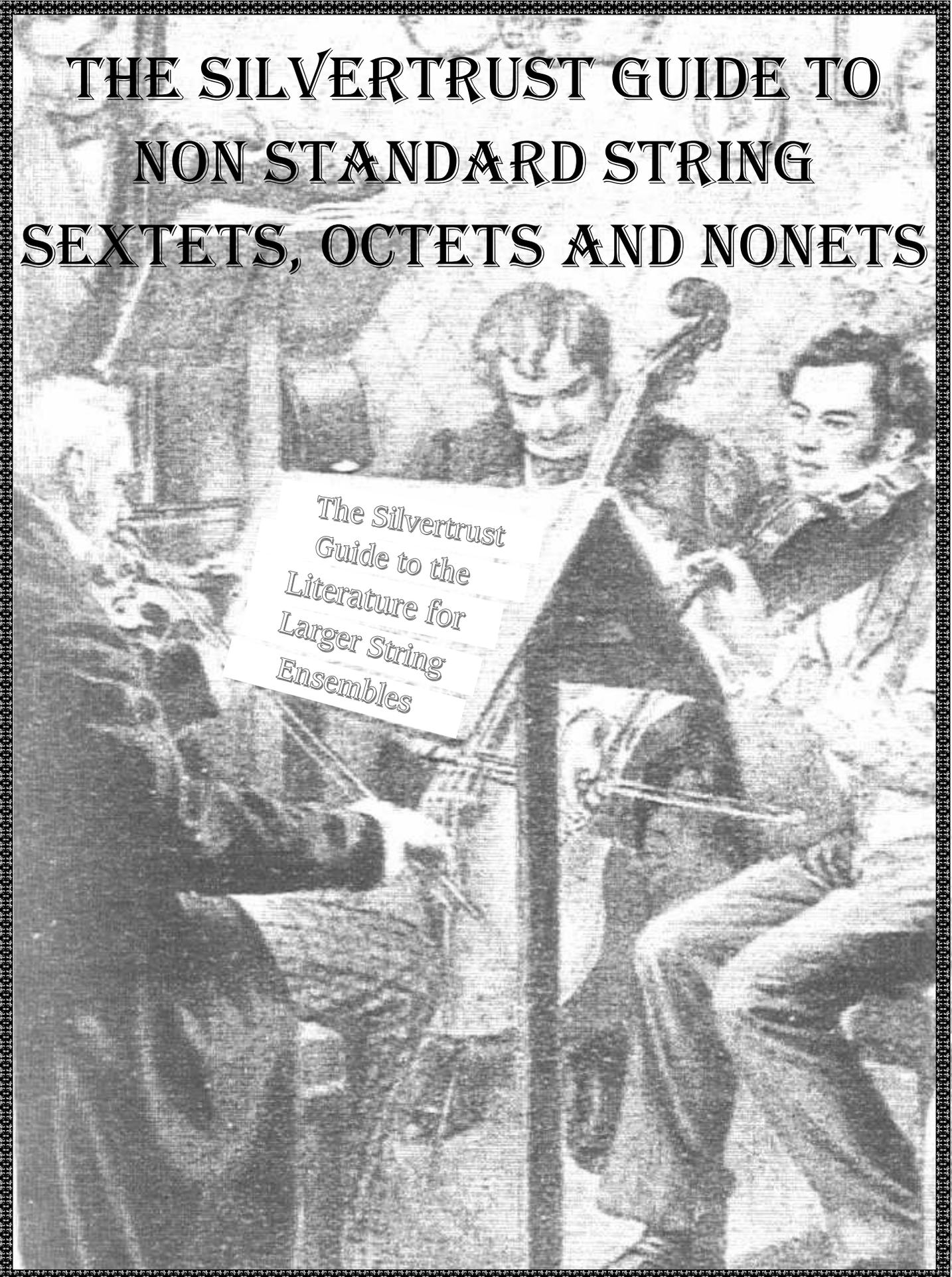


# THE SILVERTRUST GUIDE TO NON STANDARD STRING SEXTETS, OCTETS AND NONETS



*The Silvertrust  
Guide to the  
Literature for  
Larger String  
Ensembles*

## II. The Non Standard String Sextet

### i.e. Not works for 2 Violins, 2 Violas & 2 Violoncellos



**Jan Brandts Buys** (1868-1939) came from a long line of professional musicians. His father was an organist in the town of Zutphen in the Netherlands where Jan was born. He studied at the Raff Conservatory in Frankfurt and in 1893 settled in Vienna where he got to know Brahms, who along with Edvard Grieg, praised his works. His **Sextet in D Major, Op. 40 for 3 Violins, 2 Violas and Cello** can be recommended both public performance and home music making. It is in no way difficult to play. It is well-constructed and finely written. The opening theme of the fleet first movement, *Allegro molto*, gives the music the feeling of a scherzo. The second theme is particularly effective. The rhythm creates a charming accompaniment and the whole movement is very artistically handled. The main subject of the slow, second movement, *Stoltz einherschreitend*, is a sweet melody which is eventually replaced with a funereal theme. The often syncopated music is full of rich and charming melodic touches. The Scherzo which comes next is in the form of an old Dutch sailors dance, rhythmically piquant and contrapuntal is quite cleverly done. The powerful finale, *Energico e tenuto*, makes for a superb ending. A first rate work. Edition Silvertrust created a second cello part as a replacement for Violin III so the work can, if desired, be played as a standard string sextet.



**Ignacy Feliks Dobrzynski** (1807-67) was the son of a kapellmeister to a Polish count who held much the same duties that Haydn did with the Esterhazys. Training from his father and experience with the count's orchestra provided Dobrzynski's early musical education. Later he went to the Warsaw Conservatory and studied piano and composition with Josef Elsner. While he achieved only moderate success in his native Poland, in Germany, his works were highly praised, and critical reviews in newspapers, such as those in the influential city of Leipzig, were very favorable. The **Sextet** is full of glorious melodies, inventiveness and originality. Hear it and you will wonder how such a work could fall into oblivion. His **String Sextet in E flat Major, Op.39 for 2 Violins, Viola, 2 Cellos and Bass** was composed in 1845. It was premiered by the Leipzig Gewandhaus concertmaster Ferdinand David and his colleagues in 1849 to considerable acclaim. The first of four movements, a lovely *Allegro moderato ed espressivo*, is reminiscent of Spohr. The unusual Minuetto, *allegro* which follows begins as a fugue and only gradually transforms itself into a minuet. The trio section is a very attractive, sentimental waltz. The third movement, *Elegia, andante espressivo e sostenuto*, was said to have created the greatest impression upon audiences. It was known as *Homage a Kosciuszko*. It begins with a funereal dirge and has a brief stormy middle section. The finale, an energetic *Allegro*, is replete with fine melodic material. A solid work which amateurs will enjoy and perhaps deserving of a concert performance.

**Felix Mendelssohn's** string sinfonia or symphonies are not thought of as chamber music. But, in fact, they are. It is ironic that

while none of these sinfonia as he called them were intended to be played by the massed string section of a modern symphony orchestra or even the size of today's chamber orchestra, that is the only way these works seem to be heard. The title of Sinfonia was given because of the style rather than the number of players he intended for the work. It is almost certain that Mendelssohn intended these works for a small group of players—five, six or eight players, depending on the sinfonia, and not more. These lovely pieces were meant for home use and for musical soirees. The famous pianist Ignaz Moscheles, a friend of the Mendelssohn family and piano teacher of both Felix and his sister Fanny, reported on several evenings, where the Mendelssohns and a few friends performed these works at the Mendelssohn home. Among the twelve sinfonia, numbers seven, eleven and twelve were intended for six players, 2 violins, 2 violas, cello and bass. They are easy and fun to play and appealing.

**Heinrich Molbe** (1835-1915) was the pseudonym of Heinrich von Bach, a prominent Viennese lawyer whose three brothers—Alexander, Eduard and Otto—were nonetheless all better known than him. He was born in the village of Unterwaltersdorf in lower Austria outside of Vienna. His father, an important jurist, sent him, as he had the other brothers, to the University of Vienna to study law. Alexander, the eldest (b. 1813) and most famous of the four, served as Imperial Chancellor to the Emperor Franz Joseph from 1848-1850. Eduard entered the imperial civil service and was a governor of several Habsburg provinces while Otto became a composer and eventually director of the Mozarteum in Salzburg. Heinrich, while at the University of Vienna, studied composition privately, as did his brother Otto, with Simon Sechter, the famous professor of composition and theory at the Vienna Conservatory. Heinrich also entered the imperial civil service and briefly served as the Governor of the Fiume and Trieste Province, then in Austrian possession. Though he could claim to be a professionally trained musician, he apparently felt that being known as a composer would be detrimental to his legal and imperial civil service careers and hence composed under a pseudonym. He was a fairly prolific composer, writing nearly 400 works, including some 200 art songs and 140 chamber works. His **String Sextet in D Major, Op.64 for 2 Violins, 2 Violas, Cello and Bass** dates from in 1897. It is a big work and can be warmly recommended, especially to amateur players. Molbe clearly had a gift for melody. The first movement, *Allegro con brio*, is jovial and full of good spirits and opens with a melody the equal of some of Schubert's best. The other themes are equally pleasing. The second movement, *Adagio non troppo ma molto espressivo*, is a lovely character piece. It begins with the cello and bass giving forth a mighty tune in their lowest registers, which moves bravely forward to the syncopated accompaniment in the other voices. It has tinges of a Chopinesque funeral march. As it dies out, a lovely, more optimistic section follows. Next comes an energetic but muted Scherzo with trio. In the finale, *Allegro molto vivace*, the composer makes considerable use of pizzicato. The main theme, which is full of energy, has an aura of magnificence about it.

**Ignaz Pleyel** (1757-1831) was born in the Austrian town of Ruppersdal. He began his studies with Jan Baptist Vanhal and then



with Haydn, who, along with Mozart, considered Pleyel extraordinarily talented. Mozart is said to have called Pleyel the "next Haydn" and Haydn saw to it that his star pupil's works, primarily chamber music, were published. Pleyel's reputation quickly spread and he obtained the position of Kapellmeister

(Music Director) at one of Hungary's leading courts. Later he moved to Strasbourg where he worked with Franz Xaver Richter and settled there. During the French Revolution, he moved to London but later returned to France and became a French citizen. In 1795, he founded a publishing firm which bore his name. It became one of the most important in France, publishing the works of Beethoven, Hummel, Boccherini, Onslow, Clementi, Dussek and many others. In addition, he founded a famous piano manufacturing company which also bears his name. Pleyel and his music were quite famous during his lifetime. In England, for a time, his music was more popular than that of Haydn.

Pleyel's **String Sextet in F Major for 2 Violins, 2 Violas, Cello and Bass, Ben.261** dates from 1791. It was brought out by the publisher Andre as his Op.37. The date of the composition is significant because Pleyel, a student of Haydn, composed in the so called Viennese classical style pioneered by Haydn and Mozart and up until 1789, not in the concertante style founded in Paris and still favored by French composers. When he was appointed Kapellmeister of the Cathedral in Strasbourg, he was widely regarded by French revolutionaries with suspicion because he was an Austrian. It is said that he only escaped the guillotine by quickly writing patriotic Jacobin works and abandoning the style of Viennese composers of which he had been considered one of the leading advocates. He adopted the concertante style of the French and his Sextet, an interesting work on several counts, reflects this fact. The only string sextets written before this one were those of Boccherini composed some 20 years before. They were for 2 violins, 2 violas and 2 cellos. Pleyel's are the first which substituted a bass for the second cello, and one of the very few in this style. The work achieved considerable popularity and was often performed up until the mid 19th century when tastes changed. It begins with an Allegro, shimmering with colorful textures, followed by a lovely Cantabile. Then comes a Minuet with Trio and a Rondo with which the Sextet closes. Certainly good for amateurs, and only as a historical representative for concert.



The name **Jean Philippe Rameau** (1683-1764) belongs to one of the most important composers of the Baroque era, although his music is rarely performed live anymore. He was known for his operas, his compositions for harpsichord and his book on harmony. based on his **Pieces de Clavecin**, which were composed between 1724-1726. They were transcribed for three violins, viola and

two cellos shortly after Rameau's death in 1768 by the French lawyer and composer Jacques Joseph Marie Decroix. A subsequent edition was made by Saint Saens in 1896. And it is in this version that they have survived. They became known as the Six Concerts for String Sextet. Edition Silvertrust has reprinted the first of the set. It is for three violins, viola and two cellos. They created a second viola part from the third violin part so the work could also be played as a standard string sextet. It is in three movements: La Coulicam (thought to be the French transliteration

of Kubla Khan), La Livri (a kind of tamborine, used in Turkish music of the time) and Le Vézinet, which refers to a suburb of Paris. Though not originally for sextet, the fact that they were transcriptions by the likes of Saint Saens, makes them noteworthy and interesting as works from the Baroque for a string sextet.



**Ernst Rudorff** (1840-1918) was born in Berlin. He began his studies there with Wolde- mar Bargiel and then entered the Leipzig Conservatory where he studied with Ignaz Moscheles and Carl Reinecke among others. After graduating he pursued a career as a piano soloist, teacher and composer. He held positions at the Cologne Conservatory and the Berlin Hochschule. Among his many students

were Wilhelm Berger and Leopold Godowsky. Most of his works were for piano. His **String Sextet in A Major, Op.5 for 3 Violins, Viola and 2 Cellos** appeared in 1865 and was dedicated to the famous violinist, Ferdinand David. It is his only work of chamber music, other than a few pieces for violin and piano. The Sextet is a grateful work to play and shows the influence of Schumann, whose chamber music Rudorff studied closely. It is superbly put together, and has extremely clear and transparent writing. It deserves concert performance and amateurs will also enjoy this tonally beautiful work. The first movement, Allegro, is a sweet and gentle idyll, whose main subject is especially impressive. The development, full of fine contrapuntal touches, is quite effective. The movement brings forth appealing melody after melody. Next comes an Andante, a delightful set of variations based on a simple lied-like theme. The finale, Allegro molto, begins with a rhythmically interesting theme and leads to a nicely executed fugal section. Edition Silvertrust who reprinted the work have provided a second viola part in lieu of the third violin so that it can be played as a standard string sextet if desired.



