Incredible Decades (2019) Disc 5.

1–4 **Piano Trio no. 1 in d minor, op. 63** (1847)
ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810–1856)
Mit Energie und Leidenschaft
Lebhaft, doch nicht zu rasch
Langsam, mit inniger Empfindung
Mit Feuer

JUHO POHJONEN, *piano*; ANGELO XIANG YU, *violin*; KEITH ROBINSON, *cello*

5–7 **Three Intermezzos for Piano, op. 117** (1892)
JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)
Andante moderato in E-flat Major
Andante non troppo e con molto espressione in b-flat minor
Andante con moto in c-sharp minor

GILBERT KALISH, *piano*

8–11 **String Quintet no. 2 in B-flat Major, op. 87** (1845)
FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809–1847)
Allegro vivace
Andante scherzando
Adagio e lento
Allegro molto vivace

ANGELO XIANG YU, JESSICA LEE, *violins*; HSIN-YUN HUANG, ARNAUD SUSSMANN, *violas*; DMITRI ATAPINE, *cello*

Disc IV of Music@Menlo *LIVE* 2019 features a collection of quintessential German Romantic voices. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Romantic era had reached its apex with its impassioned music in full bloom. The music of Schumann and Mendelssohn personifies the age's ethos of unrestrained emotions and blinding virtuosity. The late music of Brahms, emblematic of the final chapter of the German Romantic tradition, serves as a subtle yet powerful anchor in the center of this dynamic fourth volume.

Liner notes by Patrick Castillo © 2019

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810–1856)
Piano Trio no. 1 in d minor, op. 63 (1847)

The German composer Robert Schumann stands among the quintessential symbols of the Romantic era. Just as his music exhibited the hallmarks of Romanticism, so did the events of his life. When he was eighteen years old, he traveled to Leipzig in Germany to study with the pianist Friedrich Wieck, whose nine-year-old daughter, Clara, was also a gifted pianist. He and Clara developed a close friendship, which blossomed years later into one of the most intense love affairs of music history. After a protracted legal battle with Clara's forbidding father, the two were married in 1840.

By the mid-1840s, Schumann's physical and mental health both began to decline. He frequently battled bouts of depression, insomnia, and, eventually, psychosis. In his early forties, his unstable mental state reached its nadir, and after weeks of unbearable psychotic episodes, Schumann attempted to kill himself by jumping into the Rhine. Following his suicide attempt, Schumann demanded that he be committed to a mental asylum, for fear of inadvertently harming Clara or their children. He was sent to an asylum in Bonn, Germany, in 1854 and never saw his children again. He starved himself to death two years later; Clara was not permitted to see her husband until the day before he died.

The Piano Trio in d minor, op. 63, is the first of Schumann's three piano trios (not counting the Opus 88 *Fantasiestücke*, also scored for violin, cello, and piano) and has endured as the most beloved of the set among concertgoers. The work bleeds Romantic pathos throughout its four movements. Even in its tempo instructions, Schumann sees a chance for poetry; the first movement is not merely allegro but *Mit Energie und Leidenschaft*—"with energy and passion." The movement nevertheless offers a salient moment of respite from the intense d-minor *Leidenschaft* when, after each of the exposition's themes is extended, the development comes to an abrupt halt and introduces a new musical idea. Schumann creates a fragile sonic texture: in addition to marking the music *pianississimo*, he instructs the pianist to depress the soft pedal and the strings to play *sul ponticello* (bowing near the bridge, producing a thin, glassy tone). After a full recapitulation, Schumann briefly recalls this optimistic interlude before the movement's tragic conclusion.

Following the jaunty scherzo, a long phrase in the violin sets the weeping tone for the third movement, marked *Langsam, mit inniger Empfindung*—"slowly, with intimate feeling." A brighter melody appears midway through the movement to contrast the elegiac character of the opening theme. Music historian and Mendelssohn biographer R. Larry Todd noted that the ensemble texture at the outset of the finale—a lyrical theme set against shimmering chords in the piano—recalls the "sparkling, effervescent virtuosity" of Mendelssohn's Cello Sonata in D Major, op. 58. The vast emotional terrain that Schumann traverses—from the tragic first movement, through the lively scherzo and brokenhearted slow movement, and finally arriving at the triumphant finale—illustrates the archetypal Romantic journey. The Trio's impulsive rhetoric

and great emotive breadth confirm Schumann's place among the definitive voices of his generation.

