

PROGRAM NOTES by Robert Rival

Beethoven@250 with the Gryphon Trio

December 10, 2020 – 7:30 p.m. EST

“COMPOSER DEBUT”

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

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

Piano Trio in G, Op. 1, No. 2

Piano Trio in C minor, Op. 1, No. 3

In late 1792, just one year after Mozart’s death, Beethoven arrived in Vienna. There, he hoped to make good on Count Ferdinand Waldstein’s prophecy: “with the help of assiduous labour you shall receive Mozart’s spirit from Haydn’s hands.”

But in his first year in the great city of culture, Beethoven composed nothing of importance. Not even a year of lessons with Haydn, the gatekeeper of the Classical style, bore any fruit. That is, until the great master left for England in January 1794. Only then did his young pupil immerse himself in work. “This year must determine the complete man,” wrote Beethoven in his diary. “Nothing must remain undone.” He dug up some old sketches from Bonn and dashed off new material to produce a set of three piano trios. Each of considerable scope, they demonstrated his absorption of the Classical style (in part thanks to Haydn’s tutelage) and hinted at future innovations.

The adventurous key plan of **Op. 1, No. 2** (the *Largo* is unexpectedly in E major) mimics that of Haydn’s contemporaneous “Gypsy Trio,” also in G major. And in its cleverly-disguised recapitulation, the Presto finale contains another Haydnism: with all ears on the piano’s meandering octaves, it slips the principal theme on the violin. Haydn’s trademark humour abounds in the Presto finale of **Op. 1, No. 1**: in the metrically displaced upward-leaping tenths that sound like a question posed repeatedly; in quirky downward-dipping chromatic passages suggesting that the musicians have lost their way; and in the combining of both effects such that leaping tenths briefly derail the music into a remote key.

If Haydn’s example lurks in the shadows, Mozart’s stands in plain view: the piano central but not dominant; the elegant conversation among instruments; and the cello’s newfound independence, its singing quality cast into relief. The slow movement of **Op. 1, No. 1**, possibly the loveliest of the set, possesses a theme Mozartean in both its delicacy and astonishingly beautiful treatment: a tapestry of string counterpoint bathed in a wash of nostalgic modulations.

To this artful synthesis of Haydn and Mozart, the aesthetically restless Beethoven grafts elements of his nascent revolutionism. Most obvious is the novel four-movement design, a first for the piano trio genre. The added scherzo (menuetto in the case of the third trio) brought the

genre into the company of the more “serious” and lofty string quartet and symphony. So did expansive first movements.

More significant, however, are the new relationships Beethoven forges between the piano and strings. Consider, for instance, his handling of the principal theme in the **Op. 1, No. 2** Presto, whose fast, repeated-note motif (introduced by the violin) is as idiomatic for the strings as it is virtually unplayable on the piano. His solution? Change the piano’s version of the motif into a trill figure that, although different, is clearly equivalent. Piano and strings thus share the same material while retaining their individuality. And in a cheeky tour de force, Beethoven finds virtue in necessity: in due course, the violin imitates the piano’s imitation!

Most observers regard **Op. 1, No. 3** as the crowning achievement of the set. Its stormy opening motto establishes the tone; yet its predominantly turbulent mood is frequently and dramatically offset by more restrained passages. In the second movement, a graceful theme with variations, each instrument has a moment in the spotlight. The menuetto’s tightly-controlled rocking character is paired with a trio in which descending scales cascade like harmless rapids down a hillside creek. Recalling the first movement, the *Prestissimo* finale opens with a forceful statement whose razor-sharp chords thrust like swords in a duel. The ensuing footrace ends, surprisingly—though quite satisfactorily, not with a victory lap, but with a clever act of disappearance.

Beethoven dedicated his Op. 1 trios, published in 1795, to Prince Karl von Lichnowsky, a Viennese musical patron with exquisite taste. Lichnowsky, who had taken the young composer under his wing upon his arrival in Vienna, treated him like a son. For a time he even lodged him in his own house. And he instructed his servants to serve Beethoven first should they both happen to ring at the same time.