**Hermann Suter** (1870-1926) was born in the Swiss town of Kaiserstuhl. He studied with Hans Huber at the Basle Conservatory and later with Carl Reinecke at the Leipzig Conservatory. He worked as a conductor and teacher at the Zurich Conservatory. Later, he became director of the Basle Conservatory. His works show the influence of Brahms, Richard Strauss and Gustav Mah-

ler. Suter was not a prolific composer but the works that he produced were very well put together and first class. Mostly, he composed works for voice, however, he did not ignore chamber music leaving three string quartets and a string sextet. His **String Sextet in C Major, Op.18 for 2 Violins, Viola, 2 Cellos and Bass** was composed in 1916. He achieves a surprisingly satisfying tonal result with this preponderance of lower voiced instruments. Superbly executed, it belongs in the concert hall. The writing is quite accomplished and on several occasions rises to an almost orchestral level. The first movement begins with a slow Lento introduction. It is in the free form of a fantasia. In it we hear the germ of what becomes one of the themes of the Allegro energico, which is noteworthy for its spirited writing and attractive lyrical themes. The second movement is a piquant and lively Vivace which serves as a scherzo. The beautiful Canzone which follows is a warm and deeply felt piece. The crowning glory of the sextet is its finale, Allegro vivo con spirito. It begins with a substantial, moderately paced, Poco sostenuto, introduction, which step by step

creates a sense of suspense and expectation. Tension is released by the sudden bursting forth of the Allegro, a high spirited Swiss folk dance. Lilted lyrical themes are interspersed with whirling tarantella episodes. This movement alone is one of the finest in the literature. Edition Silvertrust has created a second viola part from the bass part so that the work can be played as a standard sextet if desired.

### III. String Septets



This is an ensemble for which virtually no music has been written. I have been unable to find an explanation for this fact, but there you have it.

The only string septet I am aware of is that of **Darius Milhaud** (1892-1974) He was born in in the French city of Marseille. He studied composition at the Paris Conservatory with Charles-Marie Widor and became a member of the so called "Les Six", a group of modernist French composer who were active during the first part of the 20th century. During the course of his long career, he frequently traveled abroad, sometimes for pleasure, sometimes from necessity. During the First World War, Milhaud served as secretary to the French ambassador to Brazil. During the Second World War, he moved to America during the Nazi occupation of France. The sights and sounds of the cultures which he saw always interested him. In his music, one often hears the sounds of Brazilian dances and American jazz, but also the then modern trends of French music during the 1910s and 1920s. His **String Septet for 2 Violins, 2 Violas, 2 Cellos and Bass, Op.408** dates from 1964. It is noteworthy for its use of Aleatory or chance music which occurs in the second movement entitled, "Etude in controlled chance." The instruments take turns in setting the time unit. Over this basic pulse, fast phrases must be repeated over and over for a prescribed number of seconds before the beginning of the next section. The other three movements are more traditionally constructed. The first movement is active and contrapuntal, in a sectional form based on two contrasting themes. The third movement is meditative, and is notable for exploiting the entire range of the string group. There are five different sections which present related ideas. The five sections are divided by interludes, each for a different solo instrument. The final movement forms an energetic conclusion, with the same two-theme approach as the opening movement. It is a curiosity, not something which is particularly enjoyable to hear, in my opinion, or to play. Listed here only because it was the only such work for this combination I know of. Perhaps there may be others hidden away somewhere.

## IV. String Octets including Double Quartets

What you may ask is the difference between the so called standard string octet consisting of four violins, two violas and two cellos and the double quartet. The differences such as they are, are subtle. The personnel is exactly the same and to most listeners, and perhaps players too, one cannot immediately discern any great difference. The double quartet was the creation of the famous violinist and composer Louis Spohr (1784-1859) and it is to him we must turn to learn of the differences. In his memoirs, Spohr wrote that the idea of the double quartet came to him from his friend and colleague, the famous violinist, Andreas Romberg. Quite apart from a standard octet which works as one large group, the idea of the Double Quartet was to have two separate, but equally important groups which could enter into the most varied of relationships. He set himself the task of using two quartets in frequent contrast in the manner of a double choir and saving the combining of the groups into an octet for the climaxes of the work. Hence the alternating of presentation of the thematic material of the two quartets creates an ongoing dialogue and is crucial to the structure of the work. It also allows for an even greater use of tonal coloration than the standard octet. In line with this, Spohr specified that the seating arrangement for a double quartet had to be different from an octet. He decreed that the two quartets were to be seated opposite one another with the first violin and cello of each quartet sitting directly across from his counterpart.



**Nikolai Afanasiev** (also spelled Afanassiev, Afanasyev et. al. 1821-1898) was born in the Siberian city of Tobolsk. Other than violin and piano lessons which he received from his father, he had no formal musical training as none was to be had within Russia at that time. In his memoirs, he wrote that he learned the art of composition by studying the works of famous composers such as Bach, Mozart and Bee-

thoven. He excelled as a violinist and at the age of 17 was appointed concertmaster of the Moscow Opera Orchestra. He subsequently toured Russia and Western Europe as a soloist before settling in St. Petersburg where he spent the rest of his life. Of the major Russian composers, only Alyabiev and Glinka predate him. While such composers as Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin later became known for establishing the so-called Russian National School of composition, i.e. using Russian folk melody, they were hardly the first. Afanasiev's music, and he wrote in virtually every genre, is filled with the melodies of Russian folk songs and the rhythms of Russian folk dances. Though he and his music are, to some extent, still known within Russia, today he is virtually unknown elsewhere, although his Quartet *"The Volga"* enjoyed a modicum of popularity for some decades during the last part of the 19th century, especially in Germany. Spohr's creation, the double quartet, did not grab the imagination of many composers, and few if any other than Afanasiev wrote for it. His **Double Quartet in D Major**, subtitled *"Housewarming celebration"* dates from 1875. A play through of the work reveals that it does not follow the guidelines laid down by Spohr and is, in fact, more or less, except for its title, a standard string octet. From the opening bars of the first movement, Allegro moderato, it is clear that

this is the creation of a Russian composer. The music is unmistakably Russian sounding. The writing gives the work a rather orchestral feel in great part. The second movement, Allegro vivace, is a scherzo and even more Russian sounding than the first movement, especially in the trio section. This is a very effective movement which is quite impressive, however, it requires very secure ensemble players. The third movement, Andante sostenuto brings to mind the music of the Russian Orthodox Church. There is a rather impressive cadenza for the first violin toward the end of it. The finale, Allegro non troppo, is a wonderful, celebratory, jubilant Russian peasant dance, but it must be admitted that once again, the music borders for much of the time on the orchestral. That said, this is a work which is certain to be cheered by a concert audience and will give much pleasure to home music makers.



**Woldemar Bargiel** (1828-1897) was Clara Schumann's half brother. Clara was nine years older than Woldemar. Throughout their lives, they enjoyed a warm relationship. It was thanks to Clara, that Bargiel was introduced to both Robert Schumann and Felix Mendelssohn. Upon the suggestion of the former and the recommendation of the latter, he was sent to study at the famous Leipzig Conservatory with two of the leading men of

music: Ignaz Moscheles (piano) and Niels Gade (composition). Subsequently, Bargiel held positions at the conservatories in Cologne and Rotterdam before accepting a position at the prestigious Hochschule fur Musik in Berlin where he taught for the rest of his life. Among his many students were Paul Juon and Leopold Godowsky. Besides teaching and composing, Bargiel served with Brahms as co-editor of the complete editions of Schumann's and Chopin's works. While Bargiel did not write a lot of music, most of what he composed was well thought out and shows solid musical craftsmanship. His chamber music—he wrote four string quartets, a string octet and three piano trios—represents an important part of his output. Bargiel composed his **String Octet in c minor, Op.15a** in 1877. It can certainly be recommended for performance by professionals in concert. Additionally, amateurs, when they have a chance, should not miss the opportunity to play this octet, which not only sounds good but also presents few technical difficulties. Although Bargiel was clearly steeped in the classical masters, nonetheless, this is the work of a composer from the Romantic era and one who possesses a fine tonal palette. The work begins with a lengthy, elegiac Adagio introduction which leads to a magnificent Allegro appassionato full of wonderful writing. The lovely coda, with its cello melody, reminds one of Mendelssohn. The middle movement combines a short,

religious-sounding, slow movement, Andante sostenuto, which is bound together with a bustling Mendelssohnian scherzo, Allegro. The main theme to the finale, also an Allegro, is based on a rustic folk dance. It is by turns stormy and gentle. A good work.



