Beethoven: Variations for Piano Trio on “Ich bin der Schneider Kakadu”
Mozart: String Quintet K. 406 in C minor
Faure: Piano Quartet in C minor

May 14 (Tuesday)
Mozart: String Quintet in B-flat K. 174
Bach: Brandenburg Concerto No. 5
Beethoven: Quartet in a minor, Opus 132

Reiko Uchida was born in Torrance, California and is a graduate of the Curtis Institute, Mannes College of Music, and the Juilliard School. Her recording String Poetic with Jennifer Koh, was nominated for a 2008 Grammy Award. She has performed concerts with the LA Philharmonic, and the Santa Fe, Greenwich, and Princeton symphonies. As a chamber musician, she has played at the Marlboro, Santa Fe, Tanglewood and Spoleto music festivals and has collaborated with Anne Akiko Meyers, Thomas Meijoranza, Sharon Robinson, Jaime Laredo, as well as the Borromeo, St. Lawrence and Tokyo string quartets. As a youngster, she performed on The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson. She is a past member of Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center Two and studied with Claude Frank, Leon Fleisher, Edward Aldwell, Sophia Rosoff and Margo Garrett. Ms. Uchida currently lives in New York City where she is an associate faculty member at Columbia University.

Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor, Op. 25
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Allegro
Intermezzo: Allegro
Andante con moto
Rondo alla Zingarese: Presto

Intermission

Piano Quartet No. 2 in A major, Op. 26
Johannes Brahms

Allegro non troppo
Poco Adagio
Scherzo: Poco Allegro
Finale: Allegro

We now have an official Camera Lucida kpbs email address for listener questions or comments!
cameralucida@kpbs.org

Tonight’s concert will be broadcast Saturday, March 16th at 9 pm on KPBS-FM 89.5 or streaming at kpbs.org

For more information:
http://www.camerahicialuchamermusic.org

San Diego Symphony
Janja Ling
Music Director

Jeff Thayer, violin
Che-Yen Chen, viola
Charles Curtis, cello
Reiko Uchida, piano
A Brahms Diptych

Pairing the works of a single composer on one program affords listeners and musicians alike a sharpened focus on that composer’s creative world. Rarer yet is the opportunity to experience two works of a single composer, of the same genre and form, composed in direct chronological proximity to one another. Here we are granted access to an extended moment in one composer’s output. There are only a handful of such examples that can actually function as concert programs. Beethoven’s Fifth and Sixth symphonies carry adjacent opus numbers, Op. 67 and 68, and he worked on them simultaneously; and his final piano sonatas form the famous triptich of Opp. 109, 110 and 111. In the world of chamber music, we find the sublime duality of Mozart’s String Quintets in C major and G minor, K. 415 and 414; after the fortissimo, heroic C major, Mozart felt compelled to proceed into the haunted, night-lit realms of the g-minor. With this unprecedented pairing of emotional opposites Mozart initiated the Romantic idea of the musical work as a window into the inner life of the composer, the composer himself the subject matter of his own creative process. Schubert’s two Piano Trios, Opp. 99 and 100, though not as intimately linked in their composer’s work life, show a related interest in expanding upon one medium, an urge to exhaustively explore the resources laid out on the workbench, so to speak, before moving on to other forms.

Brahms would have been aware of all these precedents; and in any event it was his habit, in the early period before his move to Vienna, to work in multiples of a medium - the two orchestral Serenades, the two String Sextets, the numerous sets of variations of the many choral works. But with the two Piano Quartets Opp. 25 and 26 we have perhaps the first answer to Mozart’s String Quintet pairing, and arguably the first two unequivocal successes in Brahms’ handling of large-scale sonata structure. In these two works, which Brahms evidently worked on in tandem over a period of years, and which were both completed by the 28-year-old composer in 1861, we hear the young master taking complete control of his craft, drawing equally on the tradition which he venerated and on the mystifications of originality and personal voice which are the hallmark of genius. Here an extended moment in one composer’s creative journey is at the same time his breakthrough into a domain of his own - Brahms becoming Brahms.

A diptych is strictly speaking a pair of panel paintings hinged together such that when opened out as a pair of wings, a single image is completed over the two sides. The conceit of these two great Piano Quartets forming a musical diptych relies on the question of whether we consider them as completing one another. This question we would hope to find answered in live performance, in the immediate confrontation with the work of art as a living organism projected through the prism of interpretation. And by extension, the meaning of these works to us is also only discoverable through active listening in concert. The interpretation of music - beyond its evident and copious gifts of pleasure, emotional refreshment and inspiration - also provides a critical lens, magnifying the work both in its context and in ours, commenting and elaborating on where we are and who we are in our relationship to history and to a shared cultural past.

If we imagine Brahms in focus looking back to Mozart’s Quintet pairing, which is highly likely, then we see in Brahms’ response the side of the diptych reversed: beginning with the major (Opus 25), and then moving up one whole step to the sunnier, more gently lyrical minor (Opus 26). One could imagine a double diptych of the two Mozart Quintets and the two Brahms Quartets, symmetrically arranged, with the two inner panels in g minor, and the outer panels reflecting a strikingly Schubertian modulation from C major to the major subdominant, A major. But this is idle speculation. Within Brahms’ own diptych, the two works draw upon different threads of the Romantic tradition, and exhibit more differences than similarities. The similarities - beyond instrumentation and four-movement an integral vocal quality in both the string and piano writing; absolute interchangeability of material between all instruments (this is definitely not a feature of earlier chamber music for piano and strings); and recurring hints of so-called gypsy-influenced material, culminating in the alla Zingarese finale of Opus 25. The differences are more subtle and varied: atmospheric, dramatical, evocational. Wherein the g-minor summons up a Gothic world ofhashed melodically and furtive suspense, the A major opens into the reassuring surroundings of the shared, the social and the domestic.

