

January 23, 2026

CONCERT

Piano Trio No. 5 in D Major, Op. 70, No. 1, "Ghost"

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: 1770

Died: 1827

Composed: 1808

- I. Allegro vivace e con brio
- II. Largo assai ed espressivo
- III. Presto

The exact source of the nickname "Ghost" for this trio is unknown, but it clearly refers to the middle movement, a striking Largo in D minor. This is dark, almost murky music, and the piano murmurs a complex accompaniment while the strings twist and extend bits of melody above it. This unusual music (Beethoven rarely marked a movement Largo) has excited a great deal of curiosity about its inspiration. One possibility is particularly intriguing.

Beethoven had worked on his opera *Leonore* (later renamed *Fidelio*) from 1804 until 1806. It had not achieved success, and anxious to try another opera, Beethoven explored many possible subjects. One of these was Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and he and the playwright Heinrich Collin went so far as to discuss a libretto. In fact, Beethoven actually began work on the music for *Macbeth*, for there are sketches in D minor marked "Macbeth." Nothing ever came of them, though the idea of an opera based on this play continued to fascinate Beethoven, even in his final years.

But on the same sheet that contains the sketches for *Macbeth* are the first sketches for the Largo assai ed espressivo movement of this trio, also in D minor. Whether this somber and brooding music, written in 1808, grew out of Beethoven's projected music for *Macbeth* cannot be known for sure, but the connection—however distant—is clearly there, and this movement may be our one hint as to what Beethoven's music for that tragedy might have been like. Surely it is not too great a leap to imagine this music in conjunction with the witches or *Macbeth's* dark final days.

Beethoven frames this remarkable Largo with two fast movements, both in radiant D Major. The middle movement is so powerful that the outer movements seem a little light by comparison, and some observers have gone so far as to suggest that they should be seen as prelude and postlude to the Largo. The Allegro vivace e con brio opens with a pithy rhythmic figure that recurs throughout the movement and finally brings it to a close. The main theme is a flowing, elegant idea heard first in the cello and quickly passed between all three instruments. This theme dominates the opening movement, giving it an atmosphere of easy expansiveness. The concluding Presto sounds innocent after the grim pizzicato strokes that end the Largo. It offers long melodic lines, a graceful partnership between the instruments, and a smooth flow of good-spirited music throughout.

String Quartet, Op. 89

AMY BEACH

Born: 1867

Died: 1944

Composed: 1929

Early in the twentieth century, Amy Beach became interested in the music of the Inuit people, the various tribes that had settled in what is now northern Canada and Greenland. She came upon this music in the work of the German-American anthropologist Franz Boaz (1858–1942), who had studied the Inuit carefully and had written down their folk tales and songs. In 1907, just as she turned 40, Beach composed a set of four brief piano pieces based on Inuit tunes that Boaz had collected. She titled the set *Eskimos* and described the work as "Four Characteristic Pieces for Pianoforte."

But that was not the end of her interest in Inuit music. In 1921, she returned to Boaz's collection and composed a one-movement string quartet based on three of those songs. The composition of the quartet did not go easily though, and Beach did not complete the work to her satisfaction until the summer of 1929, which she spent in Rome. She had the quartet performed by a local ensemble so that she could hear it, but there is no record of the quartet's official premiere, either in Rome or in the United States.

The String Quartet in One Movement is compact music—spanning only fifteen minutes—but this is extraordinarily focused music. Rather than reveling the Inuit themes for themselves, Beach uses them as the starting point for some of the most chromatic, dissonant music she ever wrote. The quartet is in three-part form, a slow-fast-slow sequence of tempos. The Grave opens in a tonal haze with the music continually edging into dissonances that do not resolve. Matters come to a pause, and the viola alone sings the opening theme, which is based on the Inuit “Summer Song.” A second theme, based on the Inuit “Playing at Ball,” erupts forcefully from the entire quartet (Beach’s marking here is *Più animato*) before we reach another pause. On four sharp chords, the music leaps ahead at the central Allegro molto, set in 6/8 and based on fragments of “Itataujang’s Song,” and soon these fragments coalesce into the subject of a brisk fugue. The energy of this fugue eventually evaporates, the opening Grave makes a literal return, and the viola recalls “Summer Song” one final time before the music slips into silence on a subdued and somber concluding chord.

