

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 2 October 2022
7.30pm

Midori violin
Jonathan Biss piano
Antoine Lederlin cello

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*

Piano Trio in C minor Op. 1 No. 3 (1794-5)

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Andante cantabile con variazioni •
III. Menuetto. Quasi Allegro • IV. Finale. Prestissimo*

Interval

Piano Trio in B flat Op. 97 'Archduke' (1810-1)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Scherzo. Allegro •
III. Andante cantabile ma però con moto - •
IV. Allegro moderato*



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When in November 1792 the 21-year-old **Beethoven** left his native Bonn for Vienna, his plan was clear: to study composition with Haydn before launching himself as a composer-virtuoso in the tradition of the recently dead Mozart. With the help of aristocratic contacts, the young firebrand quickly conquered the city's salons with his dazzling keyboard improvisations. Soon after his arrival in the capital he became a house guest of the musically gifted Prince Lichnowsky. The Prince held regular soirees at which Beethoven was a frequent star attraction; and it was at one of these evenings, probably in September 1795, that he gave the official première of the three piano trios then recently published as his Op. 1, with a dedication to Lichnowsky.

Beethoven was determined to challenge the Viennese musical elite with his first published opus. With their largely emancipated string parts, their weighty sonata structures and their intensity of musical dialectic, the three works were a headlong assault on the 18th-century notion of the piano trio as a small-scale domestic genre. Each is in four movements rather than the customary two or three. These are not elevated divertissements, but symphonies for three instruments; and if the cello sometimes doubles the keyboard bass, as it rarely does in Beethoven's later trios, it often asserts its individuality in a way that Mozart only intermittently and Haydn almost never allowed.

The first two movements of the Piano Trio in E flat, Op. 1 No. 1, are the most obviously Mozartian in the set, though the opening *Allegro's* thematic abundance and sheer breadth of scale are hallmarks of the young Beethoven. The *Adagio cantabile* is a luxuriant rondo with a first episode fashioned as a soulful love duet for violin and cello and an impassioned second episode in the outré key of A flat minor. After the first of Beethoven's true scherzi, the *Finale* suggests Haydn in its verve and brio, and in the witty capital Beethoven makes of the initial leaping figure.

In the Piano Trio in C minor, Op. 1 No. 3, Beethoven's subversiveness erupted in a work of explosive vehemence and dark lyric beauty. Haydn, recently returned from London, was among Prince Lichnowsky's guests at that 1795 soiree; and according to Beethoven's pupil Ferdinand Ries, the master was full of praise for Nos. 1 and 2 but taken aback by the C minor, Beethoven's favourite - though Ries's story of Haydn advising Beethoven not to publish it cannot be literally true, since the Trio was already in print.

Whatever Haydn's misgivings, Beethoven's earliest masterpiece in his most characteristic key gradually became one of his most popular works. The mysterious, 'pregnant' unison opening is, coincidentally or not, reminiscent of Mozart's piano concerto in the same key, K491. But the music is profoundly Beethovenian in its abrupt, extreme, contrasts, with violent rhetoric (the first page alone is peppered with *sforzando* accents) alternating with intense pathos and yearning lyricism. The famous heroic narratives of Beethoven's middle period are already in view.

The *Andante*, a set of variations in E flat on a characteristically plain, hymn-like theme, lowers the tension. But there are plenty of inventive, authentically Beethovenian moments, not least the boisterous third variation, with its brusque *sforzando* markings and twanging string pizzicatos. The third movement, somewhere between a minuet and a scherzo, returns to the C minor world of the first movement, with its restless pathos, irregular phrase lengths and explosive dynamic contrasts.

Marked *Prestissimo* (the tempo typifies the young Beethoven's determination to be 'extreme'), the finale juxtaposes violence, suppressed agitation and, in the eloquent second theme, lyrical tenderness. Its astonishing coda, held down to *pianissimo* virtually throughout, slips mysteriously to a distant B minor. Although the Trio ends in C major, there is minimal sense of harmonic resolution, let alone major-keyed optimism.

Dedicated to Beethoven's pupil and patron Archduke Rudolph, the B flat Piano Trio Op. 97 is the most serene and majestic of all piano trios. Beethoven began to sketch it in the spa of Baden-bei-Wien during the summer of 1810 and completed it the following March. Beethoven himself was the pianist in the official Viennese première on 11 April 1814, one of the last occasions when he played in public.

The Apollonian tone of the *Allegro moderato* is set by the glorious opening theme, with its broad harmonic motion and mingled grandeur and tenderness. It is typical of this most tranquil of Beethoven's great sonata structures that rather than modulating to the 'tensing' dominant, F, the music glides to the more remote G major for the equally lyrical second theme - the kind of key relationship Beethoven was to cultivate in his late works.

Beethoven enjoyed juxtaposing a lyrically expansive opening movement with a laconic scherzo - cases in point are the A major Cello Sonata Op. 69 and the String Quartet in E flat Op. 127. Like the *Scherzo* of Op. 127, the second movement of the 'Archduke' makes humorous play with an elementary rising scale, a vision of dry bones that is later transformed into a convivial *Ländler*. The Trio is Beethoven at his most eccentric, opening with a groping chromatic *fugato* then proceeding, incongruously, to a splashy salon waltz such as Weber might have written.

The *Andante cantabile*, in the relatively remote key of D major, is a series of meditative variations on a sublimely simple theme, somewhere between a sarabande and a hymn. In his middle-period works Beethoven often linked the slow movement with the finale, delighting in jolting the listener from timeless contemplation to the world of robust action - though the dancelike theme of the rondo finale is subtly foreshadowed in the *Andante's* closing bars. Beethoven makes much from the theme's harmonic ambivalence (it starts as if in the 'wrong' key of E flat) each time it returns, while the central episode irreverently punctuates an expressive new cantabile melody with fragments of the rondo theme.

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