

PROGRAM NOTES BY ERIC BROMBERGER

Adagio in E-flat Major, D. 897 (*Notturmo*)

FRANZ SCHUBERT

b. January 31, 1797; Vienna, Austria

d. November 19, 1828; Vienna, Austria

Published

1846

Performance Time

10 minutes



Schubert's Adagio in E-flat Major, D. 897, was published in 1846, eighteen years after the composer's death, under the name *Notturmo*. Schubert scholars now believe it to be a rejected slow movement for the Piano Trio in B-flat Major, D. 898. The name *Notturmo*, or "nocturne," did not originate with Schubert (his manuscript simply says Adagio) and was probably the invention of that first publisher, but it has remained part of the way we think of this music.

Schubert's sense of this brief movement may be seen in his complex markings: though the dynamic of the opening is marked pianissimo, Schubert stresses that it should also be *appassionato*. Over softly arpeggiated piano chords, violin and cello sing a long duet in thirds. Suddenly the roles reverse: the piano has that gentle melody while the strings frame it with pizzicato accompaniment. The shimmering, subdued atmosphere of this music earned it the nickname *Notturmo*, and while not authentic, that name is apt. The central episode moves into E major and grows more energetic, the music proceeding along sharply-dotted rhythms. Schubert brings back his opening string duet (the piano's accompaniment has now grown more ornate) and weaves material from the trio section into the coda before the *Notturmo* draws to a very quiet close.

Was this the rejected slow movement of the Trio in B-flat Major? We may never know, and finally it doesn't matter. What does matter is that the *Notturmo* is lovely music in its own right, and this isolated movement will bring pleasure to all who love Schubert's music.

Nel dolce dell'oblio, HWV 134

GEORG FRIDERIC HANDEL

b. February 23, 1685; Halle, Germany

d. April 14, 1759; London, England

Published

1709

Performance Time

8 minutes



We think of Handel as the composer of oratorios, operas, and instrumental music, but he also wrote

about forty “cantatas” for solo voice and continuo accompaniment – these are variously known as “continuo cantatas” or “secular cantatas.” Almost all of these set Italian texts, and most date from the years 1707–09, when Handel (then still in his early twenties) was about to make the move from Rome to London, where he would spend the rest of his career. “Cantata” need not mean a large-scale work for chorus and orchestra, and here that title simply suggests something sung. Handel chose texts for these solo cantatas that could create a particular mood or set up a dramatic situation, one that might involve several characters and require the singer to impersonate them. In effect, these cantatas become miniature dramatic *scenas* – not so grand in conception that they should be on the stage, but vivid enough to have an independence of their own.

Handel appears to have completed *Nel dolce dell'oblio* in 1709, scoring it for voice, a high melodic instrument (flute, recorder, or oboe), and bass continuo, a line that might be undertaken by various combinations of instruments – at this concert those parts are performed by flute and piano. The cantata has a subtitle that suggests its subject precisely: *Pensieri Notturni de Filli*, or “Night Thoughts of Phyllis.” The anonymous text creates a brief *scena*. The opening recitative sets the situation: Phyllis drowns on a summer evening, but Cupid disturbs her sleep with thoughts of love. In the first aria – with its lively, dancing flute part – Phyllis imagines being in the embrace of her lover, and in the second recitative, she remains faithful to that vision. In the brisk concluding aria, Phyllis wakes to discover that her dream had not been true, but that dream had a value all its own.

Only the Words Themselves Mean What They Say

KATE SOPER

b. 1981; Ann Arbor, Michigan

Premiere

February 19, 2011; Tenri Concert Hall, New York City

Performance Time

12 minutes



Kate Soper studied piano at the University of Michigan and received her bachelor’s degree from Rice and her doctorate of musical arts from Columbia. A Guggenheim fellowship recipient, she has since 2006 been co-director of Wet Ink, a new music ensemble based in New York City. Soper’s music often explores the dynamic intersection of vocal and instrumental sonority. Her publisher, Project Schott New York, provides the following introduction to *Only the Words Themselves Mean What They Say* on its website:

Only the Words Themselves Mean What They Say is the second movement of *IPSA DIXIT*, a six-movement chamber music theatre work for soprano, flute, violin, and percussion that explores the intersections of music, language, and meaning. It may be performed as part of the full work, as a standalone piece, or in an excerpt of the full work comprising any number of movements.

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Of the work, the composer writes:

I wrote *Only the Words Themselves Mean What They Say* out of a determination to test my limits as a vocalist and performer and an itch to make something out of Lydia Davis's fabulously quirky, slyly profound texts. Writing as a composer/performer opens up the pre-compositional realm to lots of useful improvisatory tangents and fresh timbral discoveries, and working closely with flutist Erin Lesser led to many happy surprises that eventually made their way into the final score. Lydia Davis's words suggested an unhinged virtuosity and idiosyncratic, multi-layered musical reading that took me from screwball comedy to paired musical gymnastics: the flute becomes a kind of Iron Man suit for the voice, amplifying it to new planes of expressivity, intensity, and insanity as the two players struggle, with a single addled brain, to navigate the treacherous labyrinth of simple logic.

