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Zemlinsky's Unfinished Final Masterpiece: The Quartet for Clarinet, Violin, Viola and Cello

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It is a curiosity of the clarinet repertoire that a number of the most important works for this instrument were written by composers in the final years of their lives: Mozart's Clarinet Concerto was written in the year of his death; Poulenc's Clarinet Sonata was completed in his final months; and Brahms too came to realize the chamber-music potential of the clarinet very late in life (thanks to the extraordinary playing of Richard Mühlfeld). Brahms's works had significant repercussions in that a number of younger Austrian and German composers subsequently chose to follow in his footsteps, writing their own pieces for the clarinet: not only were the clarinet sonatas of Max Reger directly inspired by those of Brahms, but also the Trio in D minor Op. 3 for Clarinet, Cello and Piano by Alexander von Zemlinsky was similarly modeled after Brahms's Trio Op. 114. Zemlinsky wrote his Clarinet Trio at the very beginning of his career, and in many ways it helped him become established as a composer. Unfortunately for clarinetists however, he never again showed an interest in writing chamber music including clarinet until, like Poulenc, Brahms and Mozart before him, he had reached the final years of his life.

In 1938, four years before his death, Zemlinsky began composing a Quartet for Clarinet, Violin, Viola and Cello, but sadly he left the work incomplete, only a glimpse of what could have been a great final masterpiece and a wonderful contribution to the clarinet repertoire. All that he left to us are twenty-one pages of unpublished manuscript, comprised of some rough sketches and two larger completed sections.¹ One wonders what prompted Zemlinsky to return to writing for the clarinet. He already had four string quartets to his name; substituting one of the violins of a string quartet with a clarinet was certainly now more acceptable given the rise in performance standards of wind instruments and their growing use by other composers in the early twentieth century, but perhaps in his increasing age Zemlinsky also looked back wistfully at the Clarinet Trio which had launched his career.

Zemlinsky's Clarinet Trio was written for the Wiener Tonkünstlerverein (Viennese Society of Musicians), a society which was established in 1884, and which quickly gained a reputation for promoting excellent performances of newly-composed chamber music and Lieder. Johannes Brahms was nominated Honorary President and, whenever his schedule permitted, never missed a concert. In 1896 the society sponsored a competition calling for new chamber works which had to include at least one wind instrument; the young Zemlinsky submitted his Trio in D minor for Clarinet, Cello and Piano, and won third prize.² Brahms was on the adjudicating panel, and it was certainly not a bad idea to submit a work whose instrumentation was the same as the older composer's Clarinet Trio Op. 114.

Brahms had had a fair amount of contact with Zemlinsky in the years prior to the competition, since Zemlinsky had already been active in the Wiener Tonkünstlerverein, and the two men had also met on various occasions to discuss some of Zemlinsky's earliest works. On the whole these had been fairly well received in Viennese circles, despite being criticized by some (such as the famous critic Eduard Hanslick) for being too loosely structured. Brahms too had expressed some reservations over the structural details of the young composer's works, and perhaps it was this criticism which prompted Zemlinsky to compose his Clarinet Trio using extremely taut motivic relationships. Brahms was evidently impressed enough with the work to recommend it to his publisher Simrock, and the Trio has enjoyed a central place in the chamber music repertoire of the clarinet ever since.

The tautness of construction of Zemlinsky's Trio prefigured much of his later music, in which he would adopt

the technique of developing variation, the transformation and maximum exploitation of small motivic units throughout a composition. The seeds of this style were planted in his youthful Clarinet Trio, and, in an elegant parallel, Zemlinsky's mature technique of developing variation is clearly exemplified by the unfinished Clarinet Quartet of his final years.

