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Steve Ahearn, clarinet
Charles Hulin, piano

APRIL 23, 2004
PERKINSON RECITAL HALL
Five Bagatelles, Op. 23

I. Prelude
II. Romance
III. Carol
IV. Forlana
V. Fughetta

Gerald Finzi (1901-1956)

Fényárnyék – remegés
(Lightshadow – trembling)
Composed in 1993

Vajda Gergely (b. 1973)

Sonata for Clarinet and Piano
in E flat major, Op. 120 no. 2

I. Allegro amabile – Tranquillo
II. Allegro appassionato – Sostenuto
III. Andante con moto – Allegro

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Fantasia da Concerto su motivi
del “Rigoletto” di G. Verdi

Luigi Bassi (1832-1871)
FIVE BAGATELLES, OP. 23

Gerald Finzi was born in London in 1901. When Finzi was eight years old, his father passed away, and by 1916, he had lost his three brothers and his first music teacher to World War I. These deaths occurring so rapidly and early in his life seem to have forged in the young composer an introspective personality, and a very close relationship with the comforts of literature. Following these tragic events, Finzi spent a few years in the countryside studying literature and counterpoint. He returned to London in 1925 where he became an active participant in the music scene, meeting eminent British composers Holst and Vaughan Williams. From 1933-1935 he taught at the Royal Academy of Music.

Upon leaving this post, Finzi moved back to the countryside with his wife (whom he married in 1933) where they built a home on a sixteen acre plot. Finzi was an avid historian of 18th century English music, and he devoted himself to its collection and performance. In 1940 he founded the Newbury String Players. The group was dedicated to the performance of both young English composers and classical works from Finzi’s collection. In 1951 he learned he was suffering from Hodgkins Disease and had at most ten years to live. Five years later on an excursion with Vaughan Williams he caught Chicken Pox. His immune system was already weakened from disease, and he suffered brain inflammation and died. Finzi’s library of English music from 1740-1780, considered the finest privately assembled collection at the time was moved to St. Andrew’s; his library of English literature now resides in the Finzi Book Room at Reading University.

As an avid reader and literary scholar, Finzi wrote most prolifically for voice, setting to music many of his favorite authors. *Five Bagatelles* for clarinet and piano, was written in 1945 and remained one of the few purely instrumental works he ever composed. Each movement is relatively short, and very melodic with an emphasis on counterpoint and imitation.
Most of the movements are in simple song form (ABA). The beauty of these short bagatelles lies not in any shortsighted attempt at musical novelty, but rather in their unpretentious emotional directness and simplicity.

FÉNYÁRNYÉK – REMEGÉS (LIGHTSHADOW – TREMBLING)

Gergely Vajda is currently in his second season as Assistant Conductor of the Milwaukee Symphony orchestra. Prior to his appointment in Milwaukee, Vajda served as the music Director of the New Theater in Budapest, Founder and Artistic Director of the Forras Chamber Music Workshop, Founder and Artistic Advisor of the Valley of the Arts Summer Festival in Hungary, Permanent Guest Conductor of the Hungarian State Opera, and Music Director of the Ernő von Dohnányi Symphony Orchestra of Budapest. He has also made guest appearances with some of the most important orchestras and opera houses internationally to great critical acclaim.

Recently, Vajda conducted his own work for the silent film The Crowd at the Auditorium of the Louvre and conducted the world premiere of his opera The Giantbaby at the New Theatre in Budapest.

Gregory Vajda was born in 1973 in Budapest, Hungary. He studied composition and clarinet at the Béla Bárток secondary school, and later studied conducting at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music. In 1999 Vajda was awarded the Annie Fischer State Scholarship for music performers, and in 2000 was awarded the Zoltán Kodály State Scholarship for composers.

The following notes regarding Lightshadow-trembling appear in the 2002 recording by clarinetist Csaba Klenyán entitled Dervish Dances and are used here at Mr. Vajda’s request:

Although he was only twenty at the time of its composition, Vajda’s solo piece Lightshadow-trembling (1993) bears witness to his superior knowledge of the instrument’s soul and innermost secrets. The
motifs surfacing, then fading back into the range of the inaudible exploit the dynamic possibilities of the clarinet to its maximum. The counterpoints to these ethereal motifs are the sections labeled wild, in the score, where the clarinet squeals stridently like a folk music instrument, the pipe or the reed pipe. The fast-as-lightening figures often create the illusion of polyphony, and the playful gestures evoke Till Eulenspiegel, the great jester.

SONATA FOR CLARINET AND PIANO IN E FLAT MAJOR, OP. 120 NO. 2

By 1890, Johannes Brahms had established himself as one of the most important composers in Europe. He had supported himself almost entirely throughout his career by performance and composition alone. Many of his compositions were receiving regular performances and had in fact entered the standard repertory, most notably his orchestral works and concerti. At the time, he even publicly considered retirement stating “I’m just not going to do any more. My whole life I’ve been a hard worker; now for once I’m going to be good and lazy!”

But these years were certainly the twilight of the unmarried composer’s career. Many of his closest friends and allies were beginning to fall sick and pass on. Clara Schumann, easily his closest friend and colleague (and likely much more) had retired from her piano performance career and was bedridden. In addition, his sister, and two of his closest friends in Vienna died within a matter of years. Brahms himself was beginning to show symptoms of liver cancer, the same disease that claimed his father’s life.

It was against this backdrop that Brahms made his annual summer retreat to Ischl in 1894 where he composed his two clarinet sonatas, Opus 120. Three years earlier he had fallen in love with the sound of clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld on a trip to Meiningen. Opus 120 was composed for “Fräulein Klarinette,” one of his last mistresses. Evident in the Eb Sonata are the careful restraint and enormous techni-
cal prowess of a mature and confident composer. Brahms had complete mastery over his trademark ability to blur and muddy the traditional classical forms, and yet instill them with a sure sense of clarity and expression. Schoenberg would describe this forty years later as an "economy, yet richness." Yet infused in this compositional prowess are the personal events of Brahms's last decade. This is the paradigm and the beauty inherent in Opus 120 and in the Eb Sonata: the power of a mature genius certain of his secure place in the history of music, quietly, patiently sharing the secret, human memories and regrets and of an old man.

FANTASIA DA CONCERTO SU MOTIVI DEL "RIGOLETTO" DI G. VERDI

Opera was the center of musical and social life in 19th century Italy, and Giuseppe Verdi held a unique level of popularity by the end of his life. He had an unparalleled ability to craft extraordinary scores centered around the most famous singers of the day and using previously tested, successful dramas as his libretti. Rigoletto, Verdi's seventeenth opera, was met with great enthusiasm upon its premiere in Venice. In the irreverent words of Sir Denis Forman, the plot is the one where the hunchback jester (Rigoletto) hires a hit man to murder his boss (the duke) but finds the resulting corpse is not his boss but his daughter (Gilda)." (one of the more cheery plots). Paraphrases, sets of variations, and "potpourris" were turned out by many Italian composers following the premieres of successful operas. These works served an important role in diffusing the repertoire into the households of the people of Italy, most of whom could never afford a ticket to the opera.

At the time of this composition, Luigi Bassi was Principal Clarinet at La Scala, the most important opera house in Milan, and therefore in all of northern Italy. He would have premiered many of Verdi's operas, and it is certain that Verdi penned more than a few clarinet solos with Bassi in mind. Bassi uses all three of the aforementioned styles in the present work: paraphrase (in which the borrowed theme leads to new ideas written by the arranger), ornamental variation (in which
the original structure of the theme subjected to variation is never changed), and “potpourri” (in which a variety of themes from the same opera are used to create the piece). Opera afficianados will notice the distinct lack of the most popular aria from Rigoletto, “La donna é mobile.” Instead Bassi tapped into the more heart wrenching moments from the opera to create this decorative work. Above all else, this Fantasia should be listened to for the simple pleasure of hearing Verdi’s beautiful arias on display with the technical and emotive boundaries of the clarinet.