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)
Three Intermezzos for Piano, op. 117 (1892)

Like fellow composer-pianist Beethoven, the giant whose footsteps Johannes Brahms heard behind him throughout his creative career, Brahms poured into the piano some of his most deeply felt personal statements. As with Beethoven, Brahms's oeuvre of piano music falls neatly into distinct stylistic periods, outlining his compositional life. The first group of piano works, composed throughout the 1850s and early 1860s, includes three large-scale sonatas (Opp. 1, 2, and 5); the Scherzo in e-flat minor, op. 4; and two sets of variations on themes by Handel (Op. 24) and Paganini (Op. 35). These works make extreme and virtuosic demands of their pianist. They betray Brahms as a brash young Romantic, as eager to announce himself to the piano literature through these works as Beethoven was through his own early piano sonatas.

The Eight Pieces, op. 76, of 1878 heralded a new stage in Brahms's piano style. With this set, Brahms discovered a genre that would sustain his piano writing for the rest of his career: collections of compact miniatures, devoid of thematic connection from one to the next. The remainder of his solo piano offerings comprises similar sets to the Opus 76 pieces.

The Three Intermezzos, op. 117, composed in 1892, illustrate the character of the piano music of Brahms's final years: like the *Fantasien*, op. 116 (also composed in 1892), and the Six Pieces, op. 118, and Four Pieces, op. 119 (completed the following year), the Intermezzos are subtle yet powerful works. If "autumnal" is an overused descriptor for Brahms's late music, it is nevertheless applicable here: music critic Eduard Hanslick observed Opus 117's "thoroughly personal and subjective character...pensive, graceful, dreamy, resigned, and elegiac." Brahms himself referred to the Intermezzos as *"Wiegenlieder meiner Schmerzen"* ("lullabies of my sorrow").

They are lullabies indeed, especially the first of the set, a gently rocking *Andante moderato* in the warm key of E-flat major. Brahms includes two lines of verse, translated from the Scottish ballad "Lady Anne Bothwell's Lament," as a preface to the score: "*Schlaf sanft mein Kind, schlaf sanft und schön! Mich dauert's sehr, dich weinen sehn*"— "Balow, my babe, lie still and sleep! It grieves me sore to see thee weep." (Some have surmised that the second and third Intermezzi likewise relate to Scottish ballads.) Brahms's tender melody, initially offered *piano, dolce*, bears a distant resemblance to the traditional Scottish tune. Each of the Three Intermezzos is in ternary (A-B-A) form. Following the statement of the lullaby theme, pallid octaves descend into a dark middle section in e-flat minor. As the music's tenor turns troubled, the polyphonic texture grows thornier. Intermezzo no. 1 concludes with an easy return to the opening E-flat major section, as if comforting a child distressed by a bad dream. The inner voices become still more brilliant, and the final measure radiates a soft glow.

The *Andante non troppo* (Intermezzo no. 2) in b-flat minor features spare yet highly developed keyboard writing. It begins with a swirl of thirty-second notes, introspective, enigmatic, and austere. Brahms rarely sets more than two voices sounding at once. By contrast, the resolute B section, in the relative key of D-flat major, is packed with lush chords. In his biography of Brahms, the composer and critic Walter Niemann has compared this middle passage to "a man as he stands with the bleak, gusty autumn wind eddying round him."

The *Andante con moto* (Intermezzo no. 3) in c-sharp minor begins on an understated note: the opening melody, presented in octaves, *molto piano e sotto voce sempre*, remains primarily fixated on its opening three pitches. It is simple music, presented in simple fashion, yet it gives rise to a quietly devastating musical statement. Here is the leading voice of late Romanticism foreshadowing the expressionist tendencies of the early twentieth century. Brahms counters the melodic and harmonic simplicity of the opening material with a chromatically rich central section, marked *dolce ma espressivo*. Indeed, it is music whose sweet embrace belies its expressive ferocity.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809–1847)
String Quintet no. 2 in B-flat Major, op. 87 (1845)

By the 1840s, Felix Mendelssohn, the greatest child prodigy that Western music had ever seen, had fulfilled the promise of his youth and reigned as one of Europe's supreme musical figures. In addition to being recognized as its leading composer, he was a celebrated pianist, organist, and conductor. In 1835, he fielded competing offers to become Music Director of the Munich Opera, Editor of the music journal *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, and Music Director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. He accepted the position in Leipzig, Germany, in which he contributed mightily to that city's musical life. Under his stewardship, the Gewandhaus Orchestra became one of the world's elite cultural institutions. Eight years into his tenure, Mendelssohn founded the Leipzig Conservatory, which would quickly attain similar distinction.

