

Blues and Rags to Riches

Roy Malan, violin and director

Susan Freier, violin

Polly Malan, viola

Stephen Harrison, cello

Ian Scarfe, piano

Three Rags for String Quartet (1989)

William Bolcom (b.1938)

Poltergeist
Graceful Ghost
Incineratorag

Sonata for Violin and Piano

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Allegretto
Blues
Perpetual mobile

Intermission

Quintet for Piano Strings in f minor

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Allegro non troppo
Andante, Un poco Adagio
Scherzo: Allegro
Finale: Poco sostenuto - Allegro non troppo- Presto non troppo

The Music

Sonata No.2 in G for Violin and Piano (1927)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

It took Ravel four years to complete his G major violin sonata (1923-27). A notoriously meticulous composer, Ravel may have been further slowed by his reverence for the elder Claude Debussy's 1916 Violin Sonata. Ravel is reputed to have been immune to criticism, but some of his early compositions had been labeled as too indebted to Debussy's ideas. The two composers shared a deep desire to create completely original music, and their openness to influences from around the world shaped their work. This eclecticism put Ravel, in particular, at odds with the French musical establishment, especially in the early part of his career. Yet, by 1927 Ravel was France's most famous composer.

Like many of his contemporaries – Stravinsky, Satie and Debussy among them – Ravel was inspired to write music for smaller forces after the First World War. Ravel himself had served as a truck driver in the war, despite enlisting at the relatively advanced age of 40. This emphasis on more intimate works was, in part, a reaction against the perceived bombast of pre-war German compositions for large orchestra. That said, late in their careers Beethoven, Brahms, Fauré (Ravel's mentor and champion) and Debussy all turned to solo and chamber music to convey their most personal musical ideas.

The growth of jazz in Paris during the 1920s fascinated Ravel, and this fascination is evident throughout the violin sonata, particularly in the second movement marked "Blues" with its combination of glissandi (slides) in the violin part and repetitive, occasionally honky-tonk bass in the piano. The first movement incorporates elements of gamelan – its pentatonic scales and exotic texture – and winking jazz gestures. The third movement, marked *Perpetuum mobile*, is a tour de force for the violinist, who never stops playing at breakneck speed.

- Stephen Harrison

Three Rags (transcribed 1989)

William Bolcom (1938 -)

William Bolcom began his compositional career very much in the European avant-garde tradition. After studies with Olivier Messiaen at the Paris Conservatoire, Bolcom composed music using the complex serial procedures developed by Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. However, partially inspired by the example of Charles Ives, he soon developed an original approach that drew on music from many traditions, combining the sounds of high modernism with those from various kinds of popular music. In addition to his own eclectic and entertaining compositions (Haydn Go Seek for piano trio, for instance), Bolcom has been an important pianist and curator of ragtime and, with his wife, the mezzo-soprano Joan Morris, of American popular song.

Bolcom was an especially important figure in the North American ragtime revival that began in Toronto in the mid 1960s. Bolcom began to collect and to perform rags by Scott Joplin, Joseph Lamb, James Scott and other American musicians from the early 20th century, both in concerts and at social events. According to Bolcom, it was after hearing him play Joplin rags at a party that Joshua Rifkin was moved to record the Nonesuch LPs that brought Joplin's music to a broad public, and that led to Marvin Hamlisch's arrangements of Joplin rags for the 1973 movie *The Sting*.

In addition to promoting early American ragtime, and to collaborating with Eubie Blake, Bolcom began to compose his own piano rags, mostly between 1967 and 1973. These rags show Bolcom's deep immersion in, and love for, the ragtime tradition, while also displaying his own distinctive compositional voice. The ghost of Poltergeist is apparently of the sneaky, devious variety, as the rag is predominantly quiet, with an accompaniment that bounces lightly, rather than thumping.

A “stop time” section near the end leaves unexpected gaps in the music, heightening the witty effect. Graceful Ghost Rag is Bolcom’s best-known rag. Bolcom has described it as “an elegiac rag,” in memory of his father, a gentle man and a fine dancer. This is a slow, lyrical rag, which in the quartet arrangement features the viola. Incineratorag is the one of the three rags that is closest to Joplin’s style, starting with a stereotypical four-bar introduction before continuing on to boisterous two-note groups. The contrasting middle section (the “Trio”) is particularly beautiful, with slow, dragging, syncopations. These three rags were arranged for string quartet in 1989, at the request of the violinist Emanuel Borok, to whom the arrangements are dedicated.

– Derek Katz

Piano Quintet in F Minor, Op. 34

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

“First maturity” often describes Brahms’s compositions of the early 1860s, particularly various chamber works: two string sextets, two piano quartets, horn trio, and piano quintet. Add to that a string quintet (two violins, viola, two cellos), written perhaps with Schubert’s great C Major Quintet in mind. In the summer of 1862 he sent three of its movements to dear friend and mentor, Clara Schumann, who responded with qualified encouragement. The completed quintet was previewed the next year by another musical confidant, violinist Joseph Joachim, who had serious reservations about the scoring. The dissatisfied Brahms, always self-critical, reworked it into a sonata for two pianos and, characteristically, burned the original.

When Clara performed the two-piano version, she thought it sounded too transcribed. “It’s not a sonata, rather a work whose ideas might—and must—scatter over an entire orchestra,” she said, and urged him “to recast the piece once more.” He did, not as a symphony, but as a quintet for piano and string quartet, the ideal amalgam of the two earlier works. Enthusiastically acclaimed by his friends as “rare perfection,” it is one of the greatest chamber music works of all time. Fortunately, he did not destroy the sonata arrangement, which pleased him enough to perform it frequently and publish it as Op. 34b. In the third incarnation Brahms achieved the desired compatibility of sound—warm, sustained strings and brilliant, percussive piano—and musical materials—an abundance of ideas, to which Clara alluded. These became so distributed among the instruments that the scoring is balanced and texture clear.

