

Trio con Brio Copenhagen

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

1770–1827

Piano Trio in D Major, Op. 70, No. 1, “Ghost”

Sorting out Beethoven's works for piano trio can be a confusing matter. Fourteen works for this combination are known to have survived. Four have no opus numbers; two of these are uncompleted single movement fragments, one a very early work from Beethoven's teenage years, and another is a transcription of the Symphony No. 2. Two works are designated for the instrumental combination of violin OR clarinet, cello, and piano (Opp. 11 and 38). Then there are the six “standard” piano trios: Op. 1, Nos. 1–3; Op. 70, Nos. 1 & 2; and Op. 97, the famous “Archduke.” Finally come 2 sets of variations: the Op. 44 Variations on an Original Theme, and Op. 121A, Variations on the song “Ich bin der Schneider Kakadu” (I am the tailor Cockatoo) from a popular opera of the time by the forgotten composer, Wenzel Muller.

Beethoven dedicated his two piano trios of Op. 70 (in D and E flat), to Countess Marie von Erdody, a young Hungarian with whom he resided in Vienna. She was semi-paralysed in the legs and Beethoven was almost deaf, so it is possible that their afflictions drew them together. The violinist and composer, Louis Spohr, gives an interesting account of a rehearsal of the D major Trio which he heard in Beethoven's house: “To begin with, the piano was terribly out of tune, a fact which troubled Beethoven not at all, as he could not hear it . . . In loud passages the poor deaf man hammered away at the notes smudging whole groups of them, and one lost all sense of the melody unless one could follow the score. I felt deeply moved at the tragedy of it all.” Despite his deafness this trio demonstrates his mastery of the medium. Opus 70, No. 1 has only three movements. The first movement recalls the first movement of the Fifth Symphony (written in the same year) and is similarly dominated by one idea with two contrasting motives one vigorous and the other smooth and lyrical. The trio's nickname, “Ghost,” derives from the bizarre and ghostly second movement, a Largo in D minor.

Significantly, Beethoven's sketches for this movement are on the same page of his notebook as the sketch for an opera about Macbeth. This is also in D minor and it has been suggested that he had the three witches in mind when he wrote the music. Indeed, the persistent throbbing triad in the piano played at the outset establishes the whimsical and haunting atmosphere that the cello lifts to a pitiful outburst continued by the violin. The mysterious and impressionistic use of tremolandos, the low rumblings in the piano part and the sublime melody make this movement one of Beethoven's darkest. The third movement is in sonata form and features upward major scales. The movement as a whole portrays spiritual clarity and a sense of well being. Overall, this Trio is one of the most passionate of Beethoven's chamber compositions.

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

1906–1975

Piano Trio No. 2, Op. 67 in E Minor

Shostakovich wrote his second piano trio in the summer of 1944 as a tribute to his close friend, the musicologist Ivan Sollertinsky. Earlier that year Sollertinsky, still a young man, had died of a heart attack while evacuating from Leningrad. Shostakovich described the jovial and eccentric Sollertinsky: “He was a brilliant scholar who spoke dozens of languages and kept his diary in ancient Portuguese to keep it safe from prying eyes. He found great pleasure in a merry and liberated life, even though he worked very hard. Sadly, people will probably remember only that his tie was askew and that a new suit on him looked old in five minutes.”

In his trio Shostakovich incorporates themes suggestive of both Russian folk song and dance music of eastern European Jews. At the time he composed his Opus 67 Trio, Shostakovich had just received grim reports of massacres of Jewish concentration camp inmates at the hands of the Nazis. Although Shostakovich never professed descriptive intentions, many listeners at the work's premiere heard musical depictions of the doomed dancing at the edges of their graves.

The opening Andante begins with a remarkable sonority—a wistful theme played in harmonics by the cello with the accompaniment of the violin in its lowest register. After this introduction, the movement develops its folklike themes in an atmosphere of elegiac thoughtfulness. In contrast, the energetic Allegro non troppo, propelled by emphatic dance rhythms, conveys a turbulent *joie de vivre*.

