

ATOS Trio

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Schubert, Piano Trio (“Sonata”) in B-flat Major, D. 28

In 1812, although he was a seminary student, Franz Schubert (1797-1828) experienced his first flush of creative energy in music. True, he was studying composition with Salieri (who, despite his bad rap in *Amadeus*, was kind to young composers such as Schubert), but that activity only produced vocal exercises. Schubert’s own impulses ran more toward songs, piano pieces, chamber music and musical theater.

We can see from the chronological catalog number “28” that the solitary movement in B-flat was one of the earliest of Schubert’s efforts. The dates on the manuscript show that it took the young composer more than a month to complete the piece. The music reflects the High Classic musical culture of the Vienna in which he worked. There is great care and delicate handling of the musical materials, and we perceive in his plethora of themes that “sociable spirit,” which Alfred Einstein identified in Schubert’s mature music.

Schubert’s title for this single-movement work was “Sonata.” Composed in sonata form with a repeated exposition, the movement is far beyond the academic exercises one might expect from his 28th composition. The handling of a large and somewhat complex form is surely on a professional level. What is more important, however, is that Schubert has left us a sizeable chamber-music essay imbued with great charm and stamped with his inimitable personality.

Kirchner, Piano Trio No. 1

The son of Russian parents, Leon Kirchner (1919-) was born in Brooklyn but grew up in Los Angeles from the age of nine. There he attended college, studying with Arnold Schoenberg, who became his principle mentor and influence. Kirchner obtained his advanced degrees at U.C. Berkeley, where he studied with Ernest Bloch. Later, he worked with Roger Sessions.

Kirchner has had a distinguished career as a composer and teacher. He started teaching at the University of Southern California in 1948. From 1954, he taught at Mills College next to Milhaud, and in 1961, he succeeded Walter Piston at Harvard, where he retired in 1989. Over the years, Kirchner has garnered many awards and honors. He won the Pulitzer Prize for his Third Quartet (with electronic tape) and twice he won the New York Critics Circle Award for his first two string quartets. His list of commission reads like a who’s who of symphony orchestras, festivals, and prestigious societies. G. Schirmer, Kirchner’s publisher, cites Music for Cello and Orchestra (written for Yo-Yo Ma) and a second piano trio (written for the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio) among his most significant works of recent years.

Biographer Alexander Ringer writes:

Copland observed in the 1950s that there are moments in Kirchner's music that seemed nearly "out of control." However, in the course of time such youthful ardor — especially evident in the Piano Trio of 1954 — inevitably yielded to more reflective manifestations of "inner necessity."

Pianist Cheryl Seltzer, co-director of the Continuum ensemble, which has recorded the Piano Trio No. 1, gives the following insightful description of the work:

By the time of the Trio for Violin, Cello, and Piano (1954), Kirchner had abandoned the traditional scheme of distinctly characterized movements in favor of more continuous structures. Here, the two movements are interdependent. The first, longer, movement evolves in a manner similar to the Piano Sonata, but the fluctuations between the slow, lyric theme, introduced by the cello, and an agitated section are treated with greater complexity and unpredictability. The movement ends as with a question mark, the piano's final bell-like chords a bridge between the two movements. The second movement reestablishes the moments of introspective calm from the first movement. The ascending gestures of the restless first movement now yield to a falling, consoling figure. Agitated elements, however, gradually make inroads and aggressively drive the work to its final powerful resolution.

Schubert, Adagio in E-flat Major ("Notturmo"), D. 897

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) completed only two full piano trios. Most research has placed both of them in the last year of the composer's life with a question mark. However, two pieces of evidence suggest that the Piano Trio in B-flat Major, Op. 99 (D. 898) was composed in 1825. First, the second theme of the first movement is based on a Schubert song of 1825, "Des Sangers Habe." Second, an Adagio movement, later nicknamed "Notturmo," may have been written as early as 1825. It is generally agreed that the "Notturmo" was originally intended to be the slow movement of the Piano Trio in B-flat.

During 1825, Schubert spent a holiday in the town of Gastein, and there, he heard a work song sung by pile drivers, which was in a strong triple meter, the second beat always being silent — to be supplied by the unison fall of the sledge hammers. Schubert employed this pattern in the Andante of his 1825 Piano Sonata in B-flat and again in the extended main section of the "Notturmo."

The opening of the "Notturmo" gives no hint of that rhythm, however. The piece's nickname is appropriate, however, for a quiet moonlit atmosphere pervades its introduction section. Then, rather suddenly, the main section is initiated. Its mood is anything but that of a work song. Although we can easily hear the predominant strong upbeat-downbeat pattern, Schubert uses this to ingeniously guide us through a range of moods — from majestic through

moonlight and romance back again to the majestic and a mood of awed suspension. From this feeling of suspended time, the music reaches its final moonlit moments.

Brahms, Piano Trio in B Major, Op. 8

The Piano Trio in B was the first published chamber work by Johannes Brahms (1833-1897), but it was doubtless not his first trio, and certainly not the first chamber work he composed. There is evidence that Brahms destroyed some 20 string quartets before allowing one (Op. 51) to be published in 1873. Two or more piano trios may have preceded Opus 8, and it is possible that a Trio in A, which came to light in 1938, was an early work that Brahms meant to destroy.

Brahms completed the Piano Trio in B early in 1854, and its first version was published the same year. Clara Schumann found the work beautiful but did not especially care for the first movement. She felt the entire work was repetitious, and the first movement was particularly long. This movement contained no fewer than five themes, which did not contrast well with one another. After a normal development section there was a second development — a fugato — imbedded in the recapitulation.

In 1888, Brahms's publisher Simrock wrote to the composer asking if he would care to make some revisions in his early works for the purpose of publishing second editions. Brahms replied enthusiastically, "I shall certainly revise, and in such a manner that you will be justified in announcing it on the title page." Thus in 1890, Simrock published a new version of the Opus 8 Trio. Brahms had completely overhauled the first movement, making it more concise by deleting the fugato and replacing several subordinate themes with one incisive one. The Adagio and Finale were treated similarly. A superfluous Allegro section in the slow movement was removed, and the overabundance of material in the final Allegro was trimmed to improve its formal integrity. Only the Scherzo escaped major surgery, for Brahms revised its coda only. In this version, we hear the Piano Trio in B today, revised by a mature hand but missing none of the youthful exuberance of its original creation.

Program Notes by Dr. Michael Fink
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