

Trio in B-flat Major, Opus 11

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Allegro con brio

Adagio

Allegretto. Tema “Pria ch’io l’impegno”

In 1792, just before his twenty-second birthday, Beethoven left Bonn, his home town, for Vienna. His main objective was to study with Josef Haydn; however, Haydn, who had just returned from a triumphant trip to England, was apparently not inclined to give much time to his admittedly rather rough pupil. Nonetheless, Vienna proved to be a great stimulant for the young composer and Beethoven made the best of his opportunities. He made friends with music-loving aristocrats who supported him and gave him generous gifts—including a quartet of string instruments and a horse. He arranged to study counterpoint in secret with the theorist Johann Georg Albrechtsberger and composition with Johann Schenk, and set out to make a name for himself as a pianist which he accomplished as a performer, with a prodigious ability to improvise, and as a composer of sonatas for solo piano and chamber works that involved the piano: duo sonatas for cello and violin and four piano trios. Study of this wonderful series of works—all composed before the first string quartets and the first symphony—uncovers details of Beethoven’s growth as a composer that can be seen as culminating with the *Grande Sonate Pathétique* (Beethoven’s own title), opus 13, in 1798.

Today’s *Trio* was composed originally for clarinet, most likely in response to the growing popularity of the instrument. Always the pragmatist, Beethoven also composed a version for violin that differs only in some details relating to the different registers of the instruments and the ability of the violin to play—in a few places—more than one note at the same time. Opus 11 is

often referred to as the “Gassenhauer Trio” because the theme for the variations in the third movement comes from a popular tune from an opera, *L’amor marinaio ossia Il corsaro* (*The love of the sailor, or, The Corsair*) by Joseph Weigl. The tune, “Pria ch’io l’impegno magistral prenda far vua merenda” (Before I begin this awesome task, I need a snack), was so popular that it was often heard in Vienna’s streets (or “Gassen”) and Beethoven was one of several composers to find a use for it.

While some of the more striking features in Beethoven’s development of creative thought are traced in the works composed in the years 1792-98, notably his ability to weld elements of forceful dramatic expression and rhythmic tension into a structure, there are also works in which there is no great drama, but ones in which the unexpected and humorous/whimsical are masterfully balanced with ideas that are straightforward, even innocent. Opus 11 is just such a work; it is balanced in all areas. Form, treatment of instruments, the expected and unexpected all work together in a complementary fashion and without deep drama. Perhaps the most satisfying of all is the balance between the instrumental lines, frequently allowing us to appreciate the sense of four lines working things out: the violin, cello and the two in the piano—left and right hands. Sometimes it is four individuals, each entering the conversation in turn, or two and two, piano right and left hands conversing with the violin and cello, at other times it is a discourse between three players. Solo passages are distributed throughout, each instrument featuring its own color, register and texture.

The first movement is in sonata form, opening with a bold unison statement of the first of several motives in the initial theme group, ending with two full chords in the dominant key, *ff*, followed by a silence. A surprise shift in the harmony deflects the focus only momentarily from the expectation of a new theme in the dominant, for it shows up soon enough, interestingly with

an element—three striding half notes—in common with the first theme. These half-notes are prominent characters in the ensuing development section. The second movement begins with one of Beethoven's loveliest melodies played in the cello's alto range. In this ternary form that opens in the subdominant key, E-flat major, the middle section explores some extremely interesting harmonic areas, arriving briefly on the key of E major before harnessing enharmonic opportunities to return to the opening tonality and a restatement of the first theme, this time lovingly embellished.

The last movement is a series of nine variations, all of which are promoted in great fun. The tune is a jaunty three-part form in sixteen measures. The first variation is for piano solo and the second for the two strings. The fourth and eighth variations (I promise, you will not be even interested in counting them!) are (mock-serious) minor ones and the ninth which raises the temperature with measure after measure of high-spirited trills in the piano's right hand, is followed by a coda that unexpectedly veers briefly in 6/8 time into the key of G major. But that is just a feint that provides greater opportunity for a rousing few last measures back in B-flat major and a decisive cadence in 4/4.

Trio in E Minor, Opus 67

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Andante - Moderato

Allegro non troppo

Largo

Allegretto – Adagio

It is always pertinent when writing or thinking about Shostakovich to remember his difficult and changing relationship with Soviet Russia. Throughout his career, which was launched in the early 1920s, he was buffeted by the government's trials and tribulations, and fell into and out of favor because of the official evaluation of his music *vis à vis* socialist realism. It is generally accepted that in order to survive as an artist working in the limited context of communist "supervision," one needed to project a powerfully affirmative spirit and conceal anything that resembled its opposite. Shostakovich's deliberately ambiguous style enabled his audience to experience complex emotions—fear, loss, and loathing—without risk. But for him, taking this risk apparently caused him much anxiety.

The second *Piano Trio*, *op. 67*, was composed in 1944, during the second phase of WW II that followed the 1943 defeat of the Germans at Stalingrad. This was—in spite of the pervasive difficulties brought about by the war—a period of relative ease for Shostakovich. The first devastating critique that the composer had suffered at the hands of the regime in 1936 was in the past, patriotism was at a high mark, and the musical scene in Moscow where he had settled was active and varied. The *Trio* is an intense work in four movements and in it any number of musical turns of phrase that can be easily associated with this composer co-exist with elements that might have been a response to the idealized and stylized realism expected by official policy. Already the fact that the work is in four movements indicates a certain formality, a

“comfortable” observation that is immediately dispelled when it opens with a tense, eerie tune, pitched high in the cello’s treble register and introducing a rhythmic motif that will reappear throughout the movement: long-short-short-long (or sometimes, just short-short-long). As all the parts enter—one by one in canon—drawing down the strangeness, the mood begins to ease. When it eventually calms down, the initially disturbing atmosphere created by the brilliantly conceived and disconcerting opening, is dispelled, pushed aside for the time being; however, underneath it all, the opening rhythmic pattern can often be heard. It never goes completely away and survives—greatly augmented—in the final cadence: short-short-long.