Certainly among violinists, **Max Bruch** (1838-1920) is fairly well known, but most chamber music players do not know

that he wrote two string quartets, two string quintets, a string octet, a piano trio and eight pieces for clarinet, cello and piano. Nearly all of his chamber music was composed in his youth, while he was under the thrall of Mendelssohn and Schumann. The string quintets and octet were never published during his lifetime and the manuscripts were only rediscovered in the early 1990's. Their publication and recording generated much excitement and a gush of praise, which in my opinion was not particularly justified. The works have all been baptized by the publishers as op.post, largely because one prominent Bruch scholar has claimed that they were written when the poor fellow was nearly on his death bed at age 80. However, I wonder if this so-called expert has actually played the chamber works which were published during Bruch's lifetime and written in his youth during the 1860s, to wit, his two string quartets opp.9 and 10 and his piano trio, op.5. I mention this because once you have played the above works and then play the so-called op. post. works, it is rather obvious that Bruch composed these works in his youth. If not, then one would be forced to conclude some 60 years later, his style had not evolved. But either a playing or hearing of his Eight Pieces, Op.82 composed around 1910, makes it eminently clear that his style did evolve. So what then is the explanation. The answer most likely is that Bruch returned to these works to edit and clean up what he had written as a young man but had chosen not to publish. And despite the fact that he returned to these works, it is also telling that he still chose not to publish these op.post. works while he had the chance. In all honesty, they are not great works and do not do the composer's reputation any good. This includes the **Octet in B flat Major, Op.Post.**, which substitutes a bass for the second cello. The octet had started out life as a string quintet, one of three he had composed in his youth. In 1920 he arranged it for four violins, two violas, cello and bass, but the thematic material and the treatment, for all intents and purposes, remained the same. The work, in three movements, begins with a slow introduction, which leads to the main section allegro moderato. There is much bustle and sawing in an attempt to create an exciting and dramatic atmosphere. The middle movement is mostly lyrical with a march-like contrasting theme. The finale, Allegro molto, may have been intended to combine a scherzo and finale all in one. The thematic material is not weak or unattractive, to the contrary, it has considerable appeal and charm. Bruch did have a gift for melody. But it is not evenly divided, too much is to be found in the first violin part and the accompaniment is pedestrian, with much unnecessary thrashing about to no avail. Given that one is unlikely to have many opportunities to play octets, I cannot recommend that any time be wasted on this one.



**Georges Enescu** (1881-1955) is one of the better known composers of the 20th century. Today, he is mostly remembered as the composer of his two Romanian Rhapsodies for orchestra. What is not so well-known is that he was a child prodigy on the violin and also the piano and later on had a great reputation as a violin virtuoso and famous teacher of the violin. Yehudi Menuhin, among others, studied with him. He wrote a fair

amount of chamber music but most of it is little known and rarely, if ever, performed. His String **Octet in C Major, Op.7** was hailed as an amazing accomplishment for a young man of nineteen, and indeed it is. This epic work combines the musical language of the late romantic era with the emerging new language of

polyphony. Enescu wrote that he set out to create a vast work and he later wrote it was quite hard for him to achieve what he had set out to do: *"No engineer putting his first suspension bridge across a river can have agonized more than I did as I gradually filled my manuscript paper with notes. This Octet, cyclic in form, presents the following characteristics: It is divided into four distinct movements in the classic manner, each movement linked to the other to form a single symphonic movement, where the periods, on an enlarged scale, follow one another according to the rules of construction for the first movement of a symphony. Regarding its performance, it is to be noted that too much emphasis should not be given to certain contrapuntal figures in order to permit the presentation of certain essential thematic and melodic elemental values."* The Octet was completed in 1900. The expansive main theme to the opening movement *Très modéré*, gives a clear indication that composer intends a work on the grand scale. The second subject is presented in canonic form. Enescu combines sophisticated melody with a touch of Romanian folk music. The explosive second movement, as the title clearly suggests, *Très fougueux*, is a massive fugue. The beautiful slow movement, *Lentement*, which follows is a mysterious nocturne. The finale, *Movt de Valse bien rythmé*, is an extraordinary and wild waltz which combines many of the themes of the earlier movements into a stunning synthesis. This is a masterpiece of the first order and should not be missed, but it must be admitted, it is not an easy work to play and is hard to sight read although it certainly can be managed by experienced amateurs. I highly recommend, however, that the players listen to the work and look at their parts prior to the octet session.



**Niels Gade** (1817-1890) was born in Copenhagen and began his career as a concert violinist. His career as a composer took off when Mendelssohn saw and later premiered his First Symphony. Mendelssohn must have been mightily impressed since he invited Gade to teach at the Leipzig Conservatory which he had founded. After Mendelssohn's death in 1847, Gade was appointed its director and also served as conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra. But in 1848, he returned to Copenhagen where he remained for the rest of his life, conducting and teaching. Not surprisingly, his own music usually shows the influence of Mendelssohn. His **Octet in F Major, Op.17** dates from 1849. Cobbett, writing about the octet in his

*Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music* says: *"There is romantic charm on every page. For such an addition to the limited octet repertory, musicians have reason to be grateful. It is the expression of a poetic nature."* He is, of course, entitled to his opinion, but I cannot agree and neither did Wilhelm Altmann, perhaps the most influential chamber music critic of all time who wrote:

*"Gade's Octet does not make a particularly strong impression although it is clear, well-written, not particularly hard to play and not without appealing tonalities. However, its content is filled with fluff, the melodies are thin and leave nothing solid to hold onto."* To say that this is a very Mendelssohnian work is no overstatement, in fact, it might be an understatement. One could say it was written by an ersatz Mendelssohn who clearly did not possess the original's inspiration. Right from the opening notes of the first movement, *Allegro molto e con fuoco*, we hear the aura of Mendelssohn. The chromatically descending first subject is dominated by forward rhythmic drive. But basically there is noth-

ing more than a lot of sawing. Gade substitutes forward motion for solid thematic material, perhaps in hopes of hiding how threadbare the melody is. The next movement, *Andantino quasi allegretto*, is a kind of slow Mendelssohnian intermezzo based on a sad folk melody. A lively scherzo, *Allegro moderato e tranquillo*, follows. The main theme sounds like a sailor's ditty. The dynamics are kept soft giving the music added charm. The finale, *Allegro vivace*, has the same flaw as the opening movement—very weak thematic material. In its place, Gade resorts to tricks to hide this problem, substituting running scale passages. I cannot in good conscience recommend this as an entry on your octet menu.



