

atlanta  chamber players

Music-Making in WWII

Ahavath Achim Synagogue

March 6, 2016

3pm



Notes on the Program

Bohuslav Jan MARTINŮ

Polička (Bohemia, now Czech Republic), December 8, 1890

**—Liesel (Switzerland) August 28, 1959 (reburied Polička,
August 27, 1979)**

Trio for Flute, Cello, & Piano, H.300

Martinů was one of the most prolific composers of our time. Among his nearly 400 compositions are 3 piano trios, 7 string quartets, 3 piano quintets and a piano quartet, as well as many other serenades, sonatas, and wind music—in all, some 75 chamber works—in addition to 6 symphonies, 12 ballets, 16 operas, and other major orchestral and choral compositions. Given the circumstances of his life, such evidence of creativity is nothing short of remarkable.

He began violin studies at the age of 7, and by age 10 had begun to compose; his first little work for string quartet was written in 1900. In 1906, Martinů entered the Prague Conservatory, not in composition but in violin performance. His heart was not in his studies and, after a period of probation (and a disastrous decision to study organ performance), Martinů was dismissed in June 1910 for “incorrigible neglect.” He taught privately in Prague during the years of World War I, following which he briefly reentered the Conservatory, with an identical result.

From 1919-1923, he played violin the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra to earn a living and studied composition on his own. He finally moved to Paris in 1923, where he applied himself with somewhat more discipline to work with Albert Roussel. With Roussel’s encouragement, Martinů’s work began to be successfully introduced to Parisian audiences, and the period 1923-1940, though precarious financially, was rewarding artistically. In 1940, as a Czech national living in occupied Paris, he was blacklisted by the Nazis. He and his wife, Charlotte, fled to Aix-en-Provence (in Vichy France), and spent

over a year frantically trying to arrange passage to the United States; they arrived in New York via Madrid and Portugal in March 1941. He lived in the United States until 1953. During this period, he taught at the Mannes College of Music, Yale University, Princeton University, and at Tanglewood (the Berkshire Music Center). In 1953, he moved to Nice, then to Rome in 1956, and died in Switzerland in 1959.

Unlike many artists and intellectuals of the wartime period, Martinů was successful in escaping the reach of the Nazis. At this remove, it is impossible to speculate what might have happened had he decided to remain (or had he been forced by circumstances to remain) in Europe during the war. He was not Jewish; probably his life would not have been imperiled on that basis. However, as a Czech, his livelihood was certainly threatened. Being blacklisted and forbidden to earn a living would have meant almost certain personal and artistic disaster.

Martinů was born half a century after fellow Czech composer Antonín Dvořák. At the time he was developing his own style, the great tide of nationalism had passed and, unlike Dvořák, he did not deliberately incorporate Slavic elements into his work, which as a whole is Neoclassic. He was a skilled and colorful orchestrator and a master of counterpoint. The *Trio for Flute, Cello, and Piano*, dedicated to flutist René LeRoy, was composed while on retreat in Connecticut in 1944, during Martinů's wartime exile in America. The first movement is kinetic and vivacious. The central movement is infused with warm lyricism. The solo flute introduction to the finale is gently introspective, and prolongs the mood from the close of the second movement. The finale itself, marked "scherzando" ("playful") returns to the jaunty high spirits of the opening. American composer and critic Virgil Thomson wrote of this piece "It is a gem of bright sound and cheerful sentiment."

Gideon KLEIN

Prerov, Czechoslovakia (now Czech Republic), December 6,
1919—near Auschwitz, Poland, January 27, 1945

String Trio

Klein was born into a Jewish Moravian family and evinced strong musical talent at an early age. He first studied piano, and then beginning in 1939, composition at the Prague Conservatory with Alois Hába, a proponent of advanced and somewhat avant garde techniques. Hába's 1931 opera *Matka* was written in quarter-tones; Klein's *Duo for Violin and Viola* (1940), clearly influenced by his teacher, also uses quarter-tones. Other early works consist primarily of chamber music for string quartet, a divertimento for winds, and songs.

The Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia in March 1939, and all universities were closed that November. The Conservatory was finally closed in 1941. As a Czech national, Hába's work was banned (he resumed composing and teaching after the war and died in 1973); as a Jew, Klein was shipped to the concentration camp at Terezin (Theresienstadt), in northern Czechoslovakia, that December. This camp was promoted by the Nazis for propaganda purposes as a "model Jewish settlement" in which various artistic pursuits were not only tolerated but encouraged. Though Terezin was billed as a "model," it was merely a Potemkin village "front" for the Nazis' general mistreatment of Jews and minorities. Though allowed various artistic activities, everyday life was harsh for the prisoners, many of whom died from malnutrition and exposure. The "model camp" was presented to an approving Red Cross during a visit in August 1944, during which Verdi's *Requiem* was performed by camp inmates. Afterward, the Nazis ruthlessly liquidated nearly 20,000 prisoners. Sent to Auschwitz in southern Poland in October 1944 were, among others, Pavel Haas, a student of Janáček, and Viktor Ullmann, a pupil of Schoenberg, both of whom perished in the gas chambers. Klein was among those transported, but was not killed at that time. He died outside Auschwitz less than two months after his 25th birthday as the

Soviet Army was close to liberating the area, and it is unclear whether his death occurred at the hands of the fleeing Nazis or due to the rigors of being forced on a march to accompany them.