Mendelssohn continued to have his pick of plum professional opportunities. In 1845, he received an invitation to conduct a festival in New York and was offered a commission from the King of Prussia to compose incidental music to Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. Yet he declined both of these, opting to spend the first half of the year quietly with his family in Frankfurt, Germany. During this time, he composed two major chamber works, the Piano

Trio in c minor, op. 66, and the String Quintet in B-flat Major, op. 67; he also drafted a symphony, ultimately left unfinished, and worked on an edition of Bach's organ music.

Thus dating from the apex of Mendelssohn's professional renown, the B-flat Quintet equally reveals a composer at the height of his creative powers. It is the composer's second and final string quintet, marking his return to a medium that he had last visited in 1826, with the Quintet in A Major, op. 18. That work is a product of Mendelssohn's remarkable adolescence: The previous year, at sixteen, he penned the magnificent Octet, op. 20, still regarded as one of the finest works in the canon. Four months after the Quintet, Mendelssohn completed his Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a work that likewise endures as a hallmark of its era.

The Quintet in B-flat Major provides a mature foil to the earlier Opus 18 Quintet. It is, strictly speaking, a late work, though Mendelssohn certainly had no sense in 1845 that he would die at age thirty-eight two years later. Yet in character, too, the Quintet marks a significant departure from his Opus 18. The earlier work, Mendelssohn's first essay in a form chiefly innovated by Mozart, reveals the seventeen-year-old composer as self-assured, certainly, yet nevertheless audibly following a Mozartian model. Its melodies carry the refined elegance of the Classical era; its ensemble textures are redolent of Mozart's string quintets.

By contrast, the Opus 87 Quintet demonstrates the voice of a Romantic master in full bloom immediately from its opening gesture: *forte* tremolandi in the lower four voices buoy the heroic ascending theme in the first violin. With the *Allegro vivace*'s second theme, a legato descending melody, Mendelssohn establishes a quintessentially Romantic dynamic, evocative of the dialogue between Robert Schumann's alter egos, the extroverted Florestan and introspective Eusebius. Here, illustrating Mendelssohn's superlative craft, the robust first theme and the tender, legato melody are unified by a rhythmic motif, the rollicking triplets that persist throughout the exposition. This proceeds, sans repeat, into the thrilling development section and a triumphant recapitulation, sustained throughout by melodic clarity, rhythmic vitality, and textural dynamism.

The second movement serves as the Quintet's scherzo but eschews the hypercaffeinated buzz of prototypical Romantic scherzi (a yen surely satisfied in any case by the *Allegro vivace*). Instead, this movement, marked *Andante scherzando*, projects a measured temperament. While also forgoing the lightning quickness of Mendelssohn's own signature *Midsummer Night's Dream* scherzo style, something of that rarefied music characterizes this movement as well, with its soft staccato and pizzicato gestures. Fanny Mendelssohn's description of the Opus 20 Octet's scherzo, for which she claimed her brother drew inspiration from the *Walpurgisnachtstraum* in Goethe's *Faust*, applies equally well here: "Everything new and strange, and at the same time most insinuating and pleasing, one feels so near the world of spirits, carried away in the air, half inclined to snatch up a broomstick and follow the aerial procession."

The deeply felt *Adagio e lento* counters the esprit of the first two movements with a sober melancholy. All five voices issue the lachrymose, dirge-like theme. From this solemn opening, the movement's pathos steadily intensifies to full-throated despair. This despair, at its height of anguish, gives way to music of profound and spiritual beauty, a redemption that will return with overwhelming passion at the movement's conclusion.

The Quintet's *Allegro molto vivace* finale revisits the opening movement's vigor. Its opening pronouncement—a strong, dotted-rhythm chord, played in double and triple stops across the full ensemble, launching an animated flight of sixteenth notes in the first violin—heralds the tuneful theme. Though carefree in character, the melody is muscular in texture; no sooner has the theme been stated than the tremolandi of the Quintet's opening return. As one irresistible musical idea after another comes to the fore, Mendelssohn's expert deployment of the ensemble's five voices continues to thrill the ear. A central episode marked by intricate counterpoint reflects the composer's fascination with Bach—yet in its melodic sensibility and expressive zeal, this soaring finale is unmistakably the work of a singular Romantic master.

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