

# March 2024

by Derek Katz

## Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) *Verklärte Nacht*, Op. 4 (1899)

It is unlikely that the name Arnold Schoenberg will cause any anxiety for notoriously open-minded and adventurous Camerata Pacifica audiences 150 years after his birth, but, just in case, the string sextet *Verklärte Nacht* (Transfigured Night) is a lush early work, composed when Schoenberg was still engaging directly with the musical languages of the Romantic era. Not only is 2024 a Schoenberg anniversary year, but it is also 125 years after the composition of *Verklärte Nacht*. Schoenberg claimed to have written the substantial piece within three weeks near the end of 1899, and the work certainly sounds as if it were composed in a passionate white heat. For such a gorgeous piece, *Verklärte Nacht* was initially received surprisingly inhospitably. The Vienna new music society to whom Schoenberg first submitted the work declined to perform it, with one society member reportedly declaring that the piece “sounded as if someone had smeared the score of [Wagner’s] *Tristan* while it was still damp.” The first performance, in 1902, apparently was greeted with a mixed response including hissing and booing.

*Verklärte Nacht* is a single-movement work of about half an hour, inspired by a poem by Richard Dehmel. This unusual combination of chamber music with programmatic content was intended by Schoenberg to reconcile the practices of Johannes Brahms and Richard Wagner. In Vienna in 1899, Brahms (only dead for two years) was still regarded as a conservative Classicist, in contrast to the notionally progressive school of Franz Liszt and Wagner. Schoenberg felt that this was a false dichotomy (a famous late essay is titled “Brahms the Progressive”) and claimed inspiration from both camps. Chamber music was a genre dominated by Brahms in the German-speaking world at the time, and *Verklärte Nacht* does display the kind of motivic development that Schoenberg learned from Brahms. However, it also makes use of the rich and flexible harmonic language typical of Wagner, and, as a single movement in multiple tempos and characters that tells a story, it also resembles a tone poem, of the sort composed for orchestra by Liszt and by Richard Strauss.

Dehmel’s poem is about an unnamed woman and man walking through the woods at night. The woman tells the man that she is carrying a child conceived with a man that she does not love. The man answers that the warmth between them will transform the child into their own and make him into a child himself. Schoenberg was attracted to the poem by its focus on nature, and its separation of love and sex from bourgeois convention. In a program note about *Verklärte Nacht* written near the end of his life, Schoenberg suggested that there were different ways to think about the relationship between Dehmel’s poem and his composition. It is perfectly possible to enjoy it as “pure” music, with no knowledge of the poem, or more generally to hear it as being about nature and human feelings. He also provided a series of musical examples and identified which portion of the poem each corresponded to.

The piece falls into two halves, the first concerning the woman’s statement, and the second illustrating the man’s response. The hushed, still opening depicts the cold moonlight and the walking couple. This section eventually dissolves, and, after a pause, a muted cello plays a new theme “with painful expression,” against tremolos in the second violin and viola. This represents the woman’s unhappiness. The following section, which becomes increasingly agitated and declamatory, conveys the woman’s explanation of her situation, and her fears about the man’s reaction. The only respite is a brief, calm passage in the major mode, expressing the consolations of motherhood. After reaching an intense highpoint, this section also subsides into silence. A few very quiet chords prepare for the second half, which bursts into a clear and unexpected D major. A quartet of violas and cellos, with the first cello playing the melody, provides a warm, rich sonority for the man’s response. This is followed by a magical passage in which muted harmonics and whispering scales depict the beauty of the moonlight, and by a sort of love duet in which the first violin and first cello trade four-note figures. The section continues with a series of lyrical new themes, the most ecstatic of which represents the man’s acceptance of the child. The piece ends very softly, with the “bare, cold wood” of the opening transfigured into a “high, bright night.”

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Last April, Camerata Pacifica presented Arvo Pärt's *Partita* for solo piano. That was an early student work, written in a spiky, neo-Baroque style and openly criticized by the Soviet Union of Composers. The work on this program, however, *Spiegel im Spiegel* (Mirror in the Mirror), was composed in 1978, 20 years after the *Partita*, and is in the calm, meditative style that made Pärt an international celebrity. Starting in the late 1960s, Pärt retreated from composition, instead studying Medieval and Renaissance music, including Gregorian chant and early church polyphony. Pärt also joined the Orthodox Church in 1972. After this, Pärt developed a new musical style that reflected both his religious beliefs and his immersion in early music. These works are slow and spare, generally built from major chords and scalar melodies. Pärt calls this style "tintinnabuli," after the Latin word for "bell." These works are constructed using strict and consistent rules, but the basic principle is that a "melodic" line is combined with a "bell" line. The "melodic" line usually moves by step, and the "bell" line generally articulates a major triad.