Klein produced most of the works on which his reputation rests today during his imprisonment at the Theresienstadt camp. They are relatively small pieces—some songs, a piano sonata, various works for strings (a quartet, trio, and partita). He entrusted manuscripts of his music to a young woman named Irma Semtzka at the Terezin camp with the request to hand them to his older sister Eliska Kleinova, should Eliska survive the war. Amazingly, both Irma (who remained at the camp until it was liberated) and Eliska (who survived Auschwitz) were able to meet in Prague after the war; Eliska arranged a public concert of her brother's work on June 6, 1946.

The *String Trio* on this concert is very likely the last work Klein completed, probably in September 1944 before he was sent to Auschwitz. The first movement, a vivacious allegro, is the shortest. It is characterized at the outset by a compelling rhythmic verve, which eventually subsides and the movement ends quietly. The central movement, “variations on a Moravian song,” is comprised of several brief but related sections. The third movement is again marked by an aggressive, almost marchlike character, and unlike the first movement, the rhythmic drive is sustained throughout and comes to a decisive close. Although various commentators note that Klein's “mature style” (such as it was, formed under the rigors of camp life) reflects influences of both Janáček (a fellow Czech composer) and Schoenberg, the outer movements of this trio might be said to sound more like Bartók; the central movement is highly expressionistic—the music of Alban Berg comes to mind.

Ernst Von (Ernő) DOHNÁNYI
Pozsony, Hungary (today Bratislava, Slovakia), July 27,
1877—New York City, February 9, 1960

Piano Quintet No.1 in C Minor, Opus 1

Dohnányi is considered one of the most important Hungarian composers of the twentieth century and, with Béla Bartók, Leoš Janáček, and Zoltán Kodály, an architect of contemporary Central European music in general. He was introduced to music at an early age through the efforts of his father, himself an accomplished amateur cellist, and his church organist. He was the first Hungarian of recognized talent to attend the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, where he studied piano and composition. His example inspired a young friend, Bartók, to do the same.

Dohnányi graduated from the academy in 1896. Two years later, with the personal sponsorship and under the baton of the great Hans Richter, Dohnányi gained fame as a virtuoso pianist with an October 1898 London performance of Beethoven's fourth piano concerto at Queen's Hall. He repeated his triumph with the St. Louis Symphony on his first American tour a year later. (In later life as a respected professor of piano, his pupils would include Georg Solti and Geza Anda.) A composer of no less stature than Brahms had praised Dohnányi's 1895 piano quintet (the composer's "official" opus 1, heard on today's program), and arranged the Vienna premiere of the quintet himself. Dohnányi's first piano concerto, his opus 5, received a major international prize in 1899, and by the turn of the new century (at the advanced age of 23), Dohnányi was firmly established as the greatest and most influential Hungarian composer and pianist since Franz Liszt.

Except for a ten-year teaching stint at the Berlin Hochschule (1905-1915), Dohnányi spent his entire middle life active in his native Hungary. He was director of the Budapest Academy from 1934-1941, when he resigned rather than carry out the requirement to dismiss all Jewish faculty. As conductor of the

Budapest Philharmonic since 1920 (where he championed the work of Bartók, Kodály, and other progressive composers), he managed to shield the Jewish members of the orchestra from persecution until May 1944, when he disbanded the entire ensemble rather than be forced to dismiss his Jewish musicians. (Politically, Hungary was initially a member of the Axis powers of World War II and supported the anti-Semitic policies of Adolf Hitler. Late in the war, however, Hungary began armistice negotiations with the United States and Britain. In response, the Nazis physically occupied Budapest in March 1944.) In addition to many musicians and educators whom his actions may have spared from persecution, Dohnányi's personal intervention and assistance to a number of individual Jewish artists has been recognized, arranging for travel permissions and citizenship renewals so that some Jews were able to leave the country.

Dohnányi fled to Austria in November 1944 in anticipation of the fascist collapse and in advance of the eventual Communist takeover, and finally, in 1949, accepted the post of composer-in-residence at Florida State University in Tallahassee, where he spent the remainder of his career.

Dohnányi's music has been damned with faint praise by some commentators: it "poses no problems" for the listener and "provides a vital link to the nineteenth century." Though Dohnányi lived well into the twentieth century, his music is conservative and strongly romantic and makes little effort to exploit either the nationalistic folk idioms favored by Bartók and Kodály or newer techniques introduced by Schoenberg, Berg, and other modernists.

The first movement has been characterized as one of "rugged passion," characterized by aggressive writing and complex textures. Dohnányi was of course a virtuoso pianist, but the string treatment displays undoubted technical mastery. The scherzo is marked by constant syncopation. The central section of the scherzo as well as the slow movement seem most conventionally turn-of-the-century Viennese. The finale is in form an energetic rondo, with episodes alternating between 5/4

and 6/4 meter markings. The main idea is clearly Hungarian, its ethnic roots emphasized by the irregular meters. The coda of this movement is really the finale of the entire quintet, as it features a reprise of the opening of the first movement.

It has been noted that the “feeling” of the quintet seems to belong to a much older and wiser composer. The piece is clearly influenced by Brahms, but it is in no way derivative; the astonishingly mature voice is the composer’s own. It is more chromatic than Brahms would have dared, and the alternating meters of the Hungarian-flavored finale are inspired. The “cyclic” treatment (bringing back the primary idea of the first movement to close the complete work) is something Brahms would never have considered. It was first performed in Budapest on June 16, 1895.

— Notes by Edmund Trafford