

PROGRAM INFORMATION

Sponsor: **San Antonio Chamber Music Society**

Concert Date: **April 28, 2019**

Artist: **Wu Han, piano**
Philip Setzer, violin
David Finckel, cello

Piano Trio in in E-flat Major, Op. 1, No. 1

Ludwig van Beethoven
1770-1827

Allegro
Adagio cantabile
Scherzo
Finale: Presto

Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor, Op. 67 (1944)

Dmitri Shostakovich
1906-1975

Andante-Moderato-Poco piu mosso
Allegro con brio
Largo-Allegretto

-intermission-

Trio No. 2 in C minor, Op. 66

Felix Mendelssohn
1809-1847

Allegro energico e con fuoco
Andante espressivo
Scherzo: Molto allegro quasi presto
Finale; Allegro appassionato

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Trio no. 1 in E-flat Major

Approximate duration: 34 minutes

Despite the burgeoning tensions between master and pupil, Beethoven's Opus 1 Trios are nevertheless audibly indebted to Haydn, as well as to Mozart, the character of whose Piano Quartet in E-flat, K. 493, the first of these Trios, also in E-flat, calls to mind. For Haydn's part, his influence is evident in the E-flat Trio's melodic sensibility and, especially, in its independence of voices.

The Allegro first movement's opening theme is marked by a series of ascending arpeggios—a gesture known as the “Mannheim rocket”—separated by three chords. The Mannheim rocket was fashionable at the time, named for its frequent use by composers associated with the Mannheim court orchestra to show off the brilliant virtuosity of that celebrated “army of generals.” Before proceeding to the second theme, the Trio offers a glimpse of Beethoven's obsessive developmental tendencies, fully realized in later works: the three instruments toss the Mannheim rocket gesture back and forth, each extending it in turn, while another voice comments. Another series of three chords, at double the note value of those in the opening measures, followed by a simple legato line, signals the arrival of the second theme group, which in turn unfolds as a generous succession of affable melodic ideas. The short but sure-handed development section and subsequent recapitulation confirm Beethoven's total integration of the formal model set by Haydn and Mozart.

The tender Adagio cantabile is a rondo, shaded with remarkable subtlety and expressive nuance. Consider the second episode, in e-flat minor: following a thoughtful utterance in the piano, the violin presents an ascending melody—a prayer of supplication, perhaps—soon taken up by the cello. But the mood of this passage is short-lived: the atmosphere turns suddenly sentimental, then assertive—all within the span of a few measures. While this slow movement may not break any new ground in its formal structure, a subtle but powerful sense of drama nevertheless plays out, framed by seemingly innocuous (but, indeed, deeply felt) music.

The Scherzo shows a restraint perhaps unexpected in the first published scherzo from such a youthful firebrand as Beethoven in 1794. But likewise does this movement demonstrate some of the propensities that would come to define Beethoven's voice over the following decades, such as his obsessive working-over of short motivic cells and shockingly abrupt dynamic contrasts.

The exposition of the sonata-form Presto finale recalls Haydn in its mischievous sense of humor, right from its opening gesture: cheeky ascending leaps of a tenth in the piano. The music that follows, with its rhythmic pep and effervescent energy, might evoke children at play. Likewise the extended recapitulation. But the movement's development section unleashes a sudden outburst beyond even Haydn's most forward-looking *Sturm-und-Drang* moments. Cast into relief against the innocuous material that comes before and after, this music's ferocity is only further intensified. The moment passes quickly, but makes an indelible impression. It is as though Beethoven offers but a taste of what more he has up his sleeve.

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DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)

Piano Trio no. 2 in e minor, op. 67

Composed in 1944.

Premiered on November 14, 1944 in Leningrad by violinist D. Tsiganov, cellist S. Shirinsky, and the composer.

Shostakovich dedicated his Second Piano Trio to the memory of Ivan Sollertinsky, a prominent Russian music critic and cultural commentator, as well as one of the composer's closest friends and staunchest supporters. Shostakovich biographer Solomon Volkov writes, "His legendary erudition... made Sollertinsky an irreplaceable advisor and mentor. The composer could speak frankly to him about everything under the sun, from sex to Schoenberg." Shostakovich regarded Sollertinsky with devoted affection, once writing to his friend: "I consider you the only musician, and, besides that, a personal friend, and in any situation of life I will always and in every way support you." Such a promise of support was not an insignificant one during Stalin's reign: any prominent cultural figures who displeased the dictator were marked men, as were all those who allied themselves with them.

This in fact would be Sollertinsky's fate for championing Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. With its unflinching perspective on sexuality and violence combined with the poised craftsmanship of Shostakovich's score, *Lady Macbeth* was quickly hailed as a classic of Russian opera. It received its premiere in 1934 and met with universal acclaim. Two years later, however, Stalin attended a performance of *Lady Macbeth* and, scandalized by both the subject matter and Shostakovich's bold score, walked out before the final act. Two days later, a now-legendary editorial appeared in *Pravda*, the national newspaper and unofficial Stalinist mouthpiece, entitled "Muddle Instead of Music." The editorial, which offered a scathing attack on Shostakovich's opera, ran unsigned but was understood to represent the official view of the Communist Party; many, including Shostakovich, suspected with good reason that Stalin authored the editorial himself.

