SUMMER FESTIVAL IN REDMOND

MONDAY, AUGUST 8, 2011

Ludwig van Beethoven
Trio for Violin, Viola, and Cello in G Major, Op. 9, No.1
Adagio—Allegro con brio
Adagio, ma non tanto e cantabile
Scherzo: Allegro
Presto
Ida Levin, violin Richard O'Neill, viola Amit Peled, cello

Edvard Grieg
Sonata for Violin and Piano in C minor, Op. 45
Allegro molto ed appassionato
Allegretto espressivo alla romanza
Allegro animato
James Ehnes, violin Orion Weiss, piano

Edward Elgar
Quintet for Piano and Strings in A minor, Op. 84
Moderato—Allegro
Adagio
Andante—Allegro
Scott Yoo, violin Emily Daggett Smith, violin Che-Yen Chen, viola
Robert deMaine, cello Adam Neiman, piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)
Trio for Violin, Viola and Cello in G Major, Op. 9, No. 1 (1798)

Around 1600, which marked the onset of the Baroque era, composers adopted four-part harmony as the basic linear texture of the major and minor scales that replaced earlier Church modes. From that auspicious change in music history, choral music increasingly was written for the familiar SATB division of labor—soprano, alto, tenor and bass—and the same principle was applied to purely instrumental music. Given its time-proven usefulness by the middle of the 18th century, the universality of four-part writing led to

the emerging string quartet as the dominant format in chamber music. Composers simply thought "naturally" in terms of four parts or "voices." Compared to the vast body of string quartets, which continues virtually unabated to this day, precious few pieces for string trio have emerged. As one might imagine, it's a bit of a challenge to fit four-part harmony into three stringed instruments, even with such devices as double- and triple-stopping. (With a keyboard, of course, such problems do not exist with ten independent fingers on tap.)

With the above in mind it is interesting that Beethoven took up the greater challenge of the string trio before he composed his landmark set of six string quartets, Op. 18. He composed three string trios published as Op. 3, by which time he had already written his three masterly piano trios, an easier format to work in. He had also completed the Op. 8 string trio, which he titled *Serenade*.

The Trio for Violin, Viola and Cello in G Major, Op. 9, No. 1 begins with an *Adagio* introduction with an assertive descending three-note unison motive that immediately presents a graceful theme treated contrapuntally but without letting the listener know where he was heading. After some anticipatory transitional passagework he launches the *Allegro con brio*, which fully lives up to its tempo marking. The faster paced thematic ideas already show that Beethoven expected performers to have the requisite "chops" to bring this challenging music to full realization. A contrasting gentler theme soon emerges and interacts throughout the lengthy movement with consummate skill. Out of nowhere a minor-key theme intrudes, which provides not only contrast but a sense of expanding scale. Always on the edge of surprising the listener, Beethoven adds a coda chock full of weirdly accented dissonances, sudden key changes and a tempestuous battle for dominance fought by the cello and violin while the viola simply tries to keep afloat.

The ensuing *Adagio, ma non tanto e cantabile* seems to be saying, "Hey, I was only kidding" or "time for a breather." Beginning in the harmonically remote key of E Major, the mood and method belong to the world of song. The music glides by with the calming feel of a *barcarolle*, though a few well-chosen shifts into the minor darken the mood to good effect. In the end, however, it is Beethoven's lyrical side that most persuasively defines the movement.

Beethoven ended the previous movement on a G-sharp (the middle note in an E-Major triad). Since the following *Scherzo* begins on a G-natural, this shift in key signature has the effect of shattering the spell and propelling us into an energetic, quirky and deftly

humorous enterprise. To stress the comic aspect of the movement he fills the first of two trios with a series of unexpected stops and re-starts, anticipating similar jests in his Symphony No. 1, Op. 21. The second trio offers the cello a chance to show off his/her prowess before the return of the *Scherzo*'s "A" section.

A *Presto* brings the work to a high-spirited conclusion, beginning with a perpetual motion swirling theme from the violin that soon stops to allow for a passing lyrical episode. Notes then scurry by dizzyingly, each instrument taking turns in propelling this nearly manic gallop forward. Yet Beethoven has more tricks with which to entertain and/or befuddle the listener. Near the end, rather than adopt a quickening of the pace, he actually cuts the speed in half, giving the viola a sequence of repeated notes while the cello posits a pedal tone. Only at that point do the three instruments unite in a rush to an abrupt and emphatic end.

Edvard Grieg (1843–1907)
Sonata for Violin and Piano in C minor, Op. 45 (1887)

After completing studies in Leipzig—to him a bastion of pedantry—Grieg moved to Copenhagen to study with the Danish composer Niels Gade. Esteemed in his day as an apostle of Mendelssohn and Schumann, Gade introduced Grieg to the luminaries of the day, including Hans Christian Andersen. In 1864, Grieg fell under the sway of Rikard Nordraak, a composer only a year older than he (but who died at 23); Nordraak persuaded Grieg to adopt a specifically Norwegian style (paralleling the kind of national consciousness that motivated Glinka in Russia, Smetana in Bohemia, and other composers across the continent.

By 1884, Grieg had established himself as Norway's gift to the world of music. His fame extended far beyond his homeland and the rest of Scandinavia. He was clearly a world figure whose reputation was unaffected by more radical composers who shared Debussy's opinion that Grieg's music was "chocolate-covered snow."