Monumental in scope, the work encompasses a wide range of emotions and a wealth of colors and moods. Even with great contrasts between dramatic power and idyllic calm, a dynamic élan is maintained largely through rhythmic manipulation. By putting together duplets and triplets (his famous two against three figures) and displacing expected strong beats Brahms creates rhythmic ambiguity and added tension. Melodic mutations give an organic unity to the whole work, especially the emphasis throughout on motives with expressive semitone motion.

The tumultuous first movement begins with a quiet theme, in unison, which uncoils like a taut spring in the piano, giving momentum to an effusion of melodic ideas and rich harmonies in the exposition of an expansive sonata form. Its unusual coda, somewhat slower at first, features subdued string sonorities (hinting perhaps at the start of the last movement) and then recalls the taut opening for a feverish finish. Retreating from such surging passion, the second movement's tender melody in the piano has a dream-like quality, but also unsettling rhythms. After a contrasting middle section, dominated by the strings, the opening melody returns for a varied treatment by all. Driving intensity resumes in the Scherzo with three successive ideas—nervous syncopation, sharp staccatos, sustained pomp—that are repeated and varied (the second even fugally) before a cantabile Trio relieves the demonic pace. To dissipate the Scherzo's frenzy, the Finale opens with a slow, eerie introduction, a poignant rising line exchanged among the strings, which soon gives way to a lively tune in the cello, repeated rondo-style with a contrasting (and repeating) episode in a rather free form. In the final section the meter changes and the tempo ratchets up for a supercharged conclusion.

-Jane Troy Johnson

The Musicians

Roy Malan, violin, studied in London with Yehudi Menuhin and then at Juilliard and the Curtis Institute, with Ivan Galamian and Efrem Zimbalist. He has been concertmaster and solo violinist with the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra since 1974 and a member of the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. For twenty years Malan was concertmaster of both Sinfonia San Francisco and the San Francisco Chamber Symphony and was a featured soloist on the latter's European tours.

He is on the faculty at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Mr. Malan is also founder and co-director, with pianist Robin Sutherland, of the Telluride Chamber Music Festival. He has received critical acclaim for concerto appearances at New York's Lincoln Center, Washington's Kennedy Center, the Paris Opera and the Edinburgh Festival. He has recorded extensively with Robin Sutherland, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, and as a concerto soloist.

Susan Freier, violin, earned degrees in Music and Biology from Stanford University as a Ford scholar and continued her studies at the Eastman School of Music, where she formed the Chester String Quartet, which went on to win the Evian, Munich International, Portsmouth (England), and Chicago Discovery competitions. She became faculty ensemble-in-residence at Indiana University at South Bend in 1980.

In 1989 Susan returned to her native Bay Area to join the Stanford University faculty and the Stanford String Quartet. She has been a participant at numerous festivals and has performed on NPR, the BBC and German State Radio. A former faculty/artist member at the Schlern and Orfeo International Music Festivals, she has most recently performed and taught at the Mendocino Music Festival, and the Telluride Chamber Music Festival, among others.

Polly Malan, viola, has played chamber music at various music festivals, including Telluride, Aspen, Spoleto, and Reno. Performing music by living composers is a particular passion of hers; Alea II, New Music Works, New Frontiers Music Festival, and the Pacific Rim Festival are some of the concert series where she has premiered new works.

She was principal violist of San Francisco's Western Opera Theater, the Spoleto Opera Orchestra, and the Bay Shore Lyric Opera. Other orchestras include the San Francisco Opera, the Skywalker Philharmonic, California Symphony, and the San Jose Symphony. She received her education at Bowdoin College, Stanford, and UC Santa Cruz where she pursued graduate studies in 20th Century Performance Practice.

Stephen Harrison, cello, has been on the Stanford University faculty since 1983, and is the cellist of the acclaimed *Ives String Quartet*. He is a graduate of Oberlin College and Boston University. Former principal cellist of the Opera Company of Boston, the New England Chamber Orchestra and the Chamber Symphony of San Francisco, he has performed on National Public Radio, the BBC, and on both German State Radio and the Netherlands State Radio.

As solo cellist of the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, he has toured internationally and recorded on the Delos, CRI, New Albion and Newport Classics labels. He has also performed on both the "Music of the Sacred and Profane" and New and Unusual Music Series presented by the San Francisco Symphony, and for Chamber Music West. Mr. Harrison has been on the faculty of the Pacific Music Festival and is currently an artist/faculty member of the Rocky Ridge Music Center.

Ian Scarfe, piano, a native of southeast Texas, is currently a music associate at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. He is the founder and director of the *Trinity Alps Chamber Music Festival*, which is dedicated to bringing classical music to the people of the remote mountains of Trinity County in Northern California. Ian recently performed Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 as a soloist with San Francisco's *Symphony Parnassus*.

He is a founding member of the chamber group *Nonsemble 6*, which is becoming well known for its wild performances of Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*. Ian earned a Bachelor's of Music Degree from Willamette University in 2005, and recently finished a Master's Degree in 2008 and an Artist's Certificate in 2010 with the SF Conservatory's prestigious Chamber Music Program. His principal teachers are Paul Hersh and Dr. Anita King.