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Alexander Pershounin, double bass, Faculty Recital, April 26, 2021 [program]

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presents

Alexander Pershounin, double bass
Faculty Recital

with

Sean Botkin, piano
Sang Koh, violin

Violin Sonata No. 1 in G major, Op. 78 Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
I. Vivace ma non troppo
II. Adagio
III. Allegro molto moderato

Alexander Pershounin, double bass
Sean Botkin, piano

Piano Trio No.1, Op. 49 Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)
I. Molto allegro ed agitato
II. Andante con moto tranquillo
III. Scherzo: Leggiero e vivace
IV. Finale: Allegro assai appassionato

Sang Koh, violin
Alexander Pershounin, double bass
Sean Botkin, piano

Program Notes

Sonata in G major, Op. 78

The piano was Brahms' instrument, of course, but the composer had an intense and fraught relationship with the violin – and violinists – that was crucial to his career. Brahms gave his first solo piano concert at the age of 15, but it was a concert tour at the age of 20 with the Hungarian violinist Reményi (Eduard Hoffman) in 1853 that was the most formative and far-reaching event of Brahms' early career. At Reményi's side Brahms learned the *alla zingarese* gypsy style that would later turn up in so much of his music.

On that tour, in Göttingen, Brahms also met the violinist Joseph Joachim, who became a close personal friend and a lifelong musical colleague and confidante. Brahms dedicated his Op. 1, the Piano Sonata in C major he completed that year, to Joachim. (Years later, Brahms also dedicated his Violin Concerto to Joachim, who had advised him on its composition and who played the premiere, championing the work throughout Europe.)

Brahms had a violin sonata then as well, written specifically to play on the tour with Reményi. The manuscript was lost, then found, and then lost again, after Brahms decided it was not worth publishing. Relentlessly self-critical, Brahms disposed of many early efforts in every genre this way: that Op. 1 Piano Sonata, for example, was labeled “Fourth Sonata” on its manuscript.

Similarly, Brahms' official Violin Sonata No. 1 may also have been his fourth. In 1878, the same year he completed the Violin Concerto, Brahms began the first violin sonata he would keep, Op. 78 in G major. Gustav Jenner, Brahms' only true composition student, related how Brahms encouraged him to write regularly and told him that the stove was there for the unsuccessful efforts. “Perhaps it may be of more general interest if I remark here that Brahms' first violin sonata is the fourth. Three previous ones were suppressed because they did not pass his criticism,” Jenner wrote in his 1905 memoir.

The Op. 78 Violin Sonata was composed in the summers of 1878 and 1879 at the town of Pörtlach on Lake Wörth. “The melodies fly so thick here that you have to be careful not to step on one,” Brahms wrote, explaining the tunefulness of the Sonata. Nearly 20 years later, the multifaceted pianist/violinist/composer/teacher/editor Paul Klengel (1854-1935) arranged it for cello and piano, and Simrock published that version in 1897, the last year of Brahms' life. (The enterprising Klengel also adapted two of Brahms' solo piano Intermezzos for cello and piano, among more than a dozen other Brahms arrangements for Simrock, including another arrangement of Op. 78 for solo piano.)

Klengel was undoubtedly inspired by his brother, the virtuoso cellist Julius Klengel, with whom he often performed in duo recitals. Klengel transposed the work down to D major, and made numerous other changes in the parts. (In addition to their recording of this transcription and Brahms' two original cello sonatas, Emanuel Ax and Yo-Yo Ma have also performed and recorded Brahms' D-minor Violin Sonata, Op. 108, leaving it in the original key with Ma simply playing the violin part an octave lower.)

One of the problems that had vexed Brahms with his earlier attempts at a violin sonata was the question of balance between the string instrument and the more powerful keyboard. The solution he found, for Op. 78 at least, was to treat the texture basically as in his songs, with the violin clearly leading and the piano supplying thinner accompaniment. He even used the closely related melodies of two of his own Op. 59 songs, "Regenlied" (Rain Song, which has given the Sonata its common nickname) and "Nachklang" (Memories) in the finale of the three-movement Sonata.

