

# WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 14 December 2022  
7.30pm

## Gould Piano Trio

Lucy Gould violin  
Richard Lester cello  
Benjamin Frith piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Trio in E flat Op. 1 No. 1 (1794-5)

*I. Allegro*  
*II. Adagio cantabile*  
*III. Scherzo. Allegro assai*  
*IV. Finale. Presto*

Variations in G on 'Ich bin der Schneider Kakadu'  
Op. 121a (?1803 rev. 1816)

*Interval*

Piano Trio in D Op. 70 No. 1 'Ghost' (1808)

*I. Allegro vivace e con brio*  
*II. Largo assai ed espressivo*  
*III. Presto*

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**Beethoven** was determined to create a stir in the world with his Opus 1 piano trios, published by subscription in August 1795 with a dedication to his patron, Prince Karl Lichnowsky. He succeeded, triumphantly. All three trios were enthusiastically received, and made the composer a handsome profit. Yet with their four-movement structures and intensity of argument, they must have seemed like a headlong assault on the traditional notion of the piano trio as a small-scale domestic genre. Where Haydn and Mozart's trios are exquisite accompanied keyboard sonatas, Beethoven's become symphonies for three instruments.

With their urbane, smiling surface, the first two movements of the Piano Trio in E flat Op. 1 No. 1 evoke Beethoven's idol Mozart. Yet their textural richness (the strings now compete on virtually equal terms with the keyboard) and sheer breadth of scale are hallmarks of the ambitious young genius. In the opening *Allegro* there is expansion at almost every level, from the leisurely proliferation of themes in the exposition to the huge coda - a Beethoven hallmark.

The *Adagio cantabile* is just as expansive, a luxuriant rondo with a first episode fashioned as a soulful love duet for violin and cello. Opening 'off-key', the mercurial third movement is the earliest of Beethoven's true scherzos. While Mozart's spirit lies behind the first two movements, the *Finale* suggests Haydn in its verve and brilliance, and in the witty capital Beethoven makes of the initial leaping figure. True to form, though, Beethoven expands the coda far beyond the dimensions of Haydn and Mozart.

In his early Viennese years Beethoven had satisfied popular demand for variations on operatic hit tunes with a stream of works involving his own instrument. These included ten Variations on 'Ich bin der Schneider Kakadu' ('I am Kakadu the tailor') from Wenzel Müller's 1794 comic Singspiel *Die Schwestern von Prag* ('The sisters from Prague'). Some two decades later, in 1816, Beethoven wrote to the Leipzig publisher Härtel offering 'Variations with an introduction and supplement, for piano, violin and cello, on a well-known theme by Müller, one of my earlier compositions, though it is not among the reprehensible ones.'

It was probably the revival of Müller's opera in Vienna in 1814 that prompted Beethoven to dust down his youthful variations, exploiting the extended compass of the newest pianos and adding his 'supplement' (i.e. coda) plus the exaggeratedly sombre G minor introduction that gradually outlines the 'Kakadu' theme. When the naïve, Papageno-ish tune emerges blithely in G major, it is with an absurd sense of anticlimax - the kind of comic deflation Dohnányi would emulate in his *Variations on a Nursery Tune*.

Following the traditional pattern, the variations adorn the melody with increasingly brilliant figuration, though No. 5, with its bare contrapuntal textures, and No. 7, an imitative duo for violin and cello alone,

deconstruct rather than merely decorate the theme. After an adagio variation in the minor key (No. 9), full of chromatic pathos, and a jolly 6/8 variation, Beethoven launches a long coda by turning Müller's innocuous ditty into a mock-learned fugato.

After the mid-1790s Beethoven abandoned the piano trio medium for over a decade, returning to it only after completing the 'Pastoral' Symphony in the summer of 1808. As he informed the publisher Breitkopf & Härtel, he composed the two trios Op. 70 'because there is a shortage of such works'. In the autumn of 1808 Beethoven was living at the Viennese apartment of his close friend and (for a time) business adviser Countess Marie von Erdödy; and it was at her musical soirées that the new trios were first performed, by Beethoven and his friends the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh and the cellist Joseph Linke.

In the Op. 1 trios Beethoven had already given the two string instruments more of the limelight than they had enjoyed in the piano trios of Mozart and Haydn. With the Op. 70 trios their emancipation is complete. The three instruments now discourse as equals in kaleidoscopically varied textures, rich in the free contrapuntal interplay that is one of the glories of the Viennese Classical style.

The Piano Trio in D Op. 70 No. 1, the so-called 'Ghost', is the only one of Beethoven's mature piano trios in three movements. Its explosive unison opening is immediately countered by a disorientating F natural high in the cello's tenor register; the cello then slips back into D major with a beseeching lyrical melody that passes in turn to violin and piano. This opening at once establishes the volatile nature of a movement that trades on abrupt contrasts of texture and dynamics and, in the development, some of the Beethoven's knottiest imitative writing. It is typical of Beethoven that the 'wrong-note' F natural near the beginning has long-term consequences, both in the recapitulation, where it initiates a poetic expansion of the lyrical cello melody, and in the finale.

The D minor *Largo assai ed espressivo* is the slowest slow movement in all Beethoven, and the most impressionistic. The weirdly fragmented thematic material, unstable harmonies and sombre, quasi-orchestral textures, with eerie tremolos in the bowels of the keyboard, combine to produce music of chilling Gothic gloom. Many years later Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny recalled that the movement always reminded him of Banquo's ghost in *Macbeth*. The trio's nickname was born.

With its gracious themes and crystalline textures the finale restores us to a world of convivial normality. There is whimsical humour, too, in the main theme's hesitations and harmonic feints. These are deliciously amplified in the coda, while the implications of the first movement's rogue F natural make themselves felt in the brusque or ruminative shifts to distant flat keys.

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