**Reinhold Gliere** (1875-1956) was born in the then Russian city Kiev. He began his musical studies there with the famous violin teacher Otakar Sevcik, among others. He then went to the Moscow Conservatory where he studied with Sergei Taneyev, Anton Arensky and Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov. His reputation today rests primarily upon his symphonies, ballets and operas, however, he was also a composer

of superb chamber music. His outstanding compositional technique was quickly recognized by his teachers and he won several prizes for his early works, including his First String Sextet which took the prestigious Glinka Prize from a jury consisting of Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov and Liadov. Gliere, himself, taught at the Moscow and Kiev conservatories for nearly 40 years. Among his many successful students were Khachaturian, Prokofiev and Miaskovsky. The **Octet in D Major, Op.5**, composed in 1900, opens with a full-blooded *Allegro moderato*. Both the energetic and optimistic main theme and the calm but very melodious second theme are unmistakably Russian. The second movement, also an *Allegro*, is an elegant intermezzo. A soulful Russian melody serves as the middle section. The slow movement, *Andante*, comes third and features a very melodious subject which is first presented in a soft and calm fashion. During the rest of the movement, Gliere slowly builds tension along with the dynamic level, reaching a powerful climax just before the movement's close. The finale, another *Allegro*, sports two tonally rich main themes, each distinguished by a very colorful sound palette. The writing verges on the orchestral at many points, perhaps most notably in the powerful conclusion. Though completely different, in excellence it is on a par with the Mendelssohn and among the very best of octets. It is not particularly difficult, reads well and is grateful to play.



**Karl Grädener** (1812-1883, sometimes Graedener) was born in the German city of Rostock. He originally worked as a soloist and cellist in a well-known string quartet in Helsingfors (Helsinki). Subsequently, he served as music director at Kiel University, and a professor of voice at the Vienna Conservatory and finally as finally as a founding member and president of the Hamburg Musicians Union. He composed in

most genres, including a considerable amount of chamber music. His **Octet in E flat Major, Op.49** dates from 1870, toward the end of his career. It was dedicated to the famous violinist Joseph Joachim. This is quite a good work, well-written with a sure feel for what string instruments can do, and the ability to produce a fine sound, not surprisingly as he served in a quartet for a decade. His themes are appealing and his use of modulation is particular-

ly effective. The opening subject to the first movement, *Allegro risoluto ma non troppo presto*, is both striking and appealing. The second melody has both nobility and lyricism. The *Adagio molto* which comes next has for its main theme a deeply religious sounding melody. The dramatic and somewhat agitated middle section disturbs the mood before disappearing. A genial Scherzo with two contrasting trios follows. The finale, *Allegro con fuoco, ma non troppo*, begins energetically with a lively main theme, while a sweet lyrical second melody provides contrast. A short fugal section then leads to a brilliant coda. A good choice for concert as well as for experienced amateur players. About the same difficulty as the Mendelssohn.



**Hermann Grädener** (1844-1929) was born in northern German city of Kiel. His father Karl was also a composer and teacher. In 1862, Hermann entered the Vienna Conservatory where he studied composition and violin. He worked for a number of years as a violinist in the Court Orchestra and gained a reputation as a respected composer and teacher, eventually holding a professorship at

the Vienna Conservatory. His **Octet in C Major, Op.12** was completed in 1881. It is a fine example of his considerable creative talent. At times somewhat symphonic in nature, it does not abandon true chamber music style. The magnificent, spacious melody of the main theme to the first movement, *Allegro moderato*, immediately captivates the listener. It is both lyrical and tender and then is followed by a very appealing second subject and then a very interesting development. The next movement, *Allegro non troppo*, is more in the nature of an intermezzo than a scherzo with its harmonic changes and original rhythms. The second theme is particularly fetching. The next movement *Lento* is a theme and set of variations. The deeply felt theme is based on a sentimental folk melody. Here, the composer makes exceptionally fine and telling use of pizzicato. The tender second variation is extraordinarily well done and is followed by a wonderfully contrasting third variation. The opening theme to the finale, *Allegro non troppo, ma con fuoco*, is the equal of the magnificent main theme from the first movement. This highly energetic subject is complimented by a chorale-like theme which provides a very effective contrast. The work is original sounding, well-written and deserves a place on the music stands of amateurs and professionals alike. It is among the very best, the equal of the Mendelssohn or Gliere, a masterwork.



**Gottfried Herrmann** (1808-1878) was born in the German town of Sondershausen. He studied violin with Louis Spohr and composition with Moritz Hauptmann. He then pursued a career as an orchestra and quartet violinist, and conductor and then became music director of Lubeck. His **Octet in D Major, Op.3** was published in 1864, but if the opus number and style are any thing to go by, the

work was composed at least a decade earlier. It substitutes a bass for the second cello. It is a big work of almost symphonic proportions and if it was composed around 1864, it could be considered old fashioned for the time, sounding as it does like something from the early Romantic era. Nonetheless, the melodic material is appealing. Strangely, the most fetching part of the first movement, *Allegro brillante ma non troppo*, is its development section.

The movement is too long and often more in the realm of orchestral rather than chamber music. The second movement, *Andante espressivo serioso e marcato*, has its moments. The thematic material is attractive although too much is given to the lead violin. A very effective Mendelssohnian *Scherzo e leggero* comes next. The finale, *Allegro con fuoco ma non troppo*, has a lot going for it and would have been more impressive if it had not gone on for as long as it does. Several cuts to both this and first movement would have perhaps qualified the work for an occasional concert performance. However, for amateurs, it is still a work worth considering.



**Otto Malling** (1848-1915) was born in Copenhagen. He studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Music with Niels Gade and Johan (J.P.E.) Hartmann. He worked as a teacher and composer and eventually became a professor and then director at the Royal Danish Academy. Among his many students was the composer Knudage Riisager. That he is little known by chamber music players can be attributed to the fact that most of his compositions were for voice and or organ. Malling's **Octet in d minor, Op.50** dates from 1893. It is in no way hard to play, very melodic, well-written and good sounding. It is tinged with Nordic coloring. The main theme of the first movement, *Allegro appassionato*, conjures the sea with its waves. It is followed by a charming, more lyrical second theme. The *Scherzo* which comes next, with its use of Nordic folk dance melody, is quite original. The energetic and powerful main section is interspersed by a gentle trio reminiscent of bagpipes. The third movement, an *Andante*, is a cross between an *Intermezzo* and *Legend*. The jovial finale is filled with powerful dance melodies and lyricism. This is a good work, fun to play and quite effective, although at times a little challenging for the first violin. It would do well with audiences if given in concert and can be recommended to amateurs.

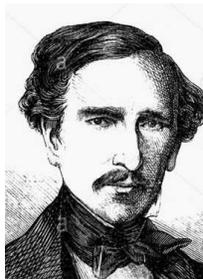
**Felix Mendelssohn** (1809-1847) and his **Octet in E flat Major, Op.20**, need not detain us. It is the most famous of all string octets and is the only one you are ever likely to hear performed in concert. Much has been written about it elsewhere and I only have a few remarks to make, which I have not seen others comment on. Having played the work numerous times, I can, with complete confidence, state that Mendelssohn in the finale miscalculated. The work begins low in the registers of the cellos and if played by any but the best of professionals, sounds like a bunch of growling bears and not music. This said, the octet is a good work, but I think part of its claim to fame is the fact that Mendelssohn was all of 16 years old when he composed it. The most effective movement is the *Scherzo*. All in all, the thematic material is first rate and quite effective. If you are only going to play octets once or twice in your life, the Mendelssohn should, of course, be one of the octets you choose to play.