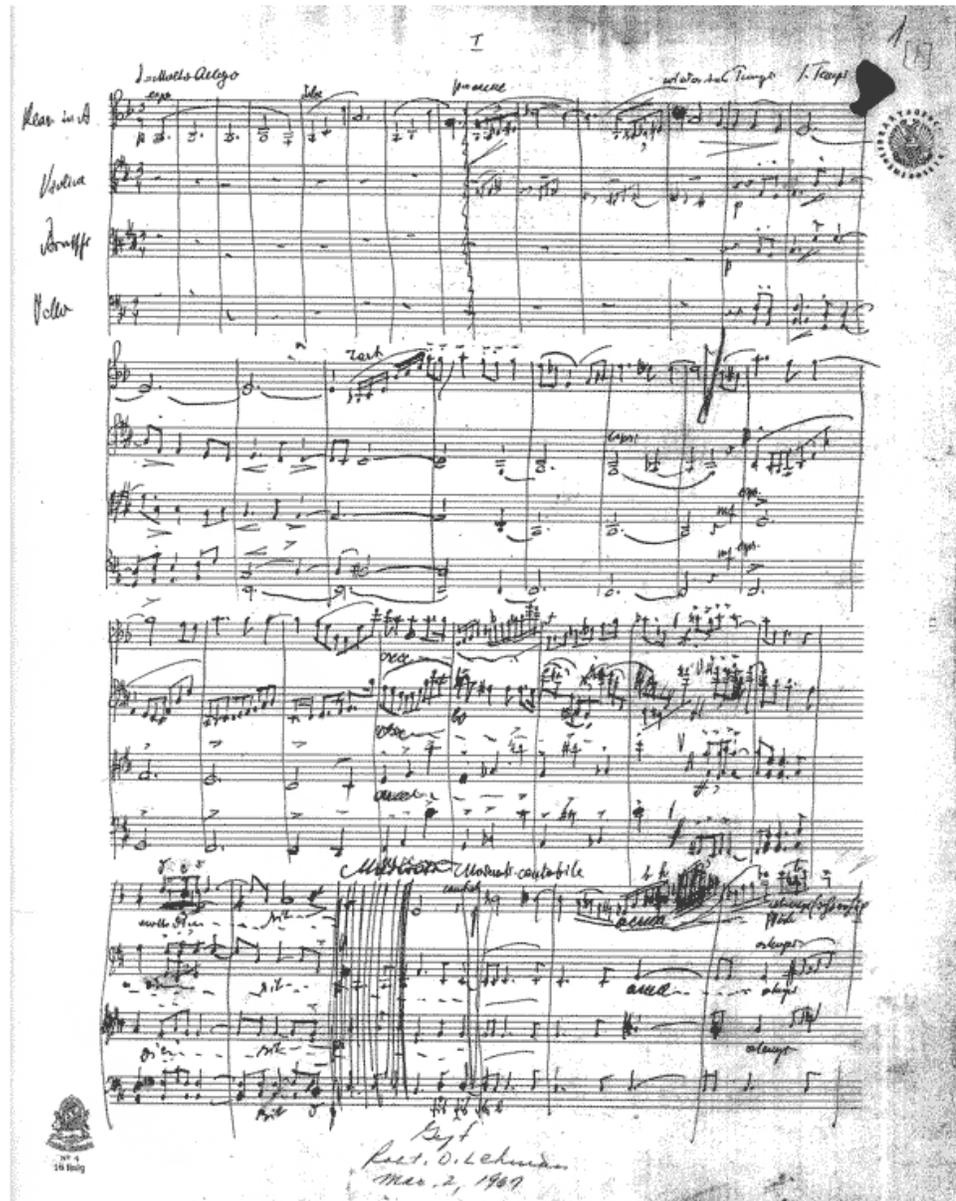
While the first movement of the Trio is in sonata form, and thus constructed with themes and "subjects," it also displays highly disciplined interrelationships on a smaller scale, the first three notes of the opening measures acting as a motivic germ which generates much of the subsequent material.³ Figure 1 shows the opening measures of the Trio. The (sounding pitch) D-E-F figure which heads the opening melody, is simultaneously inverted (D-C-B) and given to the piano, in a somewhat elongated rhythm. It is then decorated in the second phrase of the clarinet/cello melody by the inclusion of an intermediary G in measure 3, creating the D-E-G figure which is found throughout Zemlinsky's works, and which was for him a kind of personal signature. Meanwhile, the piano plays the opening motif down a third and at double speed in the second half of the third measure (right hand), and has already prefigured its altered version in miniature, in the triplets of beat three of the second measure (raising the G to G#). Additionally, measure 4 sees the retrograde and diminution of the opening D-E-F in the clarinet and cello.

Figure 1: Clarinet Trio Op. 3 mm. 1-4

Despite the success of the Trio, Zemlinsky's career over the next four decades would be primarily that of an opera conductor: for the Vienna Volksoper (1904-1911), the Neues Deutsches Theater in Prague (1911- 1927), and the Kroll Opera in Berlin (1927-1931). As a composer he also concentrated much of his energy on opera, producing works such as Sarema, Es war einmal..., Der Traumgörge and Der Zwerg. He did, however, continue to write chamber music, and his output from this period includes a number of string quartets: the First Quartet, from 1896, is very similar in style to the Clarinet Trio, yet by the time he had composed his Second Quartet and also the Lyric Symphony for soprano, baritone and orchestra (both from the early 1920s) his style of developing variation had become fully matured.

In March 1938, under the threat of invasion by Hitler's Germany, the Austrian government's chancellor was forced to hand over power to the Austrian National Socialist party, and the Anschluss, or annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany, followed shortly afterward. As a result Zemlinsky, like many other composers of Jewish descent, was forced to make hasty plans for an escape to the United States. Yet in the middle of such trying times, he still managed to work on new compositions: two songs on texts translated from Chinese, and also the Quartet in D, in which he once again returned to writing for the clarinet. By the time he left Austria he had completed sketches for both works, and had consolidated the sketches for the Clarinet Quartet into a 76-measure opening section. The first page of this is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Austrian fragment of Clarinet Quartet (first page)



After a brief stay in Prague, Zemlinsky arrived in the New York City with his family on December 23, 1938. He wasted no time in acquiring fresh manuscript paper and resuming work on the Clarinet Quartet. The various pages of his manuscript can thus give us a reliable chronology of composition, since there are clearly two sets of sketches extant, one written on Austrian "Protokoll Schutzmarke" music paper and one on the American "Shirmer Imperial Brand," presumably purchased by Zemlinsky on his arrival in New York City. Figure 3 shows the bottom corners of pages from the Austrian and New York fragments, respectively.

