

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. MICHAEL FINK
COPYRIGHT 2011. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Beethoven, Piano Trio in C minor, Op. 1 No. 3

October 29, 1792

Dear Beethoven,

In leaving for Vienna today, you are about to realize a long-cherished desire. The wandering genius of Mozart still grieves for his passing. With Haydn=s unquenchable spirit, it has found shelter but no home and longs to find some lasting habitation. Work hard, and the spirit of Mozart’s genius will come to you from Haydn=s hands.

Your friend always,
Waldstein

Armed with these words of encouragement from his patron in Bonn, young Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) was off to conquer Vienna. It is quite possible that he took piano trios with him for, in about a year, he played all three of the trios which would ultimately form his *Opus 1*. This performance took place in the home of Count Carl von Lichnowsky in the presence of Haydn, who “said many pretty things about them,” according to Beethoven’s later student, Ferdinand Ries. However, Haydn was reserved about the *C Minor Trio*, for he believed that “this trio would not be so quickly and easily understood and so favorably received by the public.”

Whether or not Haydn was correct, the third trio is certainly the weightiest of the three. Cast in the key of C Minor, it shares the profundity of several other Beethoven works in that key: *The Fifth Symphony*, the “*Pathétique*” *Piano Sonata*, and the *Fourth Piano Concerto*, for example. We hear this “weight” immediately as the music begins. The chain of short themes progresses from dark introspection to sunny extroversion. The

development that follows is best described in the words of annotator James M. Keller: “an audaciously dramatic scene with constantly changing character.” The recapitulation then seems like opening the book again at the beginning, yet we are grateful for this review.

The second movement forecasts Beethoven’s genius in composing in the theme-and-variations form. The simple theme is very much of the same stripe as later hymn-like themes he would invent. Seamlessly, the composer then moves into a smooth process of transforming this into variation essays that express his vast imagination.

An obligatory minuet follows — in a sense, a lightweight, refreshing foil to the profundity of the first two movements. The gracefulness of the Trio section demonstrates how pleasant and transparent a minor key can be.

The fire and turbulence of the work’s finale may have been a negative influence on the opinion of Haydn, whose finales were legendary for being playful and fun. Beethoven’s serious drama is nearly operatic in format and outwardly expressed emotion. We hear a panoply of such emotion in the exposition, which is later developed and intensified. Each instrument seems to compete for emotional intensity. This emotion seems to just play itself out as the ensemble brings the music to a surprisingly quiet ending.

Ravel, Piano Trio in A Minor

Maurice Ravel (1875)-1937 was never a prolific composer, and his output for chamber media was correspondingly sparse. After completing his *String Quartet* in 1903 as a

student at the Paris Conservatoire, Ravel wrote little chamber music of significance until embarking on his Piano Trio in 1914. Early that year the composer retired to the countryside to work uninterrupted, but he soon developed problems. One was his preoccupation with a proposed piano concerto on Basque themes, which never materialized. Then, during the early summer, he seems to have experienced a form of writer's block, and he became disgusted with his work on the Trio. Finally, when France entered World War I in August, Ravel became determined to finish the work quickly so that he could volunteer for military service. He worked feverishly at the Trio during August and wrote to a friend,

I am working—yes, working with the sureness and lucidity of a madman. At the same time I get terrible fits of depression and suddenly find myself sobbing over the sharps and flats!

By the end of the month, Ravel had finished what many consider one of the most significant chamber works of the 20th century.

In the first movement, cast roughly in sonata form, the most striking feature is the rhythm. The meter marking is 8/8, and the resulting asymmetrical rhythmic design of each measure is usually some variant of 3 + 2 + 3 eighth notes. This is the Bulgarian rhythm which Bartók used frequently, but it is also the rhythm of certain Basque dances which Ravel was thinking about all the time while writing the Trio.

Rhythm and meter are also critical factors in the second movement, “Pantoum.” A “pantoum” (or “phantoum”) is a poetic form of probable Malayan origin used by

Baudelaire and other French poets. It consists of bringing back two lines of one quatrain in the following one, which gives the impression of two distinct ideas juxtaposed. Ravel carries out this principle in both the structure and the rhythm of this high-spirited movement. The alternations and combinations of mosaic themes of the movement are crowned in the middle by an extended passage in polymeter. Here, the strings continue in the original meter of 3/4, while the piano accompanies with rich chords in 2/2 time.

The third movement is a formally strict 20th century adaptation of the Baroque French *Passacaille*, a contrapuntal variation form. The nature of this movement hints at why Ravel dedicated his Trio to André Gédalge, the famous contrapuntist and Ravel's former teacher.

In the Trio's brilliant finale, written in a free rondo form, asymmetrical rhythm again comes into play. Passages in 5/4 time alternate with 7/4 segments. Ravel also becomes more orchestral and virtuosic in this movement, with its shimmering cello tremolos and quick violin arpeggios. Rich, thick chords in the piano work rhythmically both with and against the strings to give the impression of "floating" meter, a feature that strongly unifies the entire Trio.

Brahms, Piano Trio in C minor, Op. 101

. . . At last I felt strong enough to try the wonderful, touching *Trio in C Minor*. What a composition it is! Ingenious throughout in its passion, its strength of thought, its charm, its expression! No other work by Johannes has ever so completely overwhelmed me

So reads Clara Schumann's diary of June 1887, a year after the completion of the trio. Johannes Brahms (1933-1897) had spent the summer of 1886 composing in a particularly idyllic setting beside Lake Thun (Switzerland), which was a change from his usual beautiful summer retreat of Pörschach by the Wörthersee.

However, "idyllic" is hardly the word we would use to describe the first movement of the very terse *C Minor Trio*. "Fierce" could describe the first theme group with its alternation of dramatic gestures and hammering rhythms. The second theme is gentler but soon becomes somewhat cerebral with contrapuntal tendencies. This sonata-form movement is noted for its tautness and brevity. The exposition is not repeated, and although Brahms alludes to several themes in the development section, none are discussed fully. An economical recapitulation rounds out the movement.

The *Presto non assai* is one of Brahms's atmospheric scherzos. Still in the shadowy minor key, the muted strings and sustained keyboard part play out a three-section character piece. Pizzicato passages in the middle section are particularly effective, and when the opening material returns, the composer enhances it with new textures.

Metrical asymmetry in the *Andante grazioso* is perhaps its most striking feature. Brahms uses combinations of 3/4 and 2/4. Even the middle section alternates 9/8 with 6/8, again creating somewhat off-balance phrasing. These asymmetrical patterns have been attributed to the composer's love of Serbian music.

Brahms once commented, “I should think the trio’s finale requires first very careful handling, then the reverse!” Indeed, this very compact sonata movement begins with precision and strength, but soon this gives way to a more rhapsodic style, and the entire finale consummates in pure power. Brahms biographer Karl Geiringer asserts that this trio is “more vigorous and powerful in character than the older compositions, just as the Swiss landscape is more magnificent than the delightful country round Pörschach.”