*Spiegel im Spiegel* suggests the infinite recursion that can occur when one mirror is reflected in another. Here, the violin plays the "melodic" line, slowly moving up and down a scale, but always circling back to the pitch A, which, as Pärt puts it, is like "returning home after being away."

This going away and returning also suggests motion reflected in a mirror. Pärt calls the piano part a "guardian angel," accompanying the violin with a constant flow of arpeggios in the right hand, with "bell" notes ringing out from above and below in turn. According to Pärt, this style represents an "economy of expression," in which the "melodic" voice "always signifies the subjective world, the daily egoistic life of sin and suffering," and the "bell" voice "is the objective realm of forgiveness." The "melodic" voice "may appear to wander, but it is always held firmly by the "bell" voice."

There are many versions of *Spiegel im Spiegel*, with the violin replaced by viola, cello or other instruments ranging from fluegelhorn to bassoon. The piece has also been used in many movies and television shows, including films by Jean-Luc Godard, Mike Nichols and Gus Van Sant as well as more recent appearances in *The Good Place* and *Ted Lasso*.

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## **Verklärte Nacht** **Richard Dehmel**

*Two people walk through a bare, cold wood;  
the Moon keeps pace, drawing their gaze.  
The Moon moves above tall oak trees,  
no wisp of cloud dims the radiance  
into which the black, jagged tips reach.  
A woman's voice speaks:*

*I am carrying a child, and not by you.  
I walk in sin beside you.  
I have grievously erred against myself.  
I despaired of happiness,  
and yet still had a deep longing  
for life's fullness, for a mother's joys  
and duties; and so I dared,  
I yielded, shuddering, my sex  
to the embrace of a stranger,  
and even thought myself blessed.  
Now life has taken its revenge,  
and I have met you, met you.*

*She walks with awkward steps.  
She looks up; the Moon keeps pace.  
Her dark gaze drowns in light.  
A man's voice speaks:*

*"Do not let the child you have conceived  
be a burden on your soul.  
Look, how brightly the universe shines!  
Splendour falls on everything around,  
you are voyaging with me on a cold sea,  
but there is the glow of an inner warmth  
from you in me, from me in you.  
That warmth will transfigure the stranger's child,  
and you bear it for me, begot by me.  
You have transfused me with splendour,  
you have made a child of me."*

*He puts an arm about her strong hips.  
Their breath embraces in the air.  
Two people walk through the high, bright night.*

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## Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Quintet in F Minor for Piano and Strings, Op. 34 (1862-64)

Camerata Pacifica audiences have recently been treated to performances of almost all of the chamber works with clarinet by Johannes Brahms, composed at the very end of his career. The present Piano Quintet, while not exactly an early work – Brahms turned 30 during the revisions of the piece – does come from a very different stage of the composer’s career. The later 1850s were a time of study and reflection for Brahms. He largely stepped back from public performance as a pianist, and, somewhat like Pärt a little over a century later, composed relatively little, instead concentrating on studying counterpoint, early music and folksong. At the time that Brahms began the Piano Quintet in 1862, he was still hoping to establish himself professionally in Hamburg, and had not yet travelled to Vienna, the city that would be his base for the rest of his life. The quintet is part of what some scholars refer to as Brahms’s “first maturity,” forming part of a very productive period, especially for chamber music, piano music and vocal music.

