

Music At First Series
2006-2007 Concert Season

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Note: Photographs of the performing artists are available upon request.

Schoenberg's String Trio: The Chamber Music Society of Minnesota and the Music At First Series Present A Summit in Twin Cities' Musical Life

By Eric Jorve, Music At First Series

(MINNEAPOLIS-ST. PAUL, Minnesota – January 15, 2007) It is one of the curious tidbits of music history that Vienna, the veritable Jerusalem of Western music, can claim only two composers as native-born: Franz Schubert, and Arnold Schoenberg. Which was the greater creative genius of the two has been the contentious argument of the twentieth century. Schoenberg may win.

If there was ever a piece of music that offered listeners a tantalizing vision of what lies beyond the opaque curtain of death, it would be Schoenberg's masterpiece for string trio. Composed in 1946, the *String Trio, Op. 45*, was written several short weeks after the composer lay virtually dead – his heart completely stopped – for nine long minutes while doctors labored frantically to save him. Only an injection directly to the heart revived him. Schoenberg said the string trio reflects his physical and psychological suffering during this period.

In music as in life, Arnold Schoenberg is no mere mortal. Nor is his String Trio just any piece of chamber music. Like its composer, the String Trio is legendary, formidable, and unique. Its technical and artistic demands are enough to scare the bejeesus out of ordinary chamber musicians. And, if you love music, you must hear it.

Schoenberg is not regarded as one of the titans of modern music for nothing. His innovations set the terms of aesthetic debate for 20th-century music, and his influence will be felt for generations to come. His twelve-tone compositional process, derived after deep exploratory forays into atonality, continues to provoke the most extreme reactions. You either love it or revile it. There isn't any in-between. Paradoxically, it's precisely in his most radical works that Schoenberg is closest to tradition.

So where does Schoenberg's string trio fit into the master's oeuvre? Is it atonal? *You bet your tonal booties, it is.* Written in his serial twelve-tone method? *In spades.* Any tunes to whistle on the way out to the parking lot? *Nope.* So why would anyone want to hear this piece? *Where else are you going to see a practical demonstration of every trick known to string players, a contest akin to a championship football game, and the war of the worlds all wrapped neatly into twenty sweaty minutes of pure hell and exhilaration? Wow!?! Yeah, it's that good.*

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Fortunately, the short list of contestants includes one of America's greatest cellists, and incidentally, one of the greatest interpreters of Schoenberg's music anywhere in the world, guest artist Fred Sherry. Sherry, whose past performances here with the Chamber Music Society of Minnesota, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and others are marked as highlights in the annals of Twin Cities music history, will be joined by Chamber Music Society of Minnesota artists Ariana Kim, violin, and Sally Chisholm, viola.

Schoenberg's String Trio is extraordinary in its extreme contrasts and striking changes of texture. Cast in a single movement with three "parts" and two "episodes," the composer calls upon the utmost powers of the performers with trills, *tremolandos*, harmonics, *pizzicato*, *col legno* (hitting the string with the "stick" part of the bow) – creating a 'psychological storm' of rhythmic outbursts of frightening intensity. "In surprising ways, the Trio seems to alternately *remember* and then abandon the musical languages of its historical antecedents," wrote music historian Michael Cherlin.

The program allows Schoenberg to provide his own counterweight to the string trio in the guise of light-hearted *Cabaret Songs* which date inspirationally to the years immediately following the dawn of the twentieth century (1901-3) when the composer was employed as a cabaret musician in Berlin. Soprano Maria Jette, a perennial Twin Cities audience favorite and CMSM performing artist, will also perform selected *Arias* from Johann Sebastian Bach's beloved religious cantatas.

The balance of the program features another autumnal work, the *String Quintet in G Major, Op. III* by Austrian composer Johannes Brahms. Brahms intended to be his swan song: "I have worked enough; now let the young fellows take over," he said from his summer mountaintop haven in Bad Ischl. Brahms was exceedingly fond of the alto register, and it is therefore no surprise that he chose to follow the lead of his beloved Mozart and score the quintet for two violins, two violas, and a solitary cello. If this piece is to be taken as any sort of farewell, it must be regarded as the mature work of a confident composer retiring at the height of his powers. Conceived on a symphonic scale, it is music of great optimism, empowered by masterly compositional technique and inspired by Brahms' mature creative genius.

The performance is sponsored by the Music At First Series, the northern Twin Cities premier music series featuring the area's leading music ensembles. The concert is scheduled for 4:00 p.m. on Sunday, January 28, 2007, at First Lutheran Church, 1555 40th Avenue NE, Columbia Heights. Tickets ranging in price from \$25.00 to \$15.00 are available by calling the Chamber Music Society of Minnesota, (651) 450-0527, or at the door. Additional information is available on the Music At First website at www.flcch.org, or the CMSM website at www.chambermusicsocietymn.org.

Sherry and other principal CMSM artists will be on hand prior to the performance to share their impressions of Schoenberg's monumental trio and the other music on the program. The concert preview will begin at 3:10 p.m.

The concert venue is fully handicapped accessible, and features off-street parking. Discount tickets are available for large groups. Tickets may be purchased at the door, or in advance from the Chamber Music Society of Minnesota. Directions and more information are available by calling the church office at (763) 788-9653.

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