Figure 3: Austrian and US music paper insignia



Rather than being a continuation of earlier work, however, the second set of sketches is the result of a fresh beginning in which Zemlinsky reworked the opening clarinet theme (this time with a slower tempo marking of "Allegro moderato" instead of "Molto allegro") and went on to develop it differently, keeping virtually none of the material from the earlier Austrian fragment (see figure 4).

Zemlinsky once again consolidated this second set of sketches into a continuous, longer section, written out fully and this time lasting 137 measures. Both fragments give us tantalizing glimpses of a complete first movement, and are ample enough to have been recorded on the German record label Thorofon by clarinetist Walter Hermann and other musicians from Hamburg's NDR Sinfonieorchester.⁴

Figure 4: New York Fragment of Clarinet Quartet (first page)

Just a cursory glance at the first page of this second fragment reveals writing in which, typical of developing variation technique, virtually every gesture or melodic idea can be traced back to the clarinet's opening measures and the accompaniment in the strings. A few examples will suffice: the opening four measures played by the clarinet are transformed into the "turn" motive which recurs in all the instruments at some point during the movement; the initial statement of the strings from m. 6 also returns frequently in various guises, for example in m. 48 and m. 97; and larger transformations of the entire opening melody are also found, for example in the strings, in canonic imitation, beginning at m. 32. The form of the movement, as far as one can tell from the incomplete fragment, is a series of short, concatenated sections of varying tempos, each one a new development and variation of this material, yet not distinct enough to truly be a theme and variations. The music is restless and given to frequent outbursts of contrasting emotions, more characteristic of turn-of-the-century expressionism than music composed in the late 1930s.

Zemlinsky's years in the United States were not particularly happy ones. Hopes for performances of his opera *Kandaules* were dashed when the Metropolitan Opera refused to stage it due to one particular scene which allegedly contained too-explicit sexual content, and in order to survive financially he was instead forced to write "school pieces" such as the *Humoreske* for wind quintet – a well-crafted work but one not representative of Zemlinsky's style or depth of artistry.⁵ In an attempt to write a work which would be performable in the US and earn much-needed money, he quickly began work on a new opera based on the Homeric legend of *Circe*, and so the *Clarinet Quartet* had to be put aside. In the Fall of the following year, Zemlinsky suffered a debilitating stroke, and his health declined steadily until he passed away in March 1942, leaving the *Clarinet*

Quartet as two incomplete fragments.

Turning from the two larger fragments to examine the other pages of sketches, one is struck by the linearity of Zemlinsky's compositional technique (perhaps a by-product of the technique of developing variation). While he may have had a large-scale formal plan for the first movement somewhere in his mind, the sketches do not reveal this, since virtually every scribbled measure of the sketches is at some point inserted into one of the two larger fragments. Unlike the clear sonata form of the Clarinet Trio, the first half(?) of the Clarinet Quartet provides us no clue as to how the movement would have ended, no recapitulation section to be deduced from the exposition section, even in a most abstract sense. There is virtually nothing "left behind" in the sketches and thus no material which might be of help in reconstructing or completing the movement. The New York fragment, Zemlinsky's final and longer version, simply breaks off on the fifth page.

An issue of interest to performing clarinetists is the question of whether there is enough material for a performance of this piece. I have already mentioned the recording on the Thorofon label. On this disc, the duration of the second, longer fragment is 4 minutes 34 seconds. It would not be inappropriate for this fragment to be performed, say, on a program of clarinet quintets, with the requisite musicians already at hand. Moreover, audiences in academic institutions may especially welcome hearing both the first and second fragments, both as a peek inside the compositional process of a great composer, and as a reminder that sometimes even two chances are not enough, and Zemlinsky's Clarinet Quartet remains a final masterpiece that never was.

1 These are currently in the Zemlinsky Collection in the Library of Congress (Box 25, folders 3-4).

2 The first prize went to Walter Rabl (for his Quartet for Clarinet, Violin, Cello and Piano) and the second prize to Joseph Miroslav Weber (for his Septet "Aus meinem Leben").

3 See Antony Beaumont, *Zemlinsky* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 51-52, my discussion of the opening of the Trio is based on his analysis.

4 *Alexander Zemlinsky im Exil: Kammermusik und Lieder*; Hannover: Thorofon CTH 2376, 1998. Compact disc. Antony Beaumont, author of the definitive biography of Zemlinsky, also appears as pianist on this disc.

5 *Humoreske* ("School Piece") for Wind Quintet (Universal Edition, 1978), MS also in the Library of Congress Zemlinsky collection (Box 26, folder 2).