NOTES ON THE PROGRAM by Eric Bromberger

ELIZABETH OGONEK (b. 1989)
Lightenings (2016; Festival Commission)

The New York City–raised composer Elizabeth Ogonek studied at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University, the USC Thornton School of Music in Los Angeles, and the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London. She served as the Mead Composer-in-Residence for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra from 2015 to 2018, and she's currently an associate professor of music at Cornell University. Ogonek has received commissions from many organizations, and her music has been performed by the Boston, Detroit, London, San Francisco, and Toronto symphony orchestras, among many other ensembles. In 2013, she was one of three inaugural participants in the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival's Young Composers String Quartet Project; three years later, another Festival commission led to the premiere of *Lightenings*—scored for piano, violin, clarinet, and percussion—on July 28, 2016, in Santa Fe. In a 2016 program note for the work, Ogonek wrote:

> Much of the music I have written over the last five years has explored the transference of poetic impetus to music as the basis for compositional decision-making in instrumental pieces. *Lightenings* expands upon this direction by taking an intertextual approach to music and language. A set of 12 variations based on "Lightenings"—the first part of Seamus Heaney's four-part set of poems *Squarings*—are meditations on the relationship between the annals of ordinary, everyday life and transcendence.
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> Heaney's iconic translation of *Beowulf* resulted in formal and metrical findings that greatly influenced his later poetry. Of particular importance to this project is his tetradactylic approach to versification that appears in "Lightenings." In 2003, a limited edition of *Squarings* was published alongside 48 six-inch-square line drawings by Sol LeWitt that encapsulate what Heaney described as "confident pounce and delicate shimmer. . . settings and lightenings and crossings and squarings as we've never had before."
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> Inspired by Heaney and LeWitt, my piece attempts to deal with translation across time and media by drawing on the form and content of their works, as well as on the musical tradition of variation form.

MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937)
Piano Trio in A Minor (1914)

In February 1914, Ravel went to Saint-Jean-de-Luz, a small village on the French coast near the Spanish border, to work on two projects he'd planned for some time: a piano concerto using Basque themes and a piano trio. He soon abandoned the concerto, but the first movement of the trio went well, and he completed it by the end of March. He struggled with the rest of the work, though. It took until mid-summer to get the middle movements done, and by the time he began the last movement, he had something else to worry about: World War I had broken out.

Eager to serve in the military (he would later drive an ambulance for the French army), Ravel

was nevertheless extremely agitated, particularly about the prospect of leaving his aged mother behind. To a friend, he wrote:

> If you only knew how I am suffering. From morning to night I am obsessed with one idea that tortures me. . . . If I leave my poor old mother, it will surely kill her. . . . But so as not to think of all this, I am working—yes, working with the sureness and lucidity of a madman. At the same time, I get terrible fits of depression and suddenly find myself sobbing over the sharps and flats!

Pushed on by this furious work, Ravel finished the Piano Trio in A Minor by the end of August, and it's one of his finest chamber works, filled with brilliant writing for all three performers and a range of instrumental color that's rare in a piano trio.

The first movement, *Modéré*, opens with the piano alone playing a theme of delicate rhythmic suspension. Ravel called this theme, in 8/8 time, "Basque in color." A second idea, first heard in the violin, is taken up by the other instruments, but the development section of this sonata-form movement is relatively brief. The movement comes to a close as a fragment of the first theme dissolves to the point where the piano is left quietly tapping out the rhythm in its lowest register.

Ravel called the second movement *Pantoum*, and exactly what he meant by that is an open question. (A pantoum is a form of Malay poetry in which the second and fourth lines of one stanza become the first and third of the next.) This movement is colorful—full of racing rhythms, harmonics, and left-handed pizzicatos. The center section is particularly dazzling; the strings stay in a racing 3/4 while the piano's chorale-like chords are in 4/2. At the close, the opening material returns.

The third movement, the *Passacaille*, is a passacaglia with 10 statements of the eight-bar theme. These begin quietly, become freer and louder, and gradually resume their original form as the movement comes to its quiet close. The third statement of the theme—for violin accompanied by simple chords from the piano—is ravishing.

The finale, marked *Animé*, is agitated. Whether this reflects Ravel's own agitation at the time of its composition remains an unanswerable question, but what's clear is that this movement has an energy and sweep unknown to the first three. It opens with swirling harmonic arpeggios from the violin, and this sensation of constant motion is felt throughout. The main theme, first heard in the piano, bears some rhythmic resemblance to the opening theme of the first movement, but the mood of this movement is very different. The finale is big music—not big in the sense of straining to be orchestral, but big in scope and color. Full of swirling arpeggios, trills, and tremolos, the movement flies to its searing conclusion on a stinging, high, A-major chord.

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–97)
Piano Quartet in A Major, Op. 26 (1861–62)

In 1860, 27-year-old Brahms was living in his native Hamburg, where he was trying to establish himself as a composer, but he found the conditions at his parents' house impossible and decided to look for a better place to work. He took rooms in the home of Dr. Elisabeth Rösing in the quiet suburb of Hamm, and that's where he wrote his Piano Quartet in A Major. Rösing's home had large rooms that overlooked a pleasant garden, and every Friday night, her talented circle of friends gathered informally to play music. The home was an ideal setting for the young composer, and he dedicated his warm and intimate piano quartet to his hostess.

Brahms's chamber music is often described as symphonic music masquerading as chamber music, and it must be admitted that the proportions of this piano quartet are very large. (For one thing, it's roughly 45 minutes long.) Despite its length, however, it truly is chamber music: its themes are intimate, its drama unfolds subtly, and one seldom feels that it's too large for four instruments.

Many have heard the influence of one of Brahms's favorite composers, Franz Schubert, in the lyricism, surprising harmonic shifts, and continual gentleness of the opening *Allegro non troppo*. The piano's quietly noble opening

statement dominates this first movement, although there are two subordinate theme groups. Brahms varies the standard sonata form slightly by including three variations on the main idea in the center of the development, and the movement concludes on a powerful restatement of the main theme.

We don't normally think of Brahms as a composer who was much concerned with instrumental color, but the shimmering beginning of the *Poco adagio* is one of the most striking moments in any of his works. He gives the lyric main idea to the piano but mutes the strings and has them anticipate the piano's theme by one beat. This ghostly anticipation clashes gently with the piano's theme, and the effect is both strange and lovely. The second subject explodes out of the piano, and the strings soar through the development, retaking their mutes for the movement's final measures.

The third movement is titled *Scherzo*, but this isn't a Beethovenian scherzo that's full of fierce accents and drama. Instead, the main idea flows smoothly, almost lyrically here. Brahms keeps this movement in strict form, and the trio section is a tightly argued canon, with the three stringed instruments following the piano by exactly one measure before the da capo repeat.

The rondo-finale, marked *Allegro*, shows Brahms's love of Romani music, with the dancing main theme swirling to life in the first measures. The rondo theme makes six different appearances, and Brahms sets them off with contrasting episodes of a quiet and somewhat heavier nature. At the end, the Romani theme returns to drive this music to its thunderous final bars.

ERIC BROMBERGER earned his doctorate in American literature at UCLA and for 10 years taught literature and writing courses at Bates College and San Diego State University. Then he quit teaching to devote himself to his first love, music. Bromberger, a violinist, writes program notes for the San Diego Symphony, the La Jolla Music Society, San Francisco Performances, the University of Chicago Presents, Washington Performing Arts at The Kennedy Center, and many other organizations. He was a pre-concert lecturer for the Los Angeles Philharmonic for more than 20 seasons.