

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

I. Allegro

II. Adagio cantabile

III. Scherzo (Allegro assai)

IV. Finale (Presto)

Despite misleading catalogue and opus numbers, the Piano Trio in E-flat Major actually follows a substantial amount of piano music composed during Beethoven's early years. He had declined to publish anything he wrote while working as a virtuoso pianist in the early 1790s, as he envisaged his music having a far-reaching impact – once it was ready for public release. The first pieces that Beethoven deemed sophisticated and profitable enough were the three piano trios of Op. 1, published in Vienna in 1795. The premiere was given by the composer in the home of his patron, Prince Karl Lichnowsky, also the dedicatee of the set.

It is clear that Beethoven laboured intensively over these trios; though the opus was published in 1795, the sketches for the first trio date back to Beethoven's time in Bonn, the city he had departed in November 1792. He had studied briefly with Haydn in the interim, whose influence can be seen in the choice of instrumentation (Hayden wrote 40-odd piano trios himself). However, Beethoven sought to extend the scope of the popular domestic genre, creating technically and expressively challenging parts for the string players (who had previously served as accompaniment to the pianist), and adding a fourth movement to the standard Classical structure.

The spirit of Mozart is unmistakably present in the No. 1 Trio's first two movements, but Beethoven's abundance of themes and expansion of sonata form foreshadow the Romantic developments yet to come. For the exposition, he plays with a theme based on the 'Mannheim rocket', a rising arpeggiated figure popularised by the Mannheim Orchestra in the 18th century. After clearly-defined development and recapitulation sections, the adventurous young composer begins to peek through in an expanded coda.

The graceful Adagio cantabile allows the violin and cello to shine in a sweet, singing duet, set around a moodier episode in the adventurous key A-flat minor. In the third movement, Beethoven trades in his earlier minuets for something more fast paced, bouncy and comical: his first true scherzo.

The E-flat Major Trio concludes with another sonata, this time based around a spirited, jumping figure. With brief moments of mock-introspection, sudden fits of dramatic passion, and a coda that shifts slyly from the home key to E major and back again, this finale is, without question, an early example of the ingenuity and skill for which its composer would long be remembered.

Ravel – Piano Trio in A minor

I. Modéré

II. Pantoum (*Assez vif*)

III. Passacaille (*Très large*)

IV. Finale (*Animé*)

By early 1914, Maurice Ravel had spent the last six years intending to compose a work for piano trio. When he finally began the project in March, he remarked to his student Maurice Delage: “I’ve written my trio. Now all I need are the themes.” To find them, he spent the summer months in Saint-Jean-de-Luz, a fishing town across the port from where he was born in the Basque country of southwestern France.

Though its initial progress was slow, the outbreak of World War I in August forced Ravel to work quickly on his A minor Trio. Determined to have it finished before enlisting, he wrote to Igor Stravinsky in September: “The idea that I should be leaving at once made me get through five months’ work in five weeks! My Trio is finished.” A month later, he temporarily abandoned his musical career to serve first as a nurse’s aide, and later as a driver for the French army. The Trio premiered in Paris in January 1915 and was dedicated to Ravel’s counterpoint teacher, André Gedalge.

While its inspiration came from far-reaching sources, the Trio is conservative in its four-movement structure, which became standard throughout the previous century. There are, however, significant textural innovations at play: to avoid their sound being enveloped by the piano, Ravel scored the string parts in their upper ranges, so that the violin can be heard high above the piano, and the cello’s notes occupy the space between the pianist’s hands. He also directs the strings to perform trills, tremolos, harmonics, arpeggios and glissandos, resulting in a quasi-orchestral texture that requires advanced technical proficiency to execute.

Introduced by the piano in quiet parallel chords, the first theme of the opening sonata is an ethereal reflection on the zortziko, a Basque dance rhythm. The repeated 3+2+3 division of the unusual 8/8 time signature gives the movement a static feeling, which lingers even after Ravel shifts to a slower second theme, heard initially in the violin.

