

**West Cork Chamber Music Festival 2021**  
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**Bantry and Beyond**

*The Romantics*

**8. Cello Series (3)**

Filmed at the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam

**Johannes Moser** [cello]

**Paul Rivinius** [piano]

**Zemlinsky**

*Cello Sonata*

**Fanny Mendelssohn**

*Capriccio in A flat*

**Brahms**

*Cello Sonata No.1 in E minor Op.38*

**Alexander Zemlinsky** [1871-1942]**Cello Sonata in A minor** [1894]1. *Mit Leidenschaft: Allegro*2. *Andante*3. *Allegretto*

Alexander Zemlinsky's family is a wonderful example of the diversity of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His father's family were Viennese Catholics. His mother's parents were from Sarajevo; Sephardic Jews on the father's side and Muslim on the mother's. Zemlinsky himself converted to Protestantism. Showing musical talent from an early age, Zemlinsky graduated from the Vienna conservatory in 1892. He then embarked on a career as a conductor, composer and teacher. He became the tutor of some of the most promising musicians in Vienna such as Berg, Korngold, Schindler, Schoenberg and Webern.

Schoenberg and Zemlinsky became close friends. Zemlinsky's sister married Schoenberg and Zemlinsky conducted the first performance of Schoenberg's *Erwartung* in Prague in 1924. However, Zemlinsky never used formal atonal techniques in his own music. As he pointed out in a letter to Schoenberg in 1902, "*A great artist, who possesses everything needed to express the essentials, must respect the boundaries of beauty.*"

Zemlinsky fell out with Schoenberg partly because of their differences over atonalism. Later they were reconciled in the United States. Decades before this, Brahms had been a supporter of Zemlinsky's early work, although he did think some of Zemlinsky's harmonies were too bold. Not completely satisfying either Brahms or Schoenberg defines Zemlinsky's liminal status in the early years of modernism.

Zemlinsky held important conducting positions in opera houses in Vienna, Prague and Berlin where he championed modern music; conducting Mahler, Schoenberg and Berg. His own compositions were largely orchestral pieces and operas. As for chamber music, he did compose string quartets throughout his career but much of his other chamber works appear to have been lost particularly those which were composed in 1890s.

This cello sonata was first performed in the Vienna Tonkünstlerverein in April 1894. It was dedicated to the famous cellist of the day Friederick Buxbaum who gave the first performance. Thereafter the score was believed to have been lost. In fact it was in the keeping of the Buxbaum family who gave a copy to Fritz Spiegel who, in turn, showed it to the pianist Peter Wallfisch. This copy was in a bad condition and the score was restored by the Zemlinsky scholar, Antony Baumont. The sonata has now gained an established place in the late nineteenth century cello repertoire.

This is a large scale ambitious work with the first two movements situated in the minor key. Many commentators have pointed out the influence of Brahms. However in many way it is more interesting to note the aspects of the sonata that are not Brahmsian. This is a young man's music; passionate and declarative. There is sadness and regret particularly in the first movement's second subject and in the beautiful delicate coda to the slow movement.

However these are not wistful passages of late Brahmsian nostalgia. Towards the end of the first movement, there is some extraordinary harmonic writing, which reveals a *fin de siècle* world of turmoil even violence. If anything, some of this music looks forward to Mahler rather than backwards to Brahms.

The opening Allegro is in sonata form. It is marked "*Mit Leidenschaft*" or with passion. Zemlinsky produces an extraordinary movement combining passion, turmoil and wistful lyricism particularly in the more peaceful second subject. Quiet linking passages provide a further contrast before the movement ends with a magnificent, if convulsive, coda.

The Andante provides some consolations in its broad lyrical themes. However a sense of unease persists particularly in the turbulent middle section. A calmer passage follows which leads to an almost serene conclusion. The sonata concludes with a bustling rondo which is full of humour and charm but the passion and turmoil of earlier movements are not entirely forgotten. In the final bars of this amazing work, Zemlinsky provides a gentle acceptance of peace.

*David Winter*

**Fanny Mendelssohn** [1805-1847]

***Capriccio in A flat*** [1829]

*'What you wrote to me about your musical occupations with reference to and in comparison with Felix was both rightly thought and expressed. Music will perhaps become his profession, whilst for you it can and must only be an ornament, never the root of your being and doing.'*  
Abraham Mendelssohn

We can be thankful indeed that Fanny didn't take her father too literally. While his strict attitudes certainly kept her back – and indeed we can only imagine what her output might have been had he been less strict in his notions of correct feminine behaviour – Fanny's need to compose won out against her filial obedience. While she struggled with tempering her artistic expressiveness with the societal injunctions and class expectations laid upon her, she nevertheless was one of the most prolific female composers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, with an estimated 460 compositions. The recent rediscovery of her music and the credit now being given to her for her contribution to the post-Classical Mendelssohnian style are no more than are due an extraordinarily brilliant woman.