I would also note that several of his so-called string symphonies are in fact meant to be played as chamber music. The title of *Sinfonia* was given because of the style rather than the number of players Mendelssohn intended for the work. These lovely pieces were meant for home use and for musical soirees. The famous pianist Ignaz Moscheles, a friend of the Mendelssohn family and piano teacher of both Felix and his sister Fanny, reported on several evenings, where the Mendelssohns and a few friends performed these works at the Mendelssohn home. Some were in-

tended for eight players, 4 violins—two firsts and two seconds, 2 violas, cello and bass. They are easy and fun to play and appealing.



During the last ten years of his life and for the three decades following it, **Joachim Raff** (1822-1882) was regularly mentioned in the same breath as Wagner, Liszt, and Brahms as one of Germany's leading composers. The experts and the public judged him to be the equal to such past masters as Mendelssohn, Schumann and Tchaikovsky. Incredibly, by the 1920's his music had all but disappeared from the concert stage. It seems virtually unimaginable that a composer whose talent was recognized and whose music was admired by Mendelssohn and Liszt, could become a mere footnote, yet this is what became of Raff and his music for most of the 20th century. Raff, who was born near Zurich, basically was self-taught. When he sent some of his early compositions to Mendelssohn, the master immediately recognized Raff's talent and arranged for their publication. Unfortunately, Mendelssohn died before he could help Raff much more. The young composer then approached Liszt who also took an interest in him and took him on as his personal secretary and copyist. Raff's **String Octet in C Major, Op.176** dates from 1872 and certainly is one of the octets, especially in the case of amateurs, that is worth investigating. The triumphant opening theme of the *Allegro*, is rhythmically powerful, while the more lyrical second theme gives off an air of mystery. The second movement, *Allegro molto*, is a short and swift *schermo* whose main theme has the propulsion and bounce of a fast horse ride. One is reminded of the *schermo* of Schubert's String Quintet D.956. Then comes the exquisite and beautiful *Andante moderato*, which has the quality of a song without words. The finale, *Vivace*, is a *tour d'force*. No doubt inspired by Mendelssohn, it has an incredible forward momentum which assumes the quality of a *moto perpetuo*. The syncopated second theme, in the minor, barely slows down this exciting race to the finish line. The Octet has good part-writing and is not difficult to play.



**Carl Schuberth** (1811-1863) was born in the German city of Magdeburg. His father taught him piano and he studied cello with the famous virtuoso and teacher Friedrich Dotzauer. He pursued a career as a touring soloist and eventually obtained the position of solo-violoncellist to the Czar of Russia in St. Petersburg, where he also served as conductor of the Court Orchestra, music-director at the University and inspector of the Imperial Dramatic College. He wrote a considerable amount of chamber music. His **Octet in E Major, Op.23**, which dates from 1848. It replaces the second cello with the bass. Not only are the first violin and first cello parts quite difficult, requiring players of professional standard, but the writing for the violas is difficult and uncomfortable to pull off. Nonetheless, there is much beautiful melodic material to be found in the octet, with several original touches. The work begins with a substantial upbeat *Allegro*. The second movement, *Andante*, is a song without words with a noteworthy and very charming part for the cello. The third movement, *Allegro assai*, is a spirited *schermo* full of fire and the lovely trio provides marvelous contrast. The magnificent finale, *Allegro*

furioso, lives up to its marking, fiery and operatic. Effective in concert to be sure, but not that easy for middling amateurs.



**Dmitri Shostakovich** (1906-1975), one of the most famous Russian composers of the 20th century, needs no introduction. His **Two Pieces for String Octet, Op.11** were completed in 1925, while he was still a student. The first piece, Prelude, does not particularly grab the listener's attention, although it might have been considered experimental for the time, at least in the Soviet Union. There is a lack of cohesiveness to it and really is little more than a

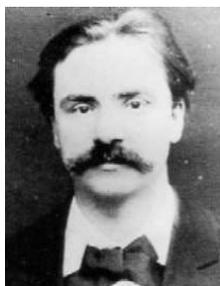
series of moods. Perhaps his teacher, Glazunov, who tended to guzzle vodka during the lessons, was too blasé to say much or did not care. The second piece, Scherzo, is violent and full of nervous energy. It is doubtful that these works would have seen the light of day had they not been written by this great symphonist and composer of string quartets. Perhaps interesting, they are mercifully short.



**Louis Spohr** (1784-1859 also known as Ludwig) was born in the German city of Braunschweig. From early childhood, he showed a great aptitude for the violin. He studied with the virtuoso violinist Franz Anton Eck in St. Petersburg and ultimately became one of the leading violinists in the first half of the 19th century. But he was also an important composer and conductor. Spohr wrote in virtually every genre, not the least

being chamber music. He composed some 36 string quartets, 7 string quintets, five piano trios, four double quartets and several other chamber pieces. The Double Quartet format--for 2 string quartets-- is not only unusual but is virtually unique to Spohr and must be ranked as his most important contribution to the realm of chamber music. In his memoirs, Spohr wrote that the idea of the double quartet came to him from friend and colleague, the famous violinist, Andreas Romberg. Quite apart from a standard octet which works as one large group, the idea of the Double Quartet was to have two separate, but equally important groups which could enter into the most varied of relationships. He set himself the task of using two quartets in frequent contrast in the manner of a double choir and saving the combining of the two groups into an octet for the climaxes of the work. Hence, the alternating presentation of the thematic material of the two quartets creates an ongoing dialogue and is crucial to the structure of the work. It also allows for an even greater use of tonal coloration than the standard octet. In line with this, Spohr specified that the seating arrangement for a double quartet had to be different from an octet. He decreed that the two quartets were to be seated opposite one another with the first violin and cello of each quartet sitting directly across from his counterpart. The **First Double Quartet in d minor, Op.65**, was written during the spring of 1823 and published two years later. The opening theme to the first movement, Allegro, is played in unison by both Quartet I and II. In general, Quartet II plays a subsidiary role. This theme, though employed in a variety of ways, appears far too often ruining its effect. The second movement, Scherzo, vivace, has an appealing main subject and the rhythmic accompaniment of Quartet II is finely intertwined. A serene though at times passion-