Despite continuing popularity Grieg has not escaped the stigma of being typecast as a composer of miniatures. Even his big-limbed and popular piano concerto has its detractors, who accuse the composer of relying on pastiche rather than formal mastery. "On paper" the concerto may appear to be nothing more than a string of loosely related episodes, yet it somehow "works" extremely well, and emerges a unified work despite claims to the contrary. Grieg's self-consciousness about form probably provided

ammunition for his critics, but an investigation of other large-scale works suggests that his conservatory studies had indeed prepared him well for the task of composition.

Grieg composed three Sonatas for Violin and Piano; no doubt it is the third and final essay in C minor, Op. 45 that enjoys the brightest reputation as well as being the composer's favorite. In 1900, Grieg wrote to Norwegian poet Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, "Last week I had the pleasure of performing my three violin sonatas with Lady Neruda-Hallé before a very discerning Danish audience and receiving a very warm response. I can assure you that we did very well and it had special significance for me, because these three works are among my very best and represent different stages in my development: the first, naïve and rich in ideals; the second, nationalistic; and the third with a wider outlook." These words clearly show the importance of the three sonatas in Grieg's evolution. Even with the "wider outlook," Norwegian folk tunes and rhythms course through the three-movement sonata.

Grieg composed an initial version of the Third Sonata in 1886 at Troldhaugen, his home in Bergen. Since he was a fine pianist, it was all but a given that he would handle the keyboard part in the premiere of the C-minor Sonata; his partner on that occasion was the eminent violinist Adolf Brodsky. (Grieg had actually given an earlier performance with violinist Carl Rabe, but he revised the work before the "official" first performance with Brodsky in December 1887.)

A bold and heroic opening gesture launches the first movement, *Allegro molto ed appassionato*. Emphatic chords from the keyboard energize the violin's mercurial main theme. The music soon slows, leading to a variant of the opening bars. Once again the pace and dynamics are reduced and a new lyrical tune is presented, itself related to the opening theme and equally subject to varied restatements and frequent mood changes. The size and effective sonata-allegro construction of the movement bespeaks a near-symphonic grandeur, yet the music also reminds us of Grieg's ability to create moments of beguiling intimacy. Before composing this work, Grieg had heard performances of both the second of Brahms' violin and piano sonatas as well as Franck's stand-alone example, which undoubtedly influenced the "classical" construction of Grieg's offering.

In the following *Allegretto espressivo alla romanza* Grieg retreats from the dark passion of the first movement, setting the contrasting mood with a delicate and lyrical opening theme presented by the piano. An upbeat dance serves as a contrasting middle section, providing playful asides and maintaining contrast from the turbulent preceding *Allegro molto ed appassionato.*

A sparkling figure high on the piano launches the concluding *Allegro animato*. Here too the spirit of dance is evoked, but one in the nature of a *danse macabre*. Perhaps a bit of *Angst* from the incidental music to Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, written more than a decade earlier, is recalled herein; frequent minor-key excursions darken the mood even when assuaged by brief lyrical interludes. The movement ends with a manic flourish.

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)
Quintet for Piano and Strings in A minor, Op. 84 (1919)

Edward Elgar has often been characterized as the "English Brahms," a reference to his across-the-bar line melodies, deep orchestral sonorities and even a gruffness that adds a granitic quality to some of his music. Though many of his works really don't warrant such a description, the Piano Quintet's sonorities and themes merit the attribution.

In 1887, Elgar composed a string quartet and violin/piano sonata, which though published, he later destroyed. Three decades later, as World War I drew to a close, he returned to chamber composition, writing his Op. 82 Violin Sonata, Op. 83 String Quartet, and his Op. 84 Piano Quintet, the largest and most symphonic of the three works. Grappling as he was with the horrors attendant to the war as well with the imminent death of his beloved wife, we need not be surprised by the palpable anger, grieving and anxiety that can be heard in all three of these minor-key offerings. As is well known, he virtually ceased composing after his virtually valedictory Cello Concerto of 1919—also in the minor.

At work on the chamber works in 1918 and 1919, Elgar lived in an area known as the Brinkwells, a wooded environment haunted by an old myth about a settlement of Spanish monks punished for "impious rites." Part of the legend involved "sinister trees" struck by lightning, a metaphor for the monks' unhappy end. Elgar found himself strongly affected by the legend and the gnarly, twisted trees that inspired it. His dying wife Alice described the sight as "sad" and "dispossessed," both of which paralleled her husband's state of mind.

Mrs. Elgar also alluded in her diary to the "wonderful weird beginning" of the Piano Quintet, referring to the "sinister trees." Ghostly and chant-like, the *Moderato* introduction establishes a mood of profound unease in no way diminished in the ensuing *Allegro* that transforms the intro theme into an urgent rush of troubled spirits. The second

subject is an exotic theme whose *pizzicato* accompaniment suggests Spanish guitar music. This episode does not provide a calm respite, but in fact heightens the movement's prevailing disquiet by the very strangeness of its departure from what has preceded it. The movement ends quietly and mysteriously.

The viola posits a legato theme to begin the *Adagio*, whose mood of *Sensucht* ("longing") is the essence of Romanticism. Unforced in its slow-paced unfolding, this deeply touching movement remained a personal favorite of the composer. In A–B–A "song" form, the outer sections provide a lyrical respite from the emotional upheaval of the first movement, though an agitated central paragraph dispels serenity.

The finale, *Andante—Allegro*, revisits the painful associations and thematic material of the opening movement, but ultimately awakens from the nightmarish images of the "sinister trees" in an energetic burst of A-Major optimism—sadly more of a "whistling in the dark" gesture than true joy. Elgar never fully recovered from the death of his wife shortly afterwards. Though he lived another decade and a half, he almost completely stopped composing after this work.

Program Notes by Steven Lowe