Well-educated and sophisticated, Fanny was academically brilliant – multi-lingual, well-read in the humanities and of course a musical genius. Visitors to her parents' home for the 'Sunday Musicales' commented that her performances were more mature than those of her more famous brother, Felix. Felix himself, although not quite liberal enough to encourage her to publish herself, valued her input in his own compositions and the two were very close. Music and composition were certainly a part of her being and doing.

It's amusing to speculate how Abraham Mendelssohn would have reacted to Fanny's *Capriccio*. This is a piece overflowing with emotional energy – from tenderness to tumultuousness – and the agitation and vigour in the middle section does not sound very 'ladylike.' She draws us in from the beginning with a delightful and intriguing melody. The piece is a work of true artistry for the cello, finely balanced by the piano accompaniment.

*Capriccio* was composed in 1829. Wilhelm Hensel, the painter whom she would marry later that year, had returned to Berlin a few months previously, after an absence of five years, during which Fanny's parents had forbidden them writing to each other. It isn't difficult to imagine the emotional agitation that Fanny must have felt at that time. Despite such a prolonged interruption to their courtship, they both wanted to marry, which says a great deal about the happiness they must have felt at their reunion – but five years is a long time and it's safe to assume there were nerves as well. Moreover, Fanny was part of a close-knit group of friends and after five years of separation, Wilhelm was understandably jealous of some of the men in the Mendelssohn circle of friends. He found it difficult to enter into such a close circle of musical people (he himself was without musical talent) and there was a certain amount of tension. Between trying to once again get to know her fiancée, planning her wedding (and dealing with her mother's interference) and her brother Felix being away, the end of 1828-29 must have had its emotional ups and downs. But like any great composer, her music is the beneficiary, and in *Capriccio* we are given the soaring cello lines of one of the great Romantic composers.

*Helen Dawson*

## Johannes Brahms [1833-1897]

### ***Sonata No.1 for Cello and Piano in E minor Op.38*** [1862-5]

1. *Allegro non troppo*
2. *Allegro quasi minuetto*
3. *Allegro*

It is strange that the first duo sonata that Brahms wrote should be for cello and piano rather than the more popular combination of violin and piano, especially when he was such a close friend with the leading violinist of the age, Joseph Joachim. However many of his contemporaries had followed Beethoven's example in writing for cello and, in particular, a cello sonata in E minor by a respected Hamburg composer Bernhard Romberg seems to have been his starting point.

Most commentators feel that Brahms wrote his two magnificent string sextets as a way of escaping the prospect of writing a string quartet, just as he waited until he was forty two before writing his First Symphony. He probably found the cello sonata a less daunting challenge and he was able to repay a favour by dedicating it to the amateur cellist Josef Gansbacher. He had also just completed the Second String Sextet with its cello-rich score so he was clearly bursting with more ideas for the instrument. He solved the Beethoven problem by going back to Bach's Art of Fugue for his inspiration. The work took three years to write and on the way it lost the Adagio out of its original four movements. So the work

we know today is in an oddly proportioned three-movement form: a very large moderately paced first movement followed by a dance-scherzo in the manner of a minuet concluding with a vigorous but severely worked fugue. The missing Adagio found its way into the F major Sonata twenty years later.

One of the most striking features of this work is his concentration on the lower registers of the instrument. This gives a rich brooding quality to the music, enhancing the darkness of the key of E minor. The opening melody starts down on the cello's C string to a gentle accompaniment of off-beat piano chords. This grave and dignified theme leads immediately to a more lyrical voice full of yearning. Before the second subject appears the theme is restated in C major, its darkness momentarily banished, only to be followed by the even more passionate second theme, now in B minor. The movement ends calmly with music of restrained, dark beauty. The *Allegretto* is delicate and wryly ironic with a deliciously hesitant *Trio* wreathed in a haunting romantic tracery. The Finale is a fugal homage to the spirit of Bach, where the piano is very much the dominant partner with the cello sometimes striving to make himself heard. Nevertheless the energy of this movement is irresistible as Brahms celebrates his contrapuntal command.

*Francis Humphrys*