The Largo is a dark and funereal chaconne built on repetitions of eight chords intoned by the piano as the violin and cello sing a sorrowful duet. The majestic dialogue between the piano and strings is continuously varied. This powerful movement serves as an introduction to the finale, which bears the true emotional weight of the trio. In the Allegretto there is a gradual increase in tension as the ever more frenzied themes suggest macabre dances of death. The soulful Russian folk theme of the first movement returns, and the first dance theme of the finale is repeated. The eight chords of the Largo's chaconne are reiterated. The opening bars of the dance theme return, now articulated hesitantly. The work concludes with quiet chords in the piano. (Note by Nancy Monsman)

MAURICE RAVEL
Piano Trio in A Minor

1875–1937

By 1914 Ravel had already been toying with the idea of writing a piano trio for some eight years and is even reported to have said to his friend and pupil Maurice Delage: “I’ve written my trio. Now all I need are the themes.” But in an autobiographical note he dictated in 1928 his only comment on the completed work was that it was “Basque in coloring.” This puzzled commentators until, some years after his death, the opening theme of the first movement was discovered among sketches for his unfinished work for piano and orchestra *Zaspik Bat* (“The Seven Provinces”), based on Basque themes.

The first movement is in sonata form, but inevitably Ravel introduces his own modifications, as with the second theme which appears unconventionally in the tonic A minor. In the development, Ravel builds up tension by means of continually fluctuating tempi, while at the reprise the first theme on the piano is reduced to its 3+2+3 rhythm in order to accommodate the simultaneous presentation of the second theme on the strings (it may be worth recording that Ravel spoke admiringly of the reprise in the first movement of the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, likewise disguised). In the matter of instrumental balance, Ravel frequently doubles violin and cello at a distance of two octaves, placing the right hand of the piano between them.

“Pantoum,” the title of the second movement, is taken from a Malay verse form, imitated by Hugo, Gautier and Baudelaire among others, in which the second and fourth lines of each quatrain become the first and third lines of the next. For years it was rather casually assumed that in adopting this title Ravel was merely indulging vague exotic inclinations. But nothing about Ravel’s composing was ever vague, and in 1975 the British scholar Brian Newbould proved that Ravel does in fact adhere closely to the structure outlined above and, what is more, observes a further requirement of the original form—that the poem (or movement) deal with two separate ideas pursued in parallel, in this case, the brittle opening theme on the piano and the subsequent smoother one on strings two octaves apart. Each of these themes thus has a real continuation (which we hear in performance) and a notional one (which is unheard but provided the composer a private satisfaction).

These exigencies would be enough to keep most composers occupied, but Ravel goes one step further and superimposes these games on a traditional ABA form, whose middle section is in a different meter! It could be that he was trying to outdo Debussy, who had set Baudelaire’s pantoum “*Harmonie du soir*” in 1889. But at any rate this extraordinarily intricate structure lends some credence to his remark about only needing the themes.

In contrast with the whirling motion of the “Pantoum,” the “Passacaille” that follows is obsessively linear—eleven statements of an eight-bar phrase, rising to a climax and then receding again. Even more than the “Pantoum,” perhaps, this movement is a tribute to the teaching of André Gedalge, the work’s dedicatee, to whom Ravel was ever grateful for his technical advice. In the last movement, the alternation of 5/4 and 7/4 bars returns us to the metric instability of the first movement, but the structure is even more firmly that of sonata

form with a second theme in the shape of massive piano chords. Ravel's work on this movement coincided with the declaration of war in August, which may possibly explain the trumpet calls in the development. Typically, he wrote off this work, in which his technical mastery is seen in all its dazzling perfection, as "just another Trio."

That disclaimer was, however, to some extent for public consumption. In his heart, Ravel was passionate about compositional technique and about his role in its progress: to close friends he would occasionally unbutton to the extent of saying: "Well, you know, nobody has ever done that before!"

Program notes by Trio con Brio Copenhagen unless otherwise noted.