Despite his denunciation of *Lady Macbeth*, Stalin nevertheless recognized the importance of the arts to the cultivation of a powerful Russian civilization as well as Shostakovich's immense value to Russia's cultural life. For this reason, Shostakovich—though never safe—was ultimately spared the worst of Stalin's wrath/ Sollertinsky, however, did not hold the same value for Stalin, and became a public scapegoat. For supporting *Lady Macbeth*, Sollertinsky was labeled by *Pravda* as a "defender of bourgeois perversion in music" as an "ideologue of the movement that crippled Shostakovich's music." Around this time, Shostakovich received a recommendation on Stalin's behalf from the chairman of the Committee on Arts Affairs that he "free himself from the influence of some seville critics, like Sollertinsky, who promote the worst of his writing."

While mounting pressure made complete and open support of Sollertinsky impossible, Shostakovich nevertheless remained loyal to his friend. After the critic died suddenly from a heart spasm in February 1944, Shostakovich commemorated their bond with his Piano Trio in e minor. In 1946, somewhat ironically, the Trio received the prestigious Stalin Prize, an honor awarded by the government each year to what the Communist Party deemed seminal works of Russian art.

The Piano Trio features one of chamber music's most memorable beginnings: Shostakovich sets the opening theme (which soon evolves into the subject of a fugue), not where it would sit comfortably in the violin's alto register, but with haunting artificial harmonics in the cello. Following a signature Shostakovich scherzo—combining wit, ferocity, and daring virtuosity—comes the devastating Largo, on whose loud, fateful, introductory chords the spirit of the piece pivots dramatically. The finale opens with a Jewish-sounding theme, demonstrating a politically dangerous solidarity with the Jewish community in the face of the Soviet regime. This theme would reappear in Shostakovich's semi-autobiographical Eighth String Quartet, which the composer dedicated “to the victims of fascism and war.”

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Felix Mendelssohn

Piano Trio no. 2 in c minor, op. 66

Approximate duration: 27 minutes

Mendelssohn completed the second of his two piano trios, the Opus 66 Trio in c minor, in 1845, six years after the first. Though he presented the work as a birthday present to his sister Fanny, the published score bears a dedication to Mendelssohn's friend and colleague Louis Spohr. In addition to his compositional renown, Spohr was known as one of the leading violinists of the day and took part himself in numerous performances of Mendelssohn's Trio in c minor with the composer at the piano.

Like its elder sibling, this trio exudes Romantic pathos immediately from its opening strains. A serpentine piano melody rises to a forceful cadence, only to return to a nervous whisper in the strings. Mendelssohn extends this theme to another upward arching musical idea in the violin and cello; a frenzy of sixteenth notes in the piano underneath inverts the contour of the theme, quietly sinking lower and lower. The movement's second theme, introduced by the violin, could be the doppelganger of the first: the heroic counterpart to the tortured opening measures.

The Andante espressivo, analogous to the Andante movement of the Opus 49 Trio, is a vintage *lied ohne worte*: this music encapsulates Romanticism at its most deeply heartfelt. Of the quicksilver third movement, marked *Molto allegro, quasi presto*, Mendelssohn yielded that the perilously fast tempo might be “a trifle nasty to play.”

Among the compelling narrative threads of Mendelssohn's life and legacy is his complicated relationship with religion. He was born into a prominent Jewish family—his grandfather was the distinguished Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn—but Felix's father, Abraham, insisted that the family convert to Christianity as a means of assimilating into contemporary German society. The hyphenated surname often used in reference to the composer, Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, was likewise insisted upon by Abraham Mendelssohn, on the premise that “there can no more be a Christian Mendelssohn than there can be a Jewish Confucius.”

Though it does not bear any explicit program, the Opus 66 finale might nevertheless be heard to reflect somewhat the nuanced role that religion played in Mendelssohn's life and artistry. The movement begins with a dance-like theme whose shape and articulation (and opening melodic interval of a minor

ninth) suggest Jewish folk music. Later in the movement, Mendelssohn unexpectedly introduces the Lutheran hymn “Gelobet seist Du, Jesu Christ.” While the piano offers the hymn, the strings play fragments of the opening theme. Music scholar Robert Philip has likened this juxtaposition to “two diminutive figures speaking in hushed tones as they enter a great cathedral.” Extending this juxtaposition of musical ideas—indeed, ultimately reconciling the two—the movement escalates to an ecstatic climax. A radiantly transfigured version of the opening dance-like melody gets the last word, propelling the trio to a riveting final cadence.

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