20.02.22 Dome Joanna MacGregor

George Gershwin (1898-1937) Lullaby for String Quartet (1919); Summertime (1934)

Music only started to impact on George Gershwin's life when he was 12 and the family bought a piano for his elder brother Ira. Ira (the future lyricist) wasn't interested, but George was. His piano teacher took him to concerts and at 15 he dropped out of school and worked as a song plugger for a firm on Tin Pan Alley, playing and singing their songs to prospective clients. He composed in his spare time. He moved to being a Broadway rehearsal pianist, was retained as a composer by Harms publishers and in 1918 composed his first musical *La La Lucille*. Two years later Al Jolson recorded *Swanee*, bringing Gershwin $10,000 in royalties in the first year.

Lullaby was composed around this time as a student exercise and was popular both at private musicales with his friends and more widely as a reused melody in his opera *Blue Monday*. The original string quartet however was subsequently neglected until the Juilliard Quartet performed it in 1967. It has both Gershwin's characteristic melodic genius and his winning combination of jazz and classical styles.

His classical training was eclectic ranging from the traditional to the avant garde. In 1928, four years after writing *Rhapsody in Blue*, he met Ravel in New York, taking him to hear Duke Ellington. He asked Ravel to teach him; Ravel declined, allegedly saying 'Why become a second-rate Ravel when you're already a first-rate Gershwin?'. On hearing how much money Gershwin earned Ravel produced a counter-proposal: that *he* study with Gershwin. Ravel suggested that Gershwin try Nadia Boulanger in Paris. So, with lessons from Boulanger as an incentive, Gershwin went to Paris. Although Nadia Boulanger also declined to teach Gershwin, his composing prospered with *An American in Paris*.

Porgy & Bess followed in 1934 as a folk opera. Gershwin chose to compose his own 'folk' songs rather than use existing ones, although links to existing folk melodies have been pointed out. The folk atmosphere in *Summertime* comes partly from his use of the pentatonic scale (black notes on the piano) and a slow-moving bluesy harmonic progression. *Summertime* has been spectacularly successful in all sorts of versions. Guiness World Records declares it to be the world's most recorded song at around 70,000 recordings.

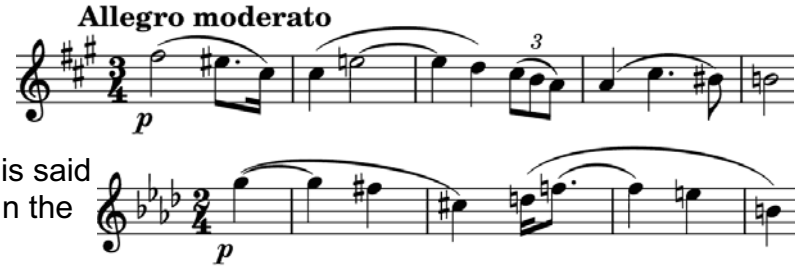
Amy Beach (1867-1944) Piano Quintet in F# minor Op.67 (1907)
Adagio - Allegro moderato
Adagio espressivo
Allegro agitato - Adagio come prima - Presto

Amy Beach (or Mrs. H.H.A. Beach as she appears on the score) was a musical prodigy who, against cultural norms, became one of the leading American composers of the early 20th century. She was the only child of the Cheneys – an affluent liberal and musical family in Maine. Aged four she composed four waltzes for piano in her head while staying at her grandfather's piano-less farm. Her mother taught her piano from age 6 and a year later she gave her first public recital including some of her own compositions. On moving to Boston the family resisted advice to send the 8-year old Amy to a European conservatory; instead her progress with local teachers was monitored by a group that included Henry Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes and a physician called Henry Beach whom she married aged 18 although he was 24 years her senior.

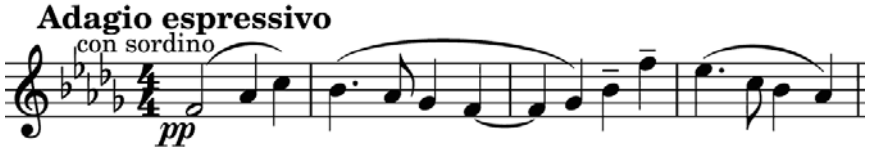
Prior to her marriage she very successfully performed numerous concertos with local orchestras including the Boston Symphony. However, Dr. Beech insisted that after her marriage she should give only one or two recitals a year. Her abundant musical energy was then, fortunately for us, diverted to composition. She spent 10 years independently studying the masters which resulted in the composition of a very substantial and varied body of work including many distinguished commissions. This particular period ended with her husband's death in 1910, and her move to Europe to develop her performing career.

Perhaps the seed for today's Piano Quintet was sown by Beach performing the Brahms Piano Quintet with the Kneisel Quartet in 1900. Beach's Quintet has a Brahmsian flavour "from the jagged chromatic melody and contrasting lyrical passages, irregular phrase lengths, its key changes and lush texture, to its strict adherence to the sonata-allegro form."