This is a tightly organized work, with its seed in the three repeated notes that begin "Regenlied." Brahms uses them (and the rest of the tune, of course) to launch the finale, but he also brings them in at the beginning of the first movement as well. Their dotted rhythm can be found in many places throughout the Sonata, and particularly in the contrasting *Più Andante* at the center of the A-B-A song-form Adagio. And then in the finale, the cello recalls the beginning of the Adagio, in the same key. (The main part of the Adagio – in the transposed cello version – is in B-flat major. The finale is mostly in D minor, with a sweet slip into D major for the soft, gentle ending.)

- John Henken,

Director of Publications for the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association.

Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor, Op. 49

There is nothing in Felix Mendelssohn's *curriculum vitae* to show even touches of Romantic angst. And, sadly (so to speak), that he died young, very young (at 38, after a series of small strokes), provided him none of the advantages that posterity has bestowed on the greatest premature leave-takers, Mozart and Schubert. Other roadblocks to top-level immortality: he was happily married and, worst of all, he was born rich. Felix ("Happy," in Latin) was not only successful as a composer, conductor, and pianist. He was a master chess-player, handsome, and socially adept to the point of becoming the beau of the fashionable balls he attended in his native Germany and in the countries where he enjoyed traveling – and, by the way, painting: he did that well, too – Italy, and especially Britain, which maintained its admiration of his music longer than any other country, in large part because he wrote oratorios, a native specialty

which had had no major champion/practitioner since Handel. There are no tragic romantic legends to be spun from such a life. And I have never heard it said, as it is – constantly, tediously, gratuitously – about Mozart and Schubert, that the world was robbed of further artistic revelations with Mendelssohn's early death.

Mendelssohn would eventually be ejected from the composers' pantheon for not being "deep," just as he was venerated in his lifetime for being perfect. By the late-1930s little of his once-omnipresent music was being performed in public anywhere (none, of course, in Nazi Germany and its dominions), aside from the *Midsummer Night's Dream* score, the "Italian" Symphony, the E-minor Violin Concerto (ever a virtuoso favorite), and the occasional performance in England by the local choral society of the beloved oratorio *Elijah*, in a simplified version. Of his chamber works, only the teenaged composer's Octet, an incomparable party piece for two first-rate quartets, and possibly the later D-minor Piano Trio, a staple of the ad hoc superstar ensemble since at least the days of Thibaud-Cortot-Casals, surfaced with any frequency during the first-half of the 20th century.

But at some time during the "explosion of classical music" (remember *that?*) launched by the advent of the long-playing record and continued by the CD, with their concomitant of bringing to every interested hearth and home every piece of music ever written, the appearance of masses of genuinely wretched music spurred an eventual reexamination of the neglected majority portion of the Mendelssohn oeuvre – and his upgrading. Mendelssohn came to be appreciated for what he always was: a very fine composer, worthy of a permanent place among the Romantic masters.

In an 1840 review of Mendelssohn's D-minor Piano Trio, Robert Schumann compared his contemporary to the greats of the past. "The storm of recent years is finally beginning to abate, and we must admit that it has washed several pearls ashore," Schumann wrote. "Mendelssohn, as one of the many sons of this age, must have had to struggle with and often listen to the insipid declaration of some ignorant critics that 'the true golden age of music is behind us' – although it probably affected him less – and has so distinguished himself that we may well say: He is the Mozart of the 19th century, the most brilliant of musicians, the one who most clearly perceives the contradictions of the age, and the first to reconcile them."

