

Beethoven, Variations for Piano Trio in E-flat Major, Op. 44

Beethoven was born and grew up in the Rhineland town of Bonn, for centuries one of the most important seats of political power north of the Alps. Bonn was the residence of one of the Electors, the group of princes charged from the 14th century with selecting the head of the Holy Roman Empire, which, with one exception, had been a member of the Habsburg family since 1438. Beethoven's paternal grandfather, Ludwig, after whom the boy was named, served as Kapellmeister at the Bonn court after 1761, and two years later got his son, Johann, hired as a singer in the musical household. The child born to Johann and Maria Magdalena Beethoven on December 16, 1770 would, of course, follow in the family musical tradition for his vocation, and young Ludwig was trained in the discipline by various local teachers, though his liberal education was largely neglected. In 1784, the boy was appointed assistant to Christian Gottlob Neefe, the organist at the Electoral Chapel; Beethoven later added the posts of cembalist for the opera and composer to his court duties. It was Neefe who gave Ludwig a solid grounding in the theory of music, and encouraged him in writing his first compositions and developing his gift as a virtuoso pianist. In May 1787, Beethoven visited Vienna for the first time to play for Mozart ("Keep your eyes on him; some day he will give the world something to talk about," Mozart predicted), but he had to rush back to Bonn in early July when his mother was taken mortally ill. Johann lost control of his life after his wife died: his fondness for drink turned into debilitating alcoholism, and Ludwig became virtual head of the household (there were two younger brothers, Caspar and Nikolaus) at the age of seventeen. Beethoven sought solace in the company of friends, especially the Breuning family, whom he called his "guardian angels," and Ferdinand Ernst Gabriel, Count Waldstein, who, by late 1792, had convinced the young musician to leave Bonn and settle in Vienna for good.

Though the music of Beethoven's youthful Bonn years does not bear comparison with the heaven-storming masterpieces of his later decades (he was 22 when he went to Vienna), it does show true talent for composition, a thorough understanding of the contemporary stylistic idioms, and occasional flashes of the brilliance to come. The Variations for Piano, Violin and Cello in E-flat major appears to have been written in 1792, shortly before Beethoven moved to Vienna. The piece acquired its artificially high (and potentially lucrative) opus number — 44 — when Franz Hoffmeister published the score in Leipzig in 1804. The theme, original with Beethoven, is a skeletal affair, simply outlining the harmonic changes without providing a distinct melody. (The finale of the "Eroica," also in variation form, begins in a similar manner.) Beethoven worked fourteen conventional variations and a coda upon this lean material, allowing all three instruments leading moments (though the piano, his instrument, is always *primus inter pares*) and eliciting some deeper emotions with two minor-key episodes.

Notes written by Dr. Richard E. Rodda

For Kilichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio with the Miami String Quartet – Nov.1, 2004 / The Kennedy Center website

Schönberg, Die Verklärte Nacht

On March 19, 1902, Zemlinsky wrote of the premiere of Arnold Schönberg's *Die Verklärte Nacht* string sextet by the Rosé Quartet the previous day, "with the exception of a few great lengths and affectations in the middle of the work, I have been greatly impressed. There are passages of genuine beauty and deepest feeling as well as of genuine, and great and unusual art in them. *You must absolutely* revise it again, publish it, and seek its dissemination. A great deal of Tristan can still be heard, but you know what I think about it. We, our true friends, were enthused... All in all I am proud of you - something will come of it, something *must* come of it. Try to give Richard Strauss the sextet as soon as possible and try to get a performance in Berlin. You will certainly benefit from it. The time will be coming for all of us!"

Schönberg had composed the Sextet after Richard Demel's poem *Die Verklärte Nacht* already in 1899. Immediately thereafter Zemlinsky arranged for a performance by the Wiener Tonkünstlerverein., which had premiered Schönberg's String Quartet in D major in 1898. But there the work met with rejection ("It sounds as if one had wiped over the still wet Tristan score!). As a result, the premiere was delayed until 1902. At this time no work by Schönberg was yet available in published form; the collections of songs forming his opp.1 and 2 were not published by the Dreililien-Verlag in Berlin until October 1903, and thus Schönberg had great need of Zemlinsky's encouraging words after the premiere. The artistic director of the publishing company, Max Marschalk, accepted the sextet for publication in April 1904, but it did not appear in print until May 1905. In the meantime, however, the sextet had experienced a number of performances, and increasingly contributed to Schönberg's renown. The extensive one-movement work is highly expressive, and even today numbers among Schönberg's most successful compositions, especially given the fact that he reworked it for string orchestra in 1916.