Piano Quintet in A Major, D. 667, “Trout”

FRANZ SCHUBERT

Born: 1797

Died: 1828

Composed: 1819

- I. Allegro vivace
- II. Andante
- III. Scherzo. Presto
- IV. Andantino — Thema con variazioni
- V. Finale. Allegro giusto

Two events in the year 1817 led to the creation of the “Trout” Quintet, one of the most beloved works in the chamber repertory. The first came in March, when Schubert met the famous baritone Michael Vogl, twenty-nine years his senior. Vogl was one of the leading singers of the Vienna Court Opera, famous for his portrayal of Pizarro in Beethoven’s *Fidelio*. Vogl recognized the young composer’s genius and became his champion, performing many of his songs, including *Die Winterreise*. The second event came that August, when Schubert wrote a brief song, *Die Forelle* (“The Trout”), that quickly became very popular.

Two years later, in the summer of 1819, Vogl invited Schubert, then 22, to accompany him on a walking

trip through Upper Austria to see the country where Vogl had been born. Schubert happily agreed, and the two spent the summer in the town of Steyr, about 90 miles west of Vienna. Schubert was enchanted by the town and countryside, with its mountains, streams, and meadows. He wrote to one of his friends in Vienna to say that the countryside was “unbelievably beautiful.” He was enthusiastically received by the local townspeople, and one of them—a wealthy merchant and amateur cellist named Sylvester Paumgartner—asked Schubert for a piece of music that he and his friends might play. He made two stipulations: that Schubert write for the players on hand and that the piece be in some way based on *Die Forelle*, of which Paumgartner was very fond.

And so in a lovely setting in the summer of 1819, Schubert wrote the music that has become known the “Trout” Quintet. It is a quintet for piano and strings, but because he was writing for the available musicians Schubert dropped the second violin and added a string bass. The bass part is not particularly demanding, but the cello part is full of wonderful writing, some of it apparently too difficult for Paumgartner, who struggled with his part at the quintet’s first performance. The addition of a second bassline instrument frees the piano from a purely accompanimental role and allows it to participate fully as a melodic instrument. Schubert exploits this freedom, often setting both the pianist’s hands in the treble clef. All these combine to give the “Trout” Quintet its distinctive sonority, which ranges from the sound of deep stringed instruments to the piano’s silvery high passages.

The “Trout” Quintet is one of those rare pieces of completely “happy” music. One feels that Schubert’s joy in the Austrian countryside has made its way into every measure of this music. It also gives the impression of having been written at great speed. Not because of anything glib or superficial in the music, but because it feels spontaneous, as if this music poured easily from Schubert’s pen. In fact, the piece took some time to compose. Schubert drafted it that summer in Steyr but did not complete it until November in Vienna.

The Allegro vivace opens with a fanfare-like arpeggio from the piano that will recur throughout this sonata-form movement. The violin has the genial first theme, while the piano introduces the gently-dotted second subject of this movement,

which is characterized by some unusual harmonic modulations. The Andante is built on three distinct theme groups, the first and third belonging to the piano. Again, this movement is full of surprising harmonic shifts, and its second theme—introduced as a viola and cello duet—is one of those gorgeous Schubert melodies that seems an endless flow of haunting song. The Scherzo, in standard scherzo-and-trio form, bounds along with much energy and high spirits. Schubert satisfied Paumgartner's second stipulation by making the Andantino a set of variations on *Die Forelle*, and this has given the quintet its nickname. Strings alone play the melody of the song, and the piano enters at the first variation. Schubert's variations are straightforward—they are melodic rather than structural variations—and the movement concludes with a brief Allegretto section that is really a sixth variation. The good-spirited Allegro giusto finale races along happily with

two principal themes, both played initially by the strings. The second of these is itself a subtle variant of the theme. Apparently, Schubert was having fun basing this entire piece on his famous song in ways that Paumgartner may not have recognized, and alert listeners will detect reminiscences of the song throughout the "Trout" Quintet. There is no true development in this movement—only a fairly literal recapitulation—and it's one of the sunniest works in the repertory as it sails happily to its conclusion.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger