Dear listeners,

As I sit here writing this program note, thinking ahead to the way we'll all be listening to this program distanced from one another, I can't help but think back on the way in which Classical music, too, has often been framed in my lifetime by a kind of distancing: a distancing between performers, audiences, and the works we all listen to and love.

At the heart of this distancing is a museum culture that I feel we are happily moving away from. The Goldberg Variations, the late Beethoven Quartets, Stravinsky's Rite of Spring: these are works we have been taught, by this distance, to "attempt," rather than to fearlessly perform. We attempt these works like we would an Everest, forgetting that each work is in itself is an attempt on the part of the composer, a reaching out, an utterance whose original creative urgency stemmed not from its ensconcement in a pantheon of revered artifacts, but from having been written in a specific time, for a specific audience, with a specific attitude, and in dialogue with specific predecessors.

Within our ensemble, we attempt to bring this awareness of each work's connectedness to a specific time, people, place and history to our programming. During this pandemic, many of these great composers have come to seem less like distant masters to us and more like close friends. Their works brighten our days and lend perspective on hardships, and we find ourselves made acutely aware of extramusical details that before may have seemed irrelevant, but that feel newly poignant and special to us in this time.

We are reminded, for instance, that Haydn wrote three of his last, most glorious trios, one of which we'll perform tonight, out of a spirit of friendship, dedicating the works to his fellow London expatriate and brilliant pianist Theresa Jansen Bartolozzi. Suddenly, in light of our own disconnection from family and friends, we are aware of all that friendship might have meant to Haydn, isolated from his home country, yet able to find in this connection with Theresa Jansen a way to converse with a kindred spirit, both musically and -- quite literally -- in his native tongue.

We are reminded, equally, that Fauré composed his single, autumnal and inward-looking Trio in D Minor during a period of deep isolation, set off by increasing fragility and deafness at the end of his life. We hear this journey inward in the trio's wayward, meandering phrase structure, in its muted tonal palette, and even in its dynamics. (Fauré makes frequent use of the rather unspecific ***mezzo piano*** that seems to imply something both a little closer and more intimate than ***piano*** to our ears, but also vaguer: perhaps a choice that almost tries to simulate more the closeness of imagining music inside our own heads than listening externally). Yet we also hear in Fauré's music the rare flower of his breathtaking late harmonic language, the kind of beauty that can only develop in isolation: beauty for its own sake, and most of all we hear in it the hope and fire of someone at the end of his life who is nonetheless still fully possessed of both the will to live and the will to feel deeply.

Finally, in another Trio in D Minor written by a much younger Robert Schumann, we are struck by a different sort of escape from circumstances, through the realm of fantasy. Schumann --

himself both a creative writer and critic -- was obsessed from a young age with the writings of the capricious and experimental Jean Paul Friedrich Richter ("Jean Paul"), and later with the fairy tales and eccentric characters of younger writer E.T.A. Hoffmann. Both Richter's mercurial changes of style and Hoffmann's varied and fanciful casts of characters were a source of constant inspiration for Schumann, most explicitly in his long cycles of character pieces for solo piano and in the short sets of chamber pieces entitled "Fairy Tales." Yet even in Schumann's longer form works such as the D Minor Trio, we are struck, not by the kind of deliberateness and strength of expression we would attribute to a work of Beethoven or Brahms, but rather by that same mercuriality. The Trio's most memorable moments are its sudden, unexpected juxtapositions, its turns on a dime and its quick transitions from one character to the next. For this reason, we have felt especially indebted to Schumann in these recent months, both for his ability to inhabit these characters so fully -- to give voice to these powerful emotions of pain and despair -- but also for his ability to juxtapose these emotions with joy and levity and to summon a whole cast of characters to fill the rehearsal room and brighten our days.

*-- Lee Dionne*