Though the second movement is a typical scherzo and trio, it is named curiously after the Pantoum, a Malaysian poetry form in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza subsequently become the first and third lines of the next. Ravel never discussed the rationale behind this title, but it is now understood as a reference to his method of developing two themes in alternation: a spiky first one in the home key, the second one smoother in the relative minor.

For the passacaille (the French equivalent of the Italian Baroque form), Ravel develops a haunting 8-bar bass line, which derives from the opening material of the Pantoum. The composer’s adoration of shifting time signatures is showcased in the Trio’s animated finale, where frequent changes from 5/4 to 7/4 and seemingly never-ending trills lead the ensemble to a spectacular conclusion.

Beethoven – Piano Trio in B-flat Major Op. 97 (“Archduke”)

I. Allegro moderato

II. Scherzo (Allegro)

III. Andante cantabile ma però con moto. Poco piu adagio

IV. Allegro moderato – Presto

Completed in March 1811, the Op. 97 Trio was Beethoven’s third piano trio publication since releasing his first opus in 1795. Its title refers to Archduke Rudolf of Austria, the youngest son of Emperor Leopold II. An amateur pianist, composer, and loyal patron, Rudolf was one of the few composition students Beethoven ever took on, and in addition to the B-flat Major Trio he became the dedicatee of fourteen pieces, including the Triple Concerto, the Op. 96 Violin Sonata, and the *Missa solennis*.

Beethoven premiered his “Archduke” Trio in Vienna in April 1814, alongside the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh and the cellist Josef Linke. By this point, unfortunately, the composer’s deafness had taken its toll on his performance abilities, and after a further recital of the same work a few weeks later, he never played in public again.

The Trio begins with the piano delivering a glorious yet tranquil first theme, which soon sidesteps unexpectedly to G major for a jaunty second subject. At the centre of the movement we hear a pizzicato duet between the stringed instruments accompanied by dancing piano trills, before the recapitulation sneaks in to lead gently towards the movement’s close.

In his mature years, Beethoven developed a fondness for contrasting expansive opening movements with short, almost humorous dances. The Archduke’s scherzo begins simply and playfully, with instrumental textures noticeably starker than in the sonorous preceding movement. A brief (and eccentric) interlude in B-flat minor—expressed by a slowly expanding fugato figure—repeatedly battles with an almost gaudy waltz, but it is the jovial opening theme in B-flat major that ultimately wins out.

Beethoven moves to a radiant D major for his Andante cantabile, one of the few slow movements he constructed according to the theme and variations form. Preserving the strict symmetry of his 28-bar theme, Beethoven adds progressively more elaborate accompaniment for the first four repetitions, until the fifth restores the quietude of the opening with subtle harmonic shifts.

As is commonly seen in works from Beethoven’s middle period, the penultimate movement leads without pause into the finale, plunging the audience from meditateness into alertness. After a dancing Allegro moderato in 7-part rondo form, we change gear for a rolling Presto coda in 6/8 time. Beethoven plays one last trick on his audience, though; the last iteration of the main theme appears suddenly in A major instead of B-flat, certainly the ‘wrong’ key for 1811. Yet, the home key is dutifully restored for a pleasing final cadence.

Notes by Madeline Roycroft

Argyle Trio

Wilma Smith (violin) was born in Fiji and studied in the US with the legendary Dorothy deLay. She worked regularly with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, was concertmaster of the NZSO, then the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and is now curator of Wilma & Friends.

Matthias Balzat (cello) is a NZ born cellist who studied under James Tennant at the University of Waikato completing a BMus (Hons) and winning several prestigious competitions before heading to Dusseldorf, Germany to complete a Masters degree at the Robert Schumann Hochschule für Musik.

Michael Houston (piano) needs no introduction as NZ's foremost concert pianist, regularly playing with professional music-ensembles as well as giving solo recitals and recording. He has twice performed the complete Beethoven sonatas in seven-concert cycles. More recently he has performed the 48 Preludes and Fugues of Bach's Well Tempered Klavier in two-concert events.