Moreover, Webern, Berg, and Willi Reich undertook efforts to transfer the sextet to piano, but these remained unfinished or unpublished. The Schönberg pupil Eduard Steuermann (1892-1964), who since his collaboration in the premiere of *Pierrot Lunaire* in 1912 had participated in almost all the premières of chamber works with piano by Schönberg, completed the present version for piano trio in 1932. The arrangement was made as a birthday present for the Viennese Maecenas Alice Möller, who had studied with Schönberg and Steuermann, and whose house was an important musical meeting place in Vienna. Steuermann had to emigrate from Vienna in 1936, but Alice Möller saved the manuscript and gave it back to him after the war during a meeting in Israel. Today it is among Steuermann's papers in the Library of Congress in Washington, and was published for the first time in 1979.

The transfer of this tonally very nuanced string sextet to an instrumentation with piano is not an easy matter. In 1923, the Düsseldorf music critic and enthusiast Carl Heinzen had a piano transcription of the work sent to Schönberg for his expert evaluation, but it evidently did not convince the composer. He replied to Heinzen, "Perhaps I should also not fail to mention to you that the transcriptions emanating from my school distinguish themselves stylistically very essentially and thus fundamentally from those used until now: we no longer write them 'for reading' but 'for playing', no longer write voice lines but "parts that can be played!"

Perhaps no one was so ideally equipped as was Eduard Steuermann, who as an interpreter, was so familiar with Schönberg's chamber music, for transforming the tonality of *Die Verklärte Nacht* into "fingerings"- so that his trio is not only a version "for reading", but also genuinely "for playing".

Notes by Irmlinde Capelle

Schumann, Piano Trio no. 1 in D minor, Op. 63

Despite his frustrated and aborted attempts to become a concert pianist – he permanently injured his fingers in an overzealous attempt to practice using mechanical invention of his own faulty design – Schumann retained an instinctive and idiomatic genius as a composer for the instrument making him one of the most important of the central romantic composers for the piano. Schumann's greatest music generally comprises his compositions involving the piano: the vast array of distinctive music for solo piano, art songs and the chamber works featuring the piano quintet, piano quartet and three piano trios. Of the three piano trios all composed between 1847 and 1851, the first in d minor is the most well known. As Schumann was the quintessential romantic composer, so this composition might well be regarded as one of the definitive romantic trios. The musical language is brooding, idiosyncratic and frequently tangential in the manner of Schumann's multi-character musical fairy tales. The piano writing definitely occupies a mid-18th century fantastical niche with the entire ensemble sometimes swelling into symphonic proportions. While there is a definite classical structure to the work including a four-movement plan and great deal of clever craftsmanship in the scherzo, the trio is quite individualistic. It has been stated that Schumann was the first to interject the formally established piano trio with a strongly personal style.

The massive opening movement is built from a searching chromatic theme, restless and unresolved as it tumbles its way through canonic imitations, rumbling figurations and rhythmic feints. This is music that follows a long, subtle narrative without the strongly articulated cadences of the crisp classical style. A turbulent passage of striding chords makes way into a second, literally uplifting theme that still moves with indefinite, undulating gestures, another leg in the romantic's unending wanderlust. The exposition rounds out with the first theme briefly transformed into a major tonality, a renewed sense that this probing journey might be making progress after all. Schumann free intermixes all these elements in the development along with a brand new theme that appears at first like a strange apparition in distant soft colors, draws briefly closer with greater majesty, but ultimately is swallowed up by the prevailing, irresolute gloom.

The scherzo is deceptively simple in its musical means, captivating in its effect. The strings join in unison to play a game of follow-the-leader with the piano moving up and down simple scale passages in canonic imitation. A dotted rhythm with an intermittent delirious swirl maintains the momentum of music that is less than monothematic, it is essentially non-thematic: a narrative of vectors and gestures. The entertainment intensifies through imitations in contrary motion and the delightful irony that while the strings join as one, the lone pianist splits in two with each hand becoming a separate,

divergent part. Astonishingly, the trio only continues this minimalist play providing a contrast through a smooth rather than dotted rhythm and the split of the string unison into separate musical threads.

The third, slow movement is the definite center of gravity. Intimate, lonely, vulnerable, a protracted lament gives the appearance of a violin sonata. Entering in its higher register, the cello softly joins in aching reply then intertwining conversation with gentle, long lines, a pervasive aspect of the entire trio. The music gains momentum as the duet soars to brighter prospects which, alas, prove only fleeting. The lament returns, darkening into tragedy, dirge and devastation. The music hangs, dejected on an unresolved cadence.

Schumann resolves this lugubrious standstill with a bright, high-spirited romp of colorful characters in a bold march of courage, triumph and orchestral textures. This multi-faceted parade is a Schumann specialty. In this case, he is particularly effective in crafting an organic whole using rich thematic variations that all derive from the initial material. In spite of (or precisely because of) the erstwhile angst, the music steadily builds to a glorious ending that, like other Schumann conclusions, may propel you to your feet with an energetic shout of glory. The composite work is a definitive study in bi-polarity, perhaps a personal reflection of Schumann's own soul.

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