

JULY 9, 2024

CONCERT

Piano Trio No. 45 in E-flat Major, Hob. XV:29 **FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN**

Born: 1732

Died: 1809

Composed: 1795

- I. Poco allegretto
- II. Andantino ed innocentemente
- III. Finale. Allemande. Presto assai

During his two extended visits to England during the 1790s, Haydn became interested in the piano trio and wrote approximately fifteen of them. Haydn was in these years at the crest of his powers (he was composing the last of his 104 symphonies), and from these heights he turned to a form that might be played as readily by the growing number of amateur musicians in London as by professional musicians. The piano plays a leading role, as indicated by the title Haydn gave these works: he referred to them not as trios but as Sonatas for Pianoforte or Harpsichord with (Accompaniment of) Violin and Violincello.

The present Trio in E-flat Major appears to have been written about 1795; it was part of a set of three dedicated to the English pianist Therese Jansen and published in London in 1797. This trio is in the standard three movements, but form is treated with great freedom here. The first movement, which has the unusual marking *Poco allegretto*, is not in the expected sonata form but is a variation-form movement in ABA form. The jaunty main idea, animated by its dotted rhythms, is announced immediately by the piano and moves through a series of transformations before arriving at the middle section, a sequence of further developments in E-flat minor.

The second movement also has an unusual marking, *Andantino ed innocentemente*, and innocent it certainly seems to be, with a gentle main idea in B Major announced by the solo piano and quickly repeated by the strings. This movement barely has time to begin to develop when it suddenly breaks off and proceeds without pause into the finale, an Allemande marked *Presto assai*. An allemande is an old German dance form, originally in duple meter. By the end of the eighteenth century, when Haydn wrote this trio, it had evolved into a triple-meter dance that was a forerunner of the waltz. Certainly that seems to be true of this movement, which waltzes energetically across its long—and very agreeable—span.

String Quartet No. 2 in D Major

ALEXANDER BORODIN

Born: 1833

Died: 1887

Composed: 1881

- I. Allegro moderato
- II. Scherzo. Allegro
- III. Notturmo. Andante
- IV. Finale. Andante — Vivace

This quartet has outpaced the fame of its composer. And the reason for this is simple: the quartet's third movement—a lush, yearning Nocturne—has become one of the most famous pieces ever written. Yet the rest of the quartet is just as melodic and ingratiating, as if in this music Borodin had consciously set out to write a quartet that would proceed from the beauty of its lyric ideas rather than from dramatic conflict.

This music had particular significance for its composer. Borodin wrote it in the summer of 1881, when he was 48 years old and a professor of chemistry in St. Petersburg. In this quartet Borodin consciously set out to evoke his past: he dedicated it to his wife and wrote it as an evocation of their first meeting exactly twenty years earlier—this music is in effect a love-song to her. Also, Borodin had taught himself to play the cello as a boy, and while he never became a very good cellist, that instrument had special meaning for him, and it plays a particularly prominent role in this quartet.

The cello announces the flowing main theme of the first movement, and this is immediately picked up by the first violin, which also has the second idea, marked *cantabile*; there is a third theme in this sonata-form movement, a march-like tune built on dotted rhythms, but the movement is remarkable for its lack of contrast: these ideas sing agreeably, and the music moves easily to a quiet close on a unison D.

The second movement is a scherzo, but Borodin avoids traditional ABA form and instead writes a quick-paced movement based on two ideas: the opening bustle gives way to a surging, almost waltz-like second theme, and these two themes alternate across the course of the movement. The third movement is the famous Nocturne. Over throbbing accompaniment, the cello lays out its lengthy song, and once again the first violin repeats it. The danger inherent in such a lovely melody is that it might become cloying on repetition, but Borodin avoids this with his concentrated development, marked by vigorous runs, chromatic harmonies, and extended canonic treatment before the main theme reasserts itself at the quiet close.

The finale has a slow beginning, and in an ingenious touch Borodin gradually accelerates this figure to make it the main theme, now marked *Vivace*. A smooth second subject arrives almost unnoticed, and Borodin builds his finale out of these materials. Once again, there is an absence of conflict, and the quartet proceeds on high energy and good spirits to its relaxed close, again on a radiant unison D.

Horn Trio in E-flat Major, Op. 40

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born: 1833

Died: 1897

Composed: 1865

- I. Andante — Poco più animato
- II. Scherzo. Allegro — Molto meno allegro — Allegro
- III. Adagio mesto
- III. Finale. Allegro con brio

Brahms liked to get away from Vienna during the hot summers, and he spent the summer of 1864 in the little town of Lichtenthal in the Black Forest near Baden-Baden. Lichtenthal was home to a flourishing artists colony during the summer, and there Brahms, surrounded by congenial friends, could indulge his passion for long walks through the woods. He returned the following summer, but this time he had a special reason to seek the solitude of the forests: his mother had died on January 31st of that year and he was still coming to terms with the loss. He composed the Horn Trio that summer, and the music was intended at least in part as a memorial to his mother—the beautiful slow movement contains a quotation from the Rhenish folksong *In den Weiden steht ein Haus* (“In the Willows Stands a House”), an evocation of happy childhood memories.

The lovely and peaceful forest setting seems to have had a profound effect on the Horn Trio. Brahms said that the opening theme came to him during a walk along “wooded heights among fir trees,” and many have noted the calm, almost pastoral nature of this music. The Horn Trio is not so much elegiac, though, as reflective and commemorative: Brahms observes the death of his mother not by wearing his heart on his sleeve but by writing gentle and beautiful music.

The opening movement is remarkable for not being in sonata form. Aware that sonata form brings a type of musical drama alien to the spirit of this trio, Brahms instead cast it in rondo form: the opening Andante episode occurs three times, separated by a slightly-quicker section marked *Poco più animato*. The calm beginning, the section that came to Brahms on his walk through the woods, has

drawn special praise—American composer Daniel Gregory Mason called it “a sort of symbol of all that is most romantic in music.” Brahms specifies that he wants this opening section played *dolce*, *espressivo*, and it alternates with the violin’s surging, rising line of the *Poco più animato* before the movement comes to a quiet close. By contrast, the boisterous Scherzo flies along on resounding triplets. Its brief trio section, in the unusual key of A-flat minor, features a long duet for violin and horn.

Brahms gave the third movement the unusual marking *Adagio mesto* (“slow, sad”), and the piano’s rolled chords at the very beginning set the mood for this somber music. Again, violin and horn trade expressive melodic lines, and the music rises to a climax marked *passionata*, where violin and horn soar high above the piano accompaniment.

The concluding *Allegro con brio* has struck many as the most “horn-like” of the movements, for it is built on a brilliant 6/8 meter that inevitably evokes the calls of hunting-horns. The finale seems never to slow down, never to lose its energy, and the Horn Trio rushes to its close in a blaze of color and excitement.

Brahms originally wrote the trio for the waldhorn or natural-horn. This was the precursor of the modern valved French horn, and the player had to use his lips or stop the bell with his hand to generate each different pitch. It was an extremely difficult instrument to play accurately, and virtually every performance today uses the valved horn. Recognizing that the unusual combination of piano, violin, and horn might result in few performances, Brahms made arrangements of the trio that substituted either viola or cello for the horn. But these versions are almost never played. The music may suit their range but not their temperament, for the trio takes much of its character from the rich and noble sonority of the French horn.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger