brahms broke off their secret engagement. Brahms had almost daily contact with Agathe, two years younger than himself, over a two-month period in the summer of 1858. They exchanged letters which Agathe, a professor’s daughter from Göttingen, viewed as “the source of the deepest and purest joy.” Brahms was even photographed wearing an engagement ring that summer, though it was never publicly acknowledged. Agathe had a voice that his friend the violinist Joseph Joachim compared with the sound of an Amati violin. But after Brahms sent his letter in 1859, the couple never again met. Both wore the scars of the broken relationship for years and only in old age could Agathe bring herself to reply to a greeting that Brahms sent via Joachim.

Characteristically, Brahms worked out his feelings in music, not in words. Characteristically, too, it took him several years before the work came together on paper. It also took a melancholy return visit to Göttingen, once Agathe had fled the town of painful memories to become a governess in Ireland. Shortly afterwards, in September 1864, back at his summer retreat in Baden-Baden, Brahms composed the anguished, intense and revealing songs of his Op. 32. Within the month, he also completed the first three movements of a G major Sextet for two violins, two violas and two cellos, finishing the finale the following May. This was to be his Op. 36. At the time, Brahms told the singer Joseph Gänsbacher: “I have freed myself from my last love.”

He did so literally, as well as figuratively, by including a sequence of notes by way of catharsis in the opening movement. The phrase is repeated three times, high on the first violin and first viola, immediately after the cello introduces the warmly lyrical second theme and it continues to appear throughout the first movement. Its notes are A-G-A-D-H-E (H being the German B natural). The reference to Agathe would have been immediately clear to Brahms’s circle of friends, since they were accustomed to musical ciphers in the music of Brahms, Schumann and other romantics.

The second movement is a bittersweet scherzo. Its darkly colored opening is a reworking of an earlier Gavotte for piano, while the contrasting middle section is a thigh-slapping ländler of great gusto. The E minor Adagio that follows is a melancholy and subdued set of variations on another earlier theme, this time associated with a more persistent desire, his love for the widowed Clara Schumann. The finale of this magnificently sonorous, closely integrated Sextet returns to a more upbeat mood.

The G major Sextet was the first work by Brahms to receive its premiere in the United States, given October 11, 1866 at the Mendelssohn Quintet Club in Boston. The European premiere followed in Zurich the following month.

— Program notes © 2019 Keith Horner. Comments welcome: khnotes@sympatico.ca
ABOUT THE PROGRAM

SALLY BEAMISH (b. 1956)
“Partita” for String Octet (2019)
(for the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, and dedicated to PFT)

This piece is inspired by my experience of the Carl Nielsen Violin Competition, where I was a juror in March 2019. I heard many superb performances of the Bach solo sonatas and partitas, and for 10 days, my head was filled with Bach.

Felix Mendelssohn was strongly influenced by Bach and Handel, and this is evident in his brilliant octet. I have taken the idea of a partita, which is traditionally a suite for a solo instrument. A string octet could be seen as a single entity – almost like a bowed keyboard – as well as being an ensemble of soloists.

The Prelude takes a fragment from the prelude to Bach’s D minor Sonata for solo violin, and weaves it into an ostinato, initially on 1st viola. This begins to fragment and break apart, reaching a climax which converges onto a single note.

The Fugue is based on the Handel quote (from the Messiah) which forms a fugato in the last movement of Mendelssohn’s Octet. I have used it as a slow theme. The fugue is in 8 parts.

The Chaconne takes a famous Mendelssohn theme, which is heavily disguised. After a fanfare-like opening, stated on lower strings, there are eight chaconne variations, each featuring a different member of the octet. The solos range from wistful to playful – the last soloist being the first viola, with an attempt to reveal the identity of the hidden theme.

Partita was commissioned by the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. It formed part of the residency which also produced “Hover” for chamber orchestra.

Partita was commissioned by the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, who gave its premiere at the River Centre for the Performing Arts in Columbus, Georgia, USA, on 4th October 2019.

—Sally Beamish, 2019

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)
String Octet, Op. 20 (1825)

With this Octet, the 16-year-old Mendelssohn earned a place in the line of great composers in the Western classical tradition. He had started daily composition at the age of 11. By 16, he could look back on a catalog of four operas, three piano quartets, a virtuoso sextet and, most significantly, a dozen string symphonies. These were the apprentice works that allowed the precocious young man to appear to burst forth as a fully mature and, indeed original, composer at the age of 16. Everything came together to favor early development. His family was rich and highly cultivated, with weekly Sunday musicales in the family’s magnificent Leipzigerstrasse estate in Berlin. Later, the philosopher Friedrich Hegel, a family friend, taught Mendelssohn at the University of Berlin. Even as an adolescent, Mendelssohn was a gifted all-rounder. He painted, he fenced, he wrote verse as well as a copious quantity of letters. As a musician, he was an accomplished pianist and played both violin and viola tolerably well.

In the Octet, Mendelssohn reveals a palette of eight essentially equal instruments and paints in myriad instrumental colors, ranging from the hushed monochrome unison at the end of the Scherzo to the burst of multi-colored hues in the eight-part fugal exuberance that follows. Mendelssohn also pinpoints the sort of chamber-scale orchestral sound he wants: “This Octet must be played by all instruments in symphonic orchestral style,” he writes in the preface to the score. “Pianos and fortés must be strictly observed and more sharply emphasized than is usual in pieces of this character.” Throughout, the young Mendelssohn eagerly explores a sparkling variety of textures, often in strikingly original ways. The first two movements alternate between polished ensemble playing and, as in the soaring opening, the style of a violin concerto. The scherzo, a meeting point for both absolute and program music, has always been the favorite movement of the Octet, inspired by the Walpurgis night dream section of Goethe’s Faust, with its vivid insect and small animal imagery. The mood of the Octet’s finale is hard to put into words. The opening, which is played low down on scrubbing cellos, seems humorous and the countermelody which soon evolves is less than reverentially lifted from the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel’s Messiah at the words: “And He shall reign for ever and ever.” In fact, the entire movement seems to evolve as a light-hearted treatment of the academic form of the fugue. It is youthful in its exuberance, tongue-in-cheek at times, effortlessly modulating from one key to another, joyous and assured. It represents a perfect rapport between form and content, the likes of which Mendelssohn was to achieve only infrequently again.

— Program notes © 2019 Keith Horner.

BIOS

TOMO KELLER (VIOLIN) was born in Stuttgart in 1974, to German-Japanese musicians, and started playing the violin at the age of six. At ten years old he gave his first performances with orchestra. He studied at Vienna’s University for Music and Performing Arts and New York’s Juilliard School of Music. Numerous top prizes and awards followed, at the Fritz Kreisler Competition, the Johannes Brahms Competition and the German Music Competition Berlin, where he was awarded the Grand Prize. He was also the first instrumentalist to receive the Aalto Stage Prize for young musicians. He has since performed at major concert halls all around the world, most recently at the new Philharmonic Halls of Hamburg and Paris and has been invited both as soloist and chamber musician to music festivals such as the Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Festspiele and Festival de Musica Manuel de Falla. He has also been a frequent guest on radio and television broadcasts on ARD, BBC, NHK and ORF. As a soloist Tomo has
performed with the Beethovenhalle Orchestra Bonn, St Petersburg Camerata, London Symphony Orchestra, Radio Symphony Orchestra Berlin and the Vienna Symphony Orchestra. Concert tours have led him all across Europe, as well as Russia, Asia, America and the Middle East. Tomo Keller is a much sought-after orchestral leader, having led the London Symphony Orchestra as Assistant Leader from 2009–2015. In 2014 he became first concert master of the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra. He has also appeared with more than 20 orchestras as guest leader all over Europe, the US and Asia. Tomo was appointed Leader of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields in December 2015.

Tomo’s recordings include solo works by Bach, Bartók and Ysaÿe, orchestral recordings including Stravinsky’s Apollon musagète with Sir John Eliot Gardiner/LSO and Avant Gershwin with Patti Austin and the WDR Big Band, which was awarded a GRAMMY® in 2008. He has given violin, chamber music and orchestral masterclasses at all major London Music Colleges as well as at Yale University and numerous other schools in the US and the Far East.

Tomo Keller plays the 1709 ‘Crafoord’ Stradivarius violin, kindly made available to him by the Swedish Järnåker Foundation.

HARVEY DE SOUZA (VIOLIN) has been a member of the Academy since 1993 and has led the orchestra on tours with Sir Neville Marriner and soloists including Joshua Bell and Julia Fischer. As a member of the Chamber Ensemble he has performed extensively throughout South America, Europe and the USA. Harvey has been a member of the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia and a member of the Vellinger String Quartet, who were winners of the 1994 London International String Quartet Competition. He has been Principal Guest Director of the Lancashire Sinfonietta and is co-artistic director of the Sangat Chamber Music Festival, now in its seventeenth year in Mumbai. Harvey plays on a Carlo Bergonzi, kindly lent to him by the Beare’s International Violin Society.

JENNIFER GODSON (VIOLIN) has been a member of the Academy since 1985. She was for many years a member of the Fairfield String Quartet with whom she toured extensively in Britain and abroad. She now leads a busy chamber and orchestral career and has a special interest in period performance. She is sub-leader of John Eliot Gardiner’s Revolutionnaire et Romantique and a member of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, with whom she has appeared as guest leader.

MARTIN BURGESS (VIOLIN) began playing with the Academy in 1992, taking up the position of Principal Second Violin in 1998. Having studied with Emanuel Hurwitz and the Amadeus Quartet he brought with him the love of chamber music. He leads the GRAMMY® nominated Emperor Quartet (winners of the prestigious Evian International String Quartet Competition). The Quartet has released critically acclaimed CDs of music by Britten, Walton, Martinu and James MacMillan. They have also performed on several film soundtracks, notably There Will Be Blood and Norwegian Wood (both written by Jonny Greenwood from Radiohead).

Martin enjoys a wide variety of playing away from both these ensembles, most recently recording and then touring the world with Peter Gabriel.

ROBERT SMISSEN (VIOLA) Born in Mansfield Nottinghamshire, Robert Smisson won a scholarship to Chethams School of Music and went on to study at the Guildhall School of Music, from which he graduated with distinction. After playing with the European Community Youth Orchestra and the Chamber Orchestra of Europe he took the position of Principal Viola with the Northern Sinfonia before joining the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, with whom he has been Principal Viola for over 25 years. He often performs as a soloist with the orchestra, and as a member of the ASMF chamber ensemble and the Pro Arte Piano Quartet he has performed, broadcast and recorded all over the world. Outside of music, being a father of five keeps him more than busy, but his other interests include walking his six dogs, gardening, DIY, early renaissance art, philosophy, cooking and cricket.

FIONA BONDS (VIOLA) is Associate Principal Viola of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, and enjoys a busy and diverse career outside the orchestra. She has recently been appointed Principal Viola of the City of London Sinfonia and is a founder member of the GRAMMY®-nominated Emperor String Quartet, who have recently released a critically acclaimed disc of Benjamin Britten’s quartets.

STEPHEN ORTON (CELLO) was born in Ripon, Yorkshire, and studied with William Pleeth at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He has been principal cello with the Bournemouth Sinfonietta and the City of London Sinfonia and was also a member of the Delmé Quartet for ten years. He has acted as Guest Principal Cello with the London Symphony Orchestra and Philharmonia. Stephen has wide experience of chamber music and has often played the Schubert Quintet with the Chilingirian Quartet. In 1985 Stephen became Principal Cello with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields and has played concertos with the orchestra. He is also a member of the Academy Chamber Ensemble, touring internationally and making numerous recordings. He has recently joined the Chilingirian Quartet in 2013.

WILL SCHOFIELD (CELLO) was born in London to Australian and Italian parents. He read music at Edinburgh University and went on to study with Radu Aldulescu in Rome and at the Menuhin Academy in Gstaad, Switzerland. Will has been cellist with the GRAMMY® nominated Emperor String Quartet since the group was formed in 1992. He started playing with the Academy of St Martin in
the Fields the following year, and membership of these two groups has been the primary focus of his playing career ever since. With the Quartet he has played throughout Europe, North and South America and in Africa, appearing at all of the major festivals in the UK and at numerous festivals abroad including Prague Spring Festival, “Mostly Mozart” New York, Flanders, Monte Carlo, Montpellier/ Radio France and Kuhmo in Finland. The Quartet records for BIS, the latest project being a complete cycle of Britten. He has also played as a guest with the Allegri and Maggini Quartets and with the Schubert Ensemble of London. With the Academy Will has had the opportunity to play the key repertoire for Chamber Orchestra at the highest level, working and recording with musicians such as Murray Perahia, Joshua Bell, Janine Jansen, Julia Fischer and, of course, Sir Neville Marriner. As a freelance cellist Will has played as Guest Principal Cello with many of the country’s top orchestras such as the Royal Philharmonic and the English Chamber Orchestra and with orchestras in Ireland and Spain. He has played on numerous film soundtracks, and with the Emperor Quartet has collaborated with Radiohead’s Jonny Greenwood on several projects, most notably the soundtrack to the 2007 movie There Will Be Blood.