The second movement is a fast galop. Full of raucous fun, it lopes along in a heavy triple meter with lots of interplay between the instruments, each one of which jockeys in turn for top position. Contributing mightily to the high spirits is the key signature of F-sharp major which contributes a certain “edge” to the overall sound. The constantly shifting harmonic movement slips and slides (even if briefly) into distantly-related key areas like B-flat major or G minor, and a trio-like section in E minor sounds quite like a square dance. Pure Shostakovich, it sounds like the genuine article. There is so much packed into the movement that it seems much longer than it is (not quite) three minutes!

The third movement is a passacaglia, a variation movement with the harmonized bass line in the piano supplying the foundation. The bass line circles slowly through an eight-measure phrase, with the last harmony serving as the first one for the next reiteration. As these eight chords of the theme trace, one to a measure, a complex but smooth harmonic curve up the scale, the fifth one in the series jolts the senses. Listen for its bitter, jarring note in the succession of chords: even as the movement marches on without taking any apparent notice, the message is clear. After five very plain variations in the strings over the same unrelenting and unreconciled

chord progression in the piano, and a short coda later, the last chord—the prime mechanism for continuity—leads directly into the last movement, an Allegretto in E major, the parallel key to the E minor of the opening movement.

The fourth movement starts as a jaunty, innocent dance in 2/4 in which each instrument trades off playing major parts of the simplistic, banal tune. The accompaniment, a little um-pah, changes into an endless variety of guises: now silly, then aggressive, grim or tragic-comic. Suddenly, mid-movement, the cello rises out of the melee in an impassioned cry, its three-note lament wails and as though frozen or emotionally drained, the piano accompaniment repeats over and over the tones of a broken chord. What follows is a struggle for power that reaches a frenzied high point as passages in 2/4 trade off. At the highest point of intensity, the lament returns, *fff*, doubled at the octave, in both strings, and those same arpeggios in doubled octaves in the piano, *ff*, *pesante*. The struggle is renewed with the 2/4 tune interrupting again until finally it gives way and collapses into streaming 32<sup>nd</sup>-notes in the piano followed by an intense review of themes from the opening tune of the first movement—both instruments in canon, muted but *ff*, high and very loud, *espressivo*. When the tempo at last slows, one last time the now not-quite innocent-sounding steady eighths return in the strings, and the piano turns again to the droll 2/4 tune.

Shostokovich might have ended the *Trio* here, but he does not. Instead he brings the passacaglia theme for one last pass at its series of chords, its “structural” flaw still plainly evident and left for all to hear: an unchangeable, unalterable fact of life.

Trio in B Major, Opus 8

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Allegro con brio

Scherzo. Allegro molto

Adagio

Allegro

In 1891, Brahms wrote to Clara Schumann: “You can’t imagine what childish nonsense has occupied me on these beautiful summer days. I have rewritten my *B Major Trio* and can now call it op. 108 instead of op. 8.” Brahms was by then a very experienced composer with many works behind him, as well as an artist who had permanently removed many items from his work list. When she first heard the piece many years before, Clara Schumann—a discerning critic if ever there was one—had identified the problem simply and directly as “Romantic absentmindedness.” One has to remember that Brahms was barely 21 when the work was published and about 58 when he returned to it. In his thorough revision of the work, he was able to reign in some of his youthful indiscretions, but without sacrificing the elements that made it a vital work of a young and ambitious composer. Because both versions are available, this particular composition gives us a unique insight into the composer’s workshop.

While he retained many features in three of the movements—the Scherzo with its waltz-like Trio remained the same—he completely removed one of the three themes in the original first movement, and replaced a fugal segment in the development with varied rhythmic and thematic elements. His good friend, Heinrich von Herzogenberg wrote, “The facility with which the old Brahms adapts himself to the younger . . . is simply astonishing . . . It is a joint composition of two masters, who give the impression that they are inwardly no longer quite in harmony.” Hopefully, this brief introduction can draw the listeners’ attention to this dualistic aspect of the

work; it is possible to hear some of the positive tension between the broadly emotional indulgence of the youthful composer and the polish and intricate thematic and rhythmic craftsmanship of the older skilled one.

From the onset, the whole work seems to refer to Schumann's *Trio* (also in this season's programming) in as much as all the movements are all based in a single tonic, here, B, with movements one and three being in tonic major, and two and four in tonic minor. In a sense, the first movement "belongs" to the cello and its glorious melody. Noble and broad lines trace a vigorous treatment of the sonata form, and though one could hardly expect anything less than some sort of fugal episode in the development as was in the original version. But Brahms wisely excised it in favor of varied treatment of rhythmic and thematic ideas—not fugal, but still quite contrapuntal in nature.

The Adagio is a dialogue between the piano and strings, it opens with a rapt melancholy followed by an agitated mid-section. The furtive Scherzo is Schumann-like in its restless movement; indeed, it is quite North German in character. The forward motion is enhanced by Brahms's characteristic rhythmic play with the basic steady pulse: two groups of three alternate with three groups of two, and eventually come to a satisfying rhythmic resolution. Syncopation plays a role here also, leading to surges springing out of clever motion-filled play.

There is hardly any more vigorous finale in a work by Brahms than this one in B minor. A robust Allegro in triple meter, it revisits important key relationships heard earlier in the work, including unusual relationships to the tonic such as G-sharp minor and C-sharp minor.

- *Dr. Jean Christensen*

The pre-concert presentation will begin at 2 PM in room 130 in Music Building. All are welcome to attend.