ate Larghetto follows. The jovial finale, Allegretto molto, is quite lively. In modern times, this has become the best known of the four double quartets, but it is not the best. Spohr's **Second Double Quartet in E flat Major, Op.77** dates from 1827. Although there are some brilliant passages for the first violin in Quartet I, especially in the warm and melodious opening Allegro vivace, Spohr took particular pains to treat both quartets more equally than he did in his first double quartet and overall, the style is less brilliant and more intimate. The second movement is a march-like Menuetto, quite classical in form with a wonderfully contrasting trio section which features a lovely duet between the violin and viola of the first quartet. The elegant third movement, Larghetto con moto, is a kind of theme with variations and features a striking pizzicato accompaniment in the second quartet. The jaunty finale, Allegretto, with several exciting, breathless sections, makes a strong impression. An altogether better effort than the first double quartet. Spohr completed his **Third Double Quartet in e minor, Op.87** in 1833. It became the best known of the four double quartets in Spohr's lifetime and was often performed throughout the 19th and first part of the 20th century. Spohr and Joachim performed it together at a famous concert in London. The work begins with an Adagio introduction but the main part of the first movement is a lyrical, spacious Allegro. The first theme has a deeply felt sense of yearning while the second subject is calmer. The main melody of the second movement, Andante con variazione is divided between the two quartets and forms the basis of a lively dialogue between the two, full of dazzling passage work. An energetic Scherzo comes next. It has a Beethovenian aura to it, alternating as it does between forward drive and lyrical calm. A dainty trio provides good contrast. In the finale, Allegro, a vigorous optimism infuses the main subject which has a fiery march-like quality. The second theme has a hymn-like quality and makes an excellent compliment to the first. Certainly the equal of No.2, but lots of accidentals in all of the parts present a real challenge not to be ignored. Spohr's **Fourth Double Quartet in g minor, Op.136** was his final work in this genre and dates from 1849. Of the four, this is probably the best choice for performance as well as the one amateurs should not miss the chance of playing as it poses less technical difficulties than his first three. In this work, Spohr shows his masterly handling of both quartets and how beautiful such an ensemble can be made to sound throughout. There is an elegiac mood to the opening Allegro which has appealing melodies and fine rhythmic treatment. A deeply felt, religious sounding Larghetto comes next. In the piquant Scherzo which follows, Spohr's beloved chromaticism is on display. The simple, calm trio section provides a fine contrast. The finale, Vivace, is particularly effective in its interplay between the two quartets. Probably the best of the four.



**Johan Svendsen** (1840-1911) gained a reputation as a rising star while he was still a student at the Leipzig Conservatory, where by general consensus he was regarded as one of the most talented students. Svendsen was born in Oslo and learned to play both the violin and clarinet from his father. From 1863 to 1867, he studied at the Leipzig Conservatory, at first violin with Ferdinand David, but problems with his hand forced him to switch to composition, which he studied with Carl Reinecke. Afterwards, Svendsen worked primarily as a theater director and

conductor. To my mind, Svendsen's **Octet in A Major, Op.3** is a real potboiler—a rip roaring, fire breathing, guns a blazing Nordic saga. I think that there is a somewhat clichéd quality to the thematic material which is overused. Yet, I have always enjoyed playing this octet and audiences love it. It dates from his time at Leipzig and was composed in February of 1866. Talk about a work that sounds orchestral, this is it, especially in the opening Allegro risoluto ben marcato with its use of unisono scoring and in the closing Allegro con fuoco. But it must be admitted that the use of Nordic melodies is effective and appealing although there is too much repetition of them rather than in the introduction of new thematic material. The most effective movement of this three movement octet is the middle movement, a theme and set of very clever variations. Go ahead and play it, it's not at all hard and you are almost certain to enjoy it.



**Ferdinand Thieriot** (1838-1919), wrote a great deal of chamber music, close to 30 works. Five years younger than Brahms, he was not only was born in Hamburg, but also studied with the same teacher, Eduard Marxer. The two knew each other from their Hamburg days and remained on friendly terms. After Hamburg, Thieriot finished his studies in Munich with Joseph Rheinberger and then moved to Vienna where his friend

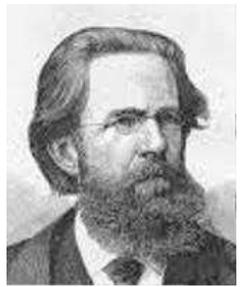
Brahms was instrumental in helping him obtain the position of Styrian Music Director in the provincial capital of Graz where he worked between 1870-85. Later, Thieriot held important positions in Leipzig and Hamburg where he remained from 1902 until his death. For the most part, Thieriot, like Brahms, remained true to the classical traditions which preceded him and took Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn and Schumann as his models. Only toward the end of his life did he his work show some of the influence of the "New German Music" of Wagner and Liszt. His **Octet in C Major, Op.78** is a relatively late work appearing in 1903 when Thieriot was 65. Probably not a candidate for the concert hall in part because it lacks the fire and depth of emotion which audiences like. On the other hand, its melodic material is often noble and charming and worthy of the attention of amateurs. In four movements, the opening Allegro is by turns powerful and lyrical. A religious-sounding Adagio follows and provides a fine contrast. Then comes a first rate and highly original Scherzo. The finale, after a short sad introduction, Mesto, bursts forth into a dramatic and thrusting Allegro con fuoco. This is a work which is grateful to play, sounds good, and not particularly difficult technically. In all, though no masterpiece, it is certainly a worthy addition to this scanty repertoire.

## V. Nonets for Strings



The only work entitled string nonet of which I am aware is that of Nicolai von Wilm. There may be others, but they remain unknown to me. However, there are many works, most entitled Suite or Serenade which are really nonets for strings and which unfortunately are all too often played by the string sections of symphony orchestras or by today's oversized chamber orchestras. But these works, though they can be successfully played by orchestras, are

chamber works which lose their intimacy and some of their beauty when played by larger ensembles. These works are usually for 4 violins, 2 violas, 2 cellos and bass. Unless otherwise noted, you can assume that this is what is required.



**Gyula Beliczay** (1835-1893), sometimes known as Julius in German and English speaking countries, was born in the Hungarian town of Révkomárom (now in Slovakia on the Danubian border between Hungary and Slovakia). He studied engineering and music in Pressburg and Vienna and then pursued a dual career serving as chief engineer in the Austro-Hungarian Ministry of Communications and composer. He studied

music at the same time he took his engineering degree— piano with Carl Czerny and composition with Martin Nottelbohm. His piano playing was admired by Liszt and Anton Rubinstein and his compositions were highly praised by contemporaries and performed all over Europe and even as far away as New York. He also was a sought after conductor and composition teacher and after retiring from his government position, he served as director of the Budapest Academy of Music between 1888 and 1892. His music shows the influence of Schubert, Mendelssohn and Schumann, but also of the Hungarian composers Mihaly Monsonyi and Ferenc Erkel. He wrote in most genres and numbers three string quartets, a piano trio, this nonet and several instrumental sonatas among his compositions. His **Serenade in d minor, Op.35** for string nonet was composed in 1873 though it was not published until several years later. The first subject to the opening movement, Moderato ma non troppo, is the minor and reappears in each of the four movements. The rhythmic nature of the second theme also gives the music a distinct Hungarian flavor. An upbeat Allegro vivace comes next, but the contrasting trio risoluto once again creates an Hungarian tone. A highly romantic and lovely Adagio cantabile serves as the third movement. The finale, another Allegretto vivace, is a rondo, full of showy passages and even a superb fugue. This is a first rate work in every way, which illustrates Beliczay's compositional excellence. It will be sure to make a good impression in concert. Not at all hard to play it can also be warmly recommended to amateurs.