But in fact both works traverse, perhaps in a pattern of reciprocity, the two sides of Brahms’ psyche: the melancholic-solitary, and the amiable and warmly affectionate. Both sides pivot on the extraordinary circumstance of his lifelong yearning for an inaccessible happiness, his love for Clara Schumann. Like a mediaeval knight, Brahms held steadfastly to an idealized love for the Lady he could never possess, his forbearance a spur to greater and more profound love. And this is the diptych of Brahms’ persona, closed to the world in his personal sphere, but unfolded for universal display in the sublimated form of his music.

Opus 25 seems to gather force and momentum over its entire length. The keenness of the opening material builds through extension, not mass; tiny motivic elements, sometimes no more than a two-note sequence, are spun out exhaustively in combinatorial patterns. The beautiful coda sets a spiders-web-like harmonoy figure in the violin against triplet ornaments in the piano; a final surging up of the opening theme promises massiveness, but recedes to a quiet exit. The Intermezzo, ornamented and detailed, presents a quietly restless, writhing texture, opening to the caustic ebullience of the Trio. The slow movement builds further: not, as is usual, a period of restraint or rest in the larger form of the work, but effusive, an outpouring, full-detonated. One imagines a group of impassioned singers surrounding the youthful Brahms at the piano, holding forth for all they were worth. The middle section, at first a military fanfare in the distance, escalates to truly symphonic scale and massiveness. And the finale is utterly frenzey; when the strings can no longer sustain the martial strains, they let the piano, like desiccated into sudden silence, as if the dancer had collapsed in exhaustion, gradually revived by the ministrations of the strings, the movement ends once more in wild affirmation.

Brahms’ emulation of Beethoven is evident in the careful curating of motivic development as a kind of self-referencing, self-definition, the blossoming of sonata form as an organic emergence from an internal source. This drama of becoming is captured by the untranslatable German concept of Bildung. But we must not forget the drama of atmosphere and texture which Brahms took from Chopin, or from Chopin via Schumann. The Intermezzo in particular lives in an imagined world of aristocratic dance and chivalry, where rank is bestowed on the basis of charm and the exactly appropriate dosage of rubato.

Opus 26 begins in a distinct quietness. In the piano’s lyrically chorded setting the background to a simple melodic elaboration in the cello, stationary, in no hurry to go anywhere in particular. Immediately the roles are reversed, the strings restate the chorale introit with a sound reminiscent of ancient consort music, and the piano gently embarks on hushed melancholy and furtive suspense, the A major opens into the reassuring surroundings of the shared, the social and the domestic. The Intermezzo, ornamented and detailed, presents a quietly restless, writhing texture, opening to the caustic ebullience of the Trio. The slow movement builds further: not, as is usual, a period of restraint or rest in the larger form of the work, but effusive, an outpouring, full-detonated. One imagines a group of impassioned singers surrounding the youthful Brahms at the piano, holding forth for all they were worth. The middle section, at first a military fanfare in the distance, escalates to truly symphonic scale and massiveness. And the finale is utterly frenzey; when the strings can no longer sustain the martial strains, they let the piano, like desiccated into sudden silence, as if the dancer had collapsed in exhaustion, gradually revived by the ministrations of the strings, the movement ends once more in wild affirmation.

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about the performers

Violinist Jeff Thayer is currently the concertmaster of the San Diego Symphony as well as concertmaster of the Monterey Symphony and the Master Chorale of the West (Santa Barbara). Previous positions include assistant concertmaster of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, associate concertmaster of the North Carolina Symphony, and concertmaster of the Canton (OH) Symphony Orchestra. He is a graduate of the Cleveland Institute of Music, the Eastman School of Music, and the Juilliard School’s Pre-College Division. His teachers include William Preucil, Donald Weilerstein, Zvi Zeitlin, Dorothy DeLay, and James Lyon. He has appeared as soloist with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the San Diego Symphony, the Jupiter Symphony, the North Carolina Symphony, the Canton Symphony Orchestra, the Pierre Monteux School Festival Orchestra, the Spartanburg Philharmonic, the Cleveland Institute of Music Symphony Orchestra, The Music Academy of the West Festival Orchestra, the Williamsport Symphony Orchestra, the Nittany Valley Symphony Orchestra, and the Conservatory Orchestra of Cordoba, among others. Through a generous loan from Irwin and Joan Jacobs and the Jacobs’ Family Trust, Mr. Thayer plays on the 1708 “Sir Bagshawe” Stradivarius.

Taiwanese-American violist Che-Yen Chen has established himself as an active performer and educator. He is a founding member of the Formosa Quartet, recipient of the First-Prize and the Amadeus Prize winner of the 10th London International String Quartet Competition. Since winning the First-Prize in the 2003 William Primrose International Violin Competition and the “President Prize” of the Lionel Tertis International Violin Competition, Chen has been described by the Strad Magazine as a musician whose “total distinction and essential musicality produced an auspicious impression” and by San Diego Union Tribune as an artist whose “most impressive aspect of his playing was his ability to find not just the subtle emotion, but the humanity hidden in the music.” Principal violist of the San Diego Symphony and Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra, Chen has appeared as guest principal violist with Los Angeles Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and Canada’s National Arts Centre Orchestra.He is a member of Camera Lucida, Concertante Chamber Players and The Mytilical Trio, which just released its debut album entitled “Time,” and will commence the inaugural year for the Formosa Quartet’s Formosa Chamber Music Festival in Taiwan.

Che-Yen Chen
Taiwanese-American violist