Brahms was strikingly uncertain about which performing forces would be most appropriate for this piece. His first attempt, composed in 1862, was for a string quintet of two violins, viola and two cellos (possibly inspired by the Schubert quintet for the same combination). This version is now lost, but we know that Brahms showed it to his friend Joseph Joachim. Joachim, the great violinist of his time, was Brahms’s consultant, collaborator and first performer for nearly all of Brahms’s chamber and solo music with violin. Joachim was very critical, especially of the work’s textures, writing to Brahms that he found them “sometimes impotently weak and thin, sometimes too thick. I hope you will remove some harshness and lighten up the color scheme here and there.” Unlike the many earlier composers who were experienced string players as well as accomplished keyboard artists (Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn), Brahms did not know the string literature from the inside, and it is likely that this iteration was not scored idiomatically. Brahms responded to Joachim’s criticisms not by adjusting the string writing, but by cutting the stringed instruments out altogether and reworking the piece as a sonata for two pianos. This time, he turned for advice to his

other close friend and musical confidant, Clara Schumann, who was even more distinguished as a pianist than Joachim was as a violinist. Alas, Brahms once again failed to get a favorable reaction. Clara found that the sonata felt like a transcription, and suggested that Brahms orchestrate it, writing that “it is a work whose ideas you could and should lavish on an entire orchestra, as if from a horn of plenty! A whole host of the finest ideas go for nothing on the piano.” Brahms did publish and perform the two-piano version, but he responded to Clara’s judgment by creating a third version, albeit for piano and strings rather than for full orchestra. This final version for piano quintet, with the exception of some minor revisions, is essentially the first piano part of the two-piano sonata combined with a transcription of the second piano part for string quartet. This version was immediately successful. The conductor Hermann Levi wrote of it in 1864, “anyone who did not know it under its earlier guises as a string quintet and sonata will not believe that it was conceived and written for other instruments. Not a single note gives me the impression of an arrangement, all the musical ideas have a much more succinct color; the monochromaticism of the two pianos has been transformed into a paragon of tonal beauty.”

The Piano Quintet both displays the kind of motivic development that Schoenberg found so fundamental to his own compositional language (and that is so audible in *Verklärte Nacht*) and also presents a rich array of colorful and contrasting material. A good example comes at the very beginning of the piece as violin, cello and piano present an expansive idea that quickly slows to a halt. The mood is immediately broken in a cascade of arpeggiated figures from the piano against block chords from the full string quartet. This is an exciting contrast, but the piano figures are also a double-time transformation of the opening phrase. The continuation of the movement is more a series of themes than the development of a single idea, but all of the themes are linked by rhythmic and melodic features.

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After a powerful reworking of the opening passage for the full ensemble, there is a more wistful melody shared between first violin and viola, a quieter section over rumbling triplets in the piano left hand, an enigmatic little duet for viola and cello, a more passionate exchange between first violin and cello, and, finally, a placid, major mode conclusion to the exposition. All of this material is attractive and compelling, but it is a constant flow of new ideas, rather than the dynamic opposition of two themes expected in a first movement from this time period.

The slow movement is much gentler than its stormy predecessor, with outer sections containing a long melody (first in the piano) built from repeated rocking figures surrounding a more extroverted middle section that features an expressive melody for the unusual combination of second violin and viola playing in unison (Brahms had originally scored this melody for the cello, in the same register). Like the first movement, the Scherzo is bursting with contrasting ideas. There are also some points of similarity with the Scherzo from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (in the same key). Both movements begin with quiet, mysterious rising arpeggios, rise to climaxes with pounding repeated triplets, and both have extended contrapuntal passages. It is easy to agree with Clara Schumann and imagine some of the grand moments in this movement expanded into a full symphonic texture. The Brahms movement starts with a sort of click track of plucked open C strings from the cello, a pulse that the rest of the ensemble seems determined to subvert, or, at least that it refuses to conform to.

A new rhythm is introduced by the first violin and viola, and then we have one of the majestic, potentially orchestral passages. Brahms continues to alternate and combine these elements, eventually adding a fugal section based on the second idea, a most unusual feature for a scherzo. The Trio in the middle of the movement is noble, lush and lyrical, with the cello keeping time on the C string again. The Scherzo ends with enormous rhythmic energy, but also with a sense of anticipation.

The finale opens with a mysterious slow introduction, in which the instruments slowly and softly take turns joining in. The eventual faster theme in the cello is ambiguous in character, not quite fast enough for a perky rondo, somewhat Hungarian in color, but not overtly so. Finding an appropriate character for final movements was a problem for Brahms, but here he creates a thrilling conclusion by increasing the tempo for a final section. He uses the same kind of rhythmic uncertainty that marked the scherzo to build energy that is released with a final flourish in the strings.