**Robert Fuchs** (1847-1927) was born near the Styrian capital of Graz and attended the University of Vienna Conservatory studying with Otto Dessoff and Joseph Hellmesberger. By 1875, he himself was teaching at the Conservatory, eventually rising to the rank of Professor of Composition. He was one of the most famous and revered teachers of his time. Mahler, Sibelius, Hugo Wolf,



Franz Schmidt, Alexander Zemlinsky, Franz Schrecker and Richard Heuberger were among his many students. The entry in Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music has this to say about Robert Fuchs: "*Fuchs was an extremely refined and cultured composer. He stood high in favor with Brahms who continually gave him warm recommendations to publishers. Together with excellent technical equipment, he possessed the gift for writing charming melodies.*" At its premiere in 1874, Fuchs' **Sere-**

**nade No.1 in D Major, Op.9** was highly praised and eventually became so popular that he wrote four more. They called him The Serenade Fox (Fuchs is fox in German). Unfortunately, these were virtually the only compositions of his which achieved fame, despite the fact that his music was highly regarded by most of the day's leading musicians, including Brahms who almost never praised the works of other composers. Brahms wrote, "*Robert Fuchs is a splendid musician, everything is so fine and so skillful, so charmingly invented, that one is always pleased.*" The Serenade was dedicated to his fellow Schubert admirer, Nicholas Dumba, a wealthy industrialist, who had provided the funding to publish the first collected edition of Schubert's works. The two dominant features of the work are lyricism and quiet introspection. The first of five movements, the opening Andante, is light, elegant and charming throughout. Next comes a Minuet, rather quiet and subdued, hardly something that could be danced to. It is followed by a fleet-footed Scherzo, bright and cheerful. The Adagio which comes next is calm and meditative but without any hint of sadness. The finale, an Allegro, begins in a mischievous fashion dominated by its bumptious rhythm. A second contrasting theme is more lyrical. A wonderful work. Not hard to play, good for concert or home. As noted, his First Serenade was such a tremendous success that it convinced him to write a second in 1876. **Serenade No.2 in C Major, Op.14** was dedicated to Count Tamas Nyary a member of the Austro-Hungarian nobility and a minor composer in his own right. It is in four movements and opens with an Allegretto which begins with a gentle, upbeat march-like theme that dominates the entire movement. The emotional center of the Serenade is an expansive and sweeping Larghetto. The third movement, Allegro risoluto, is a energetic and resolute melody which Fuchs takes through several modulations. The finale, a Presto, is a whirling Italianesque tarantella in the tradition of Mendelssohn. Another very good choice. His **Serenade No.3 in e minor, Op.21** dates from 1877 and was dedicated to the Empress of Austria, Elizabeth von Habsburg. The somewhat sad main theme of the opening movement, Andante sostenuto, titled Romanze, is first sung by the violas, cellos and bass. It is valedictory music, tinged with a sense of regret. The second movement, a gently lilting Menuetto, is characterized by a Viennese elegance. The main section of the third movement, Allegretto grazioso, is a bright, light-footed march. The exciting finale, Allegro con fuoco, alla zingarese, as the title suggests has gypsy themes. Perhaps this explains the dedication to Elizabeth, who loved all things Hungarian. Superb.

**Richard Heuberger** (1850-1914) was born in the Austrian city of Graz. He studied composition at the Graz Conservatory and later in Vienna with Robert Fuchs. He pursued a dual career as a com-



poser of operas and operettas and as a teacher at the Vienna Conservatory. During his lifetime, his operas and operettas enjoyed great popularity, but today, he is virtually unknown outside of Vienna where he is remembered for the music to his opera *The Opera Ball*. Richard Heuberger's **Nachtmusik, Op.7** was composed in 1877 and published in two versions. One for two violins, viola, cello and bass and the other for four violins, two violas, two cellos and bass. It

was in this later version that the work became better known. In four movements, it begins with a charming Allegretto with lovely and naïve melodies. The Allegro vivace which comes next is true classical Viennese minuet. The trio section sports a slower and warm, romantic melody. The third movement, an Andante, has the quality of a lullaby. The finale, Presto, is a rollicking, exuberant tune akin to a sailor's song. No great masterwork, instead light, entertaining music, well-written and fun to play.



**Mieczysław Karłowicz** (1876-1909) was born in the Polish town of Vishneva now in Belarus. As a child, Karłowicz studied violin. He studied composition with Zygmunt Noskowski at the Warsaw Conservatory and then in Berlin with Heinrich Urban, to whom he dedicated his **Serenade for Strings, Op.2** composed in 1898. Subsequently he studied conducting with Arthur Nikisch and pursued a career as a composer and conductor. This serenade is elegant

in the manner of salon music. It has an easygoing, geniality not only in its charming melodic theme but also in the accompaniments that are sweet and uncomplicated. The style is clearly late romantic, with some very interesting use of chromaticism. The first movement, allegro moderato, is designated as a March, although it doesn't really have the character that one might expect of a march, this is clear right from the playful pizzicato introduction. The main part of the movement is a quasi tango. Only in the middle section does the rhythm sound vaguely like a march. The second, Romance, andante con moto, is full of nostalgia. This followed up with elegant Waltz, allegro moderato. At last, in the finale, Allegro non troppo, there is a short episode which actually sounds like a march. Not at all a bad work, good to hear and no-thing to play.



**Carl Nielsen** (1865-1931) was born on the island of Fyn (Funen) and eventually entered the Royal Danish Conservatory in Copenhagen where he studied violin and composition with the famous composer Niels Gade. He himself became Denmark's leading composer during the first part of the 20th century. His **Little Suite for Strings, Op.1** began life as a string quintet for 2 violins, viola, cello and bass. His teacher and mentor Niels Gade, when shown the score

with its density of the writing, suggested that it would be more effective for a larger ensemble such as an octet or nonet. Nielsen reworked the quintet and added divided parts for the four upper voices so that it became a nonet. The changes made were surprisingly minor and the Suite can still be played by a string quintet although without the fullness of sound of the second version. It was completed and published in 1888 as his Op.1, although he

had already published a number of other works by this time. Nielsen's publisher, no doubt with an eye toward sales, insisted on the title *Little Suite for Strings* and not *Nonet*. An unfortunate result of this is that today we often hear it performed by the full string sections of symphony orchestras, for which it was never intended, rather than a string nonet or small chamber orchestra. The Suite begins in a serious vein with a dark and moody Praeludium. The graceful middle movement, *Intermezzo*, is full of good humor. It commences with a lilting waltz and then is followed by a more energetic dance section which has a vague Viennese quality to it. The finale begins with a short restatement of the gloomy Praeludium but soon the music takes wing, rushing into a high flying Allegro con brio of exciting exuberance. Though momentarily, a few storm clouds appear, the music sweeps forward to a triumphant conclusion. An absolute gem. Not to be missed if you get a chance.



**Nicolai von Wilm** (1834-1911) was born in the old Hanseatic city of Riga, today's capital of Latvia, but then part of the Russian empire. In the 19th century, Riga was still predominantly a German city and Wilm's family was ethnic German. He first learned piano and then studied that instrument as well as composition at the Leipzig Conservatory. Subsequently, he worked as a music director in Riga and St. Petersburg after which he moved

to Wiesbaden in Germany where he remained for the rest of his life. He was a prolific composer who wrote in most genres, but the bulk of his music was for piano. However, he did not ignore chamber music and besides this string nonet, also has a string quartet, a string sextet, a piano trio and several sonatas to his credit, all of which the famous music critic Hugo Riemann described as important works. Riemann noted that the String Nonet, for two string quartets and bass was the first and only nonet exclusively for strings, all previous nonets were for mixed ensembles of winds and strings. The **String Nonet in a minor Op.150** may well be the only string nonet, so titled, ever composed. Certainly, the only one of which I am aware. Wilm's Nonet was published in 1911 shortly before his death. It was premiered to considerable acclaim but then disappeared. It is a fine work deserving of performance both in the concert hall and in the homes of amateurs. The opening movement, Moderato, ma appassionato, is a restless turbulent affair. Next comes a beautiful and deeply felt Adagio con sentimento. The third movement, Scherzo, molto vivace, has a Mendelssohnian flavor with a lovely contrasting trio. The finale, Allegro di molto, is full of verve and elan and makes a wonderful conclusion to this first rate work.