The first of his Piano Trios, the present one, dates from 1839; the second, in C minor; from 1846. No. 1 remains the more frequently encountered of the two, for the rather simple reason that it is more graciously melodious and less concerned with harmonic complexity and contrapuntal devices, although the later work is increasingly finding willing performers and audiences. The D-minor Trio begins with a grandly arching, aching melody, announced by the cello, which leads into the violin's second theme in A major, the entire movement carried forward

in what seems a single, broad melodic span, alternately gently elegiac and thunderously (notably in the piano) dramatic. It is nonetheless appreciative of the formal verities of the time, exposition, development, recapitulation, coda. It is the easiest of music to listen to, but Mendelssohn demands utmost skill of his players – but without the audience’s awareness of difficulty, unlike the physical torments to which Schumann and Brahms subject their performers in the subsequent generation of piano trios. While the Andante continues the somewhat sad mood of the opening movement, it is more short-breathed, with a contrasting, passionate middle section. The Scherzo is prototypical Mendelssohn faerie music, but with extra punch, the sprites having buffed up since those of the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* overture. The finale is marked “Allegro assai appassionato” but it is indeed less “appassionato” than the opening movement, particularly with the interruption, twice, by a broad, throbbing melody of great melancholy yearning.

- Herbert Glass

Herbert Glass, music critic, lecturer, editor, writer. Music lecturer Orange County Performing Arts Center; Member National Academy Recording Arts and Sciences, Chamber Music American

About the Artists

Dr. **Alexander Pershounin** has performed extensively throughout Europe and United States in both classical and jazz settings and has been featured as a performer and composer on such internationally recognized music events as Montreaux Jazz Festival in Switzerland, Pori Jazz Festival in Finland, Europe’s Jazz Contest in Belgium, and New Orleans Jazz Fest, among many others. His performing credits include collaboration projects and appearances with world-class artists ranging from Bob Berg, Mulgrew Miller, Conrad Herwig, and Benny Golson to Itzhac Perlman, Yo Yo Ma, and Ray Charles, among many other prominent artists. Dr. Pershounin holds DMA and MFA degrees from the University of Southern Mississippi and MFA and BM degrees from Russia’s most prestigious music institution: Gnessins’ State Academy of Music in Moscow. Before arriving to UNI as a bass studio and liberal arts core instructor Dr. Pershounin had taught at Columbus State University, Minnesota State University Moorhead, Westfield State College, University of Southern Mississippi, and various music institutions in Russia. His students won national and international competitions, were accepted in most prestigious music institutions, and successfully developed their own professional music careers.

Pianist **Sean Botkin** began studying the piano at age five with his mother, making his first orchestral appearance four years later with the Honolulu Symphony. He went on to study privately with Neal O’Doan at the University of Washington and, under his direction, performed with the Seattle Symphony,

Spokane Symphony, and Seattle Philharmonic Orchestra. Sean has garnered prizes in an impressive list of international piano competitions: William Kapell International Piano Competition, Gina Bachauer International Piano Competition, Busoni International Piano Competition, Cleveland International Piano Competition, World Piano Competition in Cincinnati, Dong-A International Music Competition of Korea, International Music Competition of Japan and the Washington D.C. International Competition. A graduate of Stanford University, the Juilliard School, and Indiana University at South Bend, Sean has studied with eminent artists Adolph Baller, Martin Canin, and Alexander Toradze.

Sean has performed extensively in the United States, Europe, Central and South America, Asia, and Russia. Concerto and recital performances include Kazan and St. Petersburg, Russia; Tbilisi and Kutaisi, Georgia; Salzburg Festival, Ravenna Festival, Stresa Festival, Ruhr Klavier Festival, Gilmore Festival, London, Cagliari, Rome, Florence, Bologna, Palermo, Lisbon, Tokyo, Seoul, Bogotá, and San José (Costa Rica). He made his New York debut at Alice Tully Hall in 1993 performing Bartók's Concerto No. 2 with the Juilliard Symphony, conducted by Carl St. Clair. In 2009, he made a CD recording of Rachmaninoff's Piano Sonata No. 1 in D minor and performed a series of concerts in Europe sponsored by Alexander Rachmaninoff and the Rachmaninoff Foundation. In 2012, also sponsored by the Rachmaninoff Foundation, he performed Rachmaninoff's 4th Piano Concerto with the Chicago Symphony at Ravinia, conducted by Gianandrea Noseda, and in 2013 with the Orchestra of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia and guest conductor, Alexander Sladkovsky. In May 2015, Sean performed in Tbilisi, Georgia as part of the Easter to Ascension Festival. Equally active in chamber music, reactions to Sean's performances typically are expressed with phrases such as "multidimensional talents", "superb musicianship", and "beautiful and rare musical experience". Other recent performances include Rachmaninoff's Trio élégiaque No. 1 in G minor on the New York Philharmonic Ensembles concert at Merkin Hall and a solo recital at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall in New York. Upcoming performing performances include a solo recital at McPherson College in Kansas. He is currently Associate Professor of Piano at the University of Northern Iowa.

Dr. **Steve Sang Kyun Koh** was appointed to the position of Assistant Professor of Violin at University of Northern Iowa in fall 2019. From 2017 to 2019, Dr. Koh was Adjunct Instructor in violin at University of Toronto, where he received his Doctor of Musical Arts degree. He received his Bachelor of Arts at Rice University in Houston, Texas, where he was the recipient of the Herbert & Helen Allen scholarship and the Dick and Mary Ellen Wilson scholarship. After finishing his Bachelor's degree, he continued his studies and received his Master's in String Performance and Pedagogy at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, where he was the recipient of the coveted Emily Boettcher and Yule Bogue Endowed Fund and the Dick Eickstein Grant. At University of Toronto, he was a student of Professor Yehonatan Berick and the Palmason Graduate Fellow in Violin.

An avid chamber and orchestral musician, Dr. Koh is co-founder of the Interro String Quartet, which explores diverse programming and eccentric venues as means to remove chamber music from concert halls and connect with the wider public. With the Interro Quartet, he has been a co-author and recipient of several grants from the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts and has annually commissioned quartet pieces featuring emerging composers in Ontario, Canada. In further support of new music, he is a member of the Toronto Messiaen Ensemble and has collaborated with emerging North American and internationally-renowned composers, such as Gideon Gee-Bum Kim, Salvatore Sciarrino, and Ofer Ben-Amots, to name a few. From 2016 to 2018, he was a fellow at the Toronto Summer Music Festival, where he shared the stage with violists Leslie Robertson and Teng Li, cellists Antonio Lysy and Brian Manker, violinists Nikki Chooi, Yehonatan Berick, Alexander Kerr, and Adam Barnett-Hart. In addition to these performing activities, he has performed with the Sudbury Symphony, London Sinfonia, Symphony S.O.N.G., Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony, and the Windsor Symphony Orchestra.

Along with these performing activities, he is an active concert promoter and research scholar. In 2017, he founded Bloorwalk Concert Series and Music at Saint George in partnership with DASH Property Management and Saint George on Yonge Anglican Church. While Music at Saint George aims to bring chamber music concerts to communities in northern parts of Ontario, Bloorwalk Concert Series present concerts in rooftops and party rooms of condominiums, transforming rarely used common areas into free performance venues. His research interests range from string pedagogy to jazz to music technology. Published in November 2017, his dissertation, "Spaces in Between: A Swing-Informed Approach to Performing Jazz- and Blues- Influenced Western Art Music for Violin," examines the challenges performers face when trying to balance interpretation with understandings of composers' intentions.

Dr. Koh has studied with members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra National de France, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. His past and current teachers include Kenn Wagner, Helen Hwaya Kim, Yehonatan Berick, Jonathan Crow, Clara Jumi Kang, Svetlin Roussev, Joel Smirnoff, Koichiro Harada, Gerardo Ribeiro, Kathleen Winkler, Irina Muresanu, and Krzysztof Wegrzyn. He has performed in solo and chamber music masterclasses for Cyrus Forough of Carnegie Mellon University, Paul Kantor of the Shepherd School of Music, Shmuel Ashkenasi of the Curtis Institute of Music, Hiroko Yajima of Mannes School of Music, the Philharmonia Quartett Berlin of the Berlin Philharmoniker, and for the Belcea String Quartet.

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