Piano Trio in B Major, Op. 8

JOHANNES BRAHMS

b. May 7, 1833; Hamburg, Germany

d. April 3, 1897; Vienna, Austria

Published

1854; revised 1889

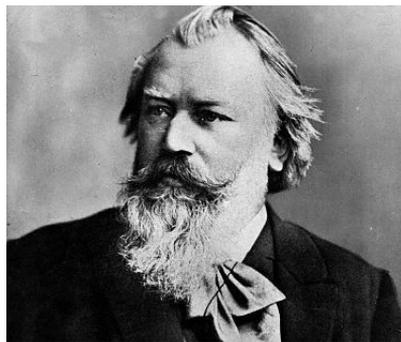
Premiered

October 13, 1855; in Danzig, Poland

January 10, 1890; in Budapest, Hungary (revised edition)

Performance Time

42 minutes



The Piano Trio in B Major had a curious genesis: Brahms composed it twice. He wrote the first version in 1853–54, when he was only twenty, and the trio was played in that form for many years. Then, in 1889, when the 56-year-old composer was at the height of his creative powers, Brahms returned to this work of his youth and subjected it to a revision so thorough that it amounted to a virtual recomposition. With characteristic understatement, Brahms said that his revision “did not provide it with a wig, but just combed and arranged its hair a little,” but a comparison of the two versions (both versions have been published and recorded) shows how greatly Brahms had refined his compositional techniques across the course of his career.

It was the development sections of the early version that bothered the mature Brahms most, and when he revised the trio, he kept the opening section of each movement virtually intact but wrote new second subjects for the first, third, and fourth movements. The development sections, which had been episodic and unfocused in the first version, became concise and economic in the second. Brahms had grown more adept not just at developing his material but also at creating themes capable of growth and change, and – as revised – the Piano Trio in B Major combines some of the best features of early and late

Brahms: his youthful impetuosity is wed to an enormously refined technique. Brahms joked that perhaps he should change the opus number from 8 to 108, but finally decided to let the original number stand. That is misleading – far from being an early work, the later version offers some of his most mature and sophisticated music.

Not everyone was happy with the revision, however. Some felt that in the process of refining and focusing his early work, the older Brahms had edited out a great deal of adolescent zeal – and beautiful music as well – and they missed that. Upon receiving a copy of the revised version, Brahms's good friend Elizabeth von Herzogenberg wrote to him: "you had no right to impress your masterly touch on this lovable, if sometimes vague, product of your youth . . . because no one is the same after all that time." But performers have invariably preferred the revised version, and Brahms's original version is seldom performed today. This concert offers the revised version.

The Piano Trio in B Major has a wonderful beginning. Piano alone suggests the shape of the first theme, and then the cello sings that theme in its full span. This is one of those melodies of that characteristic Brahmsian nobility – his individual voice was clear right from the start. The piano introduces the singing second subject (a new theme that Brahms created as part of the revision), and the development focuses mostly on this theme. But in a magical touch, Brahms brings back the opening melody – now marked *tranquillo* – and embellishes it softly as the movement gradually gathers strength and drives toward its firm concluding chords.

The scherzo was the one movement that Brahms kept almost intact, only substituting a new coda for the original. Brahms moves to B minor here, and the staccato opening has a spooky, muttering quality. This sets up the middle section beautifully, giving way to another one of those great Brahms themes that flows along nobly. The opening material returns, and Brahms concludes with the new coda.

The Adagio has a solemn, chorale-like beginning as piano and strings exchange phrases, but the real glory of this movement comes with its lovely second subject, sung by the cello. This theme was composed by the mature Brahms during the revision, and it is of such expressive autumnal lyricism that it transforms the original movement from the effort of a tentative beginner to the work of a master.

The finale pulses darkly forward on dotted rhythms. Its second subject, also added during the revision, is a firmly striding idea that Brahms marks *pesante* (heavy). The movement drives implacably to its powerful close, and – in a surprising touch – Brahms ends not in the expected home key of B major, but in B minor.

In its original form, the Piano Trio in B Major was performed quickly and widely: the premiere took place in Danzig on October 13, 1855, and the first performance in America took place the following month, on November 27, 1855, in New York City. The violinist on that occasion was the twenty-year-old Theodore Thomas, who later moved to a raw town in the west and founded the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. The premiere of the revised version took place in Budapest on January 10, 1890.

—Eric Bromberger