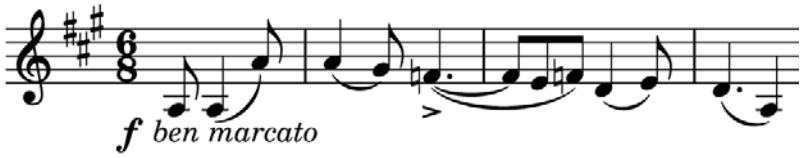
The work opens with mysterious arpeggios on the piano against a held F# on eerily thin strings, followed by a mournfully descending line. The main *Allegro moderato*'s theme (*illustrated*) is said to be derived from the second subject in the last movement of the Brahms Quintet (*illustrated*). This theme recurs in various forms throughout the work. Gentle F# octaves in the piano introduce the more optimistic *cantabile* second theme (*illustrated*); these two main ideas are beautifully contrasted and developed.



If Amy Beach had written nothing more than the following slow movement she would have won her place among my romantic greats. It opens with a gorgeously serene melody on muted strings (*illustrated*) taken up by the piano and then ingeniously inverted by the viola and cello, showing its relationship to the opening *Allegro* theme, which fuels occasional darker intrusions into the prevailing serenity.



The last movement kicks us awake with a restless motif which soon emerges full blown in the strings (*illustrated*). Its agitation gives way to quiet reflection led by the viola. Violin and piano above tremolo strings have a recitative-like exploration recalling the mood of the work's opening. Their conversation is ended by the cello starting a fugue with repeated semiquavers on the *marcato* theme, which rapidly builds to a powerful climax. The work's mysterious introduction returns. An altogether more optimistic mood now carries us to a buoyant P*resto* and a final acknowledgment of the Brahms theme played, as in the closing moments of the original, by unison strings.

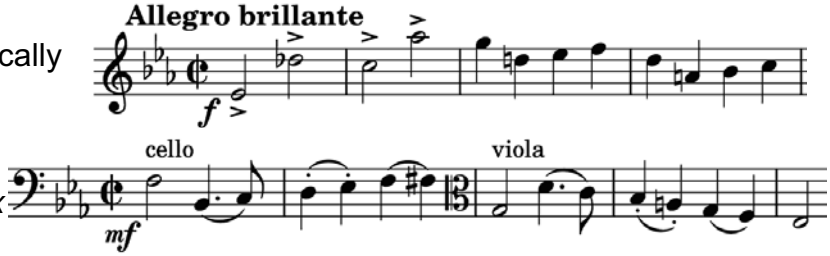


Robert Schumann (1810-1856) Piano Quintet in E flat major Op.44 (1842)
Allegro brillante
In modo d'una Marcia: Un poco largamente
Scherzo: Molto vivace
Allegro, ma non troppo

Coming after his 'Liederjahre' of 1840 and the subsequent 'Symphonic Year' of 1841, 1842 was Schumann's 'Chamber Music Year': three string quartets, today's piano quintet and the piano quartet. Such energetic creativity may have been initiated by Schumann at last winning, in July 1840, the protracted legal case in which his ex-teacher Friedrich Wieck, attempted to forbid him from marrying Wieck's daughter, the piano virtuoso Clara. They were married on 12 September 1840, the day before Clara's 21st birthday.

1842, however, did not start well for the Schumanns. Robert accompanied Clara at the start of her concert tour of North Germany, but he tired of being in her shadow, returned home to Leipzig in a state of deep melancholy, and comforted himself with beer, champagne and, unable to compose, contrapuntal exercises. Clara's father spread an unfounded and malicious rumour that the Schumanns had separated. However, in April Clara returned and Robert started a two-month study of the string quartets of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. During June and July he wrote his own three quartets. He dedicated them to his Leipzig friend and colleague Felix Mendelssohn. After an August visit to Bohemia (where the Schumanns called on Metternich), today's Piano Quintet followed in mid-October and the Piano Quartet in November.

The quintet is a particularly happy combination of Schumann's facility in writing for the piano and his new-found expertise in the string quartet. Contemporary pianos were now a match for a quartet and this work established the piano quintet at the heart of romantic chamber music. It has some similarities to Schubert's E-flat piano trio: its key, the funeral march slow movement, and the return of first-movement material in the last movement. The work is dedicated to Clara who was prevented by illness from giving the first performance. Mendelssohn stepped in, sight-read the piano part and made some suggestions for revisions to Schumann which led to the *Scherzo* gaining a (fiendish) second Trio.



The first movement opens with energetically optimistic wide leaps (*illustrated*), which contrast with the subsequent, meltingly romantic, second theme as the cello and viola exchange inverted *billets doux* (*illustrated*). This geniality is broken at the start of the development by low, heavy, slow-descending chords in the piano – a premonition of the sombre second movement where they reappear. This movement is in *Rondo* form with the death-march alternating with two contrasting episodes: the first an expansively lyrical theme, the second an *Agitato* transformation of the movement's opening.

Scales dominate the *Scherzo* which alternates with two *Trios.* The first is a gentle melody on the violin echoed in canon by the viola; the second (Mendelssohn's suggested addition) is manically agitated with some of the most daunting accidentals in romantic chamber music – many an amateur player's nemesis.

The last movement takes its heavily accented opening theme (*illustrated*) through a host of different keys, interspersing it with a wealth of other themes before turning it into a fugue which cleverly combines with the opening theme of the first movement and sends the work off to a triumphant ending.