

Beethoven@250 with the Gryphon Trio

December 11, 2020 – 7:30 p.m. EST

“THE MASTER”

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Trio in D, Op. 70, No. 1 “Ghost”

Piano Trio in E-flat, Op. 70, No. 2

Piano Trio in B-flat, Op. 97 “Archduke”

Piano Trio in D, Op. 70, No. 1 “Ghost” and Piano Trio in E-flat, Op. 70, No. 2

Avaunt! and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee!
Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold;
Thou hast no speculation in those eyes
Which thou dost glare with.

So reacts Macbeth to the sight of Banquo’s Ghost, a reminder of his murderous deed. Although Beethoven abandoned a planned opera on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* as “too gloomy,” a clue as to what the music might have sounded like survives in the mysterious slow movement of his D major piano trio. Indeed, juxtaposed with plans for the aborted opera in his sketchbook of 1808 is a sketch for this *Largo* whose shimmering piano tremolos and ghoulish atmosphere Beethoven’s star pupil Carl Czerny called “an appearance from the underworld.” Since this pronouncement the trio has been popularly known as the “**Ghost**.”

The weighty central *Largo assai ed espressivo*, in D minor, unfolds stealthily. A three-note sotto voce unison motif in the strings and an ornamented turn in the piano sustain the entire movement. Extraordinary piano tremolos, now in the bass, now in the treble, now fortissimo, now pianissimo, accompany the relentless forward march of these initial motifs. A fleeting episode in D major offers a glimmer of light. But it is short-lived, and soon the music reaches a terrifying climax. A chromatic scale in the piano that plunges nearly five octaves recalls the unrepenting Don Giovanni’s descent into the flames of hell at the conclusion of Mozart’s opera.

This spectral movement is flanked by two earthly appendages in D major. The first, an *Allegro vivace e con brio*, opens with a fiery unison motto followed immediately by a dolce theme. The desolate pianississimo unisons that end the exposition seem to foreshadow the mood of the *Largo*. A contrapuntally involved development requires two attempts to launch the recapitulation: only in the second does the movement’s motto sound in the tonic. On the other side of the abyss is a *Presto* finale that some consider too lighthearted after the horror that is the *Largo*. But what of the comical drunken Porter’s scene that immediately follows Macbeth’s

grizzly midnight murder of King Duncan? In this way, the finale's quirky chromatic scales and its off-kilter folksiness seem to offer just the right measure of dramatic relief.

Beethoven completed the "Ghost" (and its companion, Op. 70, No. 2) in 1808 while summering in a village just outside Vienna, immediately after finishing the Sixth Symphony ("Pastoral"). While the "Ghost" impresses with its intense dramatic flair, **Op. 70, No. 2** explores another world entirely, that of subtle emotions and classical restraint. As Donald F. Tovey remarked, here Beethoven achieves an unparalleled "integration of Mozart's and Haydn's resources, with results that transcend all possibility of resemblance to the style of their origins."

Haydn's influence is already apparent in the first movement, marked *Poco sostenuto—Allegro ma non troppo*. It opens with a slow introduction whose mournful melody and stark lines return several times, including at the very end, taking after Haydn's "Drumroll" symphony. These passages interrupt the music's otherwise carefree demeanour like cloudy, though fleeting, thoughts or reminiscences.

The *Allegretto* begins with a charming theme punctuated by an amusing reverse dotted figure (shortlong). One imagines a nobleman elegantly flicking crumbs off a table. But in the second theme, in the parallel minor, the mood becomes portentous, even Baroque in its rhythmic pounding. And so the movement unfolds, alternating between cheery flicking and ominous pounding, before finally dissipating entirely. Cast in double-variation form, a favourite of Haydn's, it again shows Beethoven's indebtedness to his former teacher.

But in the relaxed, waltz-like *Allegretto ma non troppo* that follows, Beethoven conjures up non-Classical realms. Antiphonal exchanges between strings and piano (double-stopping in the violin make the two stringed instruments sound like three) possess a Renaissance flavour while mysterious harmonic twists anticipate Schubert.

Then in the robust *Allegro* finale, in place of Haydn's guiding hand, come the bold gestures, jarring surprises, and general boisterousness that only Beethoven could have written. From innovative third-related key relations to the widening of the upper compass of the piano, this is Beethoven searching for new paths and effects. Perhaps most remarkable—and Beethovenian—is the structure: the recapitulation contains as much development of the principal themes as the development section itself.

Thirteen years separate Beethoven's Op. 70 from his initial forays in the genre, the three Op. 1 trios of 1795. In the interval, Beethoven's only work for piano trio, Op. 11 of 1798, actually began its life as a trio for clarinet, cello and piano. In order to boost sales, however, this light and cheerful work—whose three movements all end with a bit of surprise—was published for either clarinet or violin, the two parts being nearly identical.

The opening *Allegro con brio* bounds along, propelled by an active piano part that interacts playfully with the strings. A singing cello in its tenor register introduces the lyrical *Adagio*. When the tune passes to the violin, its companions supply interjections and imitations. The proceedings reach a magically hushed pianissimo in which short cello fragments are answered by gently flowing rivulets in the piano.

The finale, marked *Allegretto*, is a theme and variations on an immensely popular tune, “Pria ch’io l’impegno,” from the 1797 comic opera *L’amor marinaro* (Love at Sea) by Joseph Weigl (1766-1846), a once famous and now forgotten composer. In the opera, Captain Libeccio, his servant Pasquale, and Cisolfautt, a partially deaf music master rescued at sea by the Captain, sing a terzetto in which Cisolfautt (whose name consists of solfege syllables) declares: “Before I take on this magisterial task, I must have a snack.” He then warns that, “You will know what I am all about if my stomach raises a high note by a sharp.” Beethoven’s nine variations, dramatic in conception, cover a wide range of expression. And he surely intended that you laugh—or at least smile—at the downright comical ending in which, if you listen carefully, you will hear poor Cisolfautt’s stomach rumbling.

Piano Trio in B-flat, Op. 97 “Archduke”

Since Beethoven never obtained an official court position, he depended upon the generosity of Viennese music-loving aristocrats such as Lichnowsky for his livelihood. (In 1800, Lichnowsky began paying the composer a sizeable annuity.) Among Beethoven’s other devoted benefactors was the Archduke Rudolph, a talented amateur musician and younger brother of the Emperor of Austria. Beethoven dedicated his Fourth and Fifth Piano Concertos, and several other important works besides, to the Archduke. In 1809, the Archduke arranged a consortium of aristocrats to fund a lifelong annuity for the now-famous composer. In gratitude, Beethoven dedicated his last piano trio, Op. 97, composed in 1811, to the Archduke.

The “Archduke” trio is not only Beethoven’s masterpiece in the genre but also one of his finest lyrical achievements. Its stately and expansive opening theme immediately establishes the monumental character of the whole piece. Compared to the Op. 1 trios, the string texture is far richer: sustained double-stops in the violin and exquisite pizzicato passages of a scope never before attempted in a trio. Most striking, perhaps, is the carefully-wrought balance between piano and strings, the latter often serving as inner voices. The result is a finely blended sonority that rivals that of the more homogeneous string quartet.

A particularly delicate balance among instruments occurs in the latter part of the first movement’s development. Distant echoes of the principal theme dissipate into a web woven with stealthy pizzicato and gossamer piano staccato and trills. A light breeze then wisps the fragile web into the ether; and in strides the recapitulation, now varied and ornamented.

In this movement—indeed, in the whole trio—Beethoven unfolds the musical argument at a leisurely pace. Ideas float by at a rate that allows each to be individually savoured and mulled over. This is Beethoven at his most reflective.

What follows is not a slow movement but a scherzo, the first such inner-movement reordering in a trio. Cheery and tuneful, the scherzo maintains the work’s relaxed tone by attenuating the expected play on accent and rhythm so typical of the genre. A dark side nevertheless creeps into the central trio: a slithery, chromatic fugato infuses the movement with an element of foreboding.

The ensuing *Andante* and finale, performed without break, combine into a large expanse that underscores the work’s spaciousness. The slow movement’s serene, chorale-like theme is the

basis for four variations. The increasingly rapid rhythmic energy of each variation reaches a climax in the fourth, in which syncopation mingles with a dense string texture and elaborate piano figuration. The complicated texture unravels in the theme's restatement, now tinged with melancholy, and the movement sleepily drifts off ... only to be jolted awake by the boisterous barnyard romp that follows— the kind of earthy rondo finale of which Beethoven was so fond.

Beethoven composed the “Archduke” trio at the tail end of the decade during which his art blossomed into full maturity. In this remarkably productive period he penned a multitude of masterpieces, including the opera *Fidelio* and the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies. Sixteen years after the publication of his Op. 1, and two years after Haydn's death, Beethoven's financial security was assured and his fame spreading internationally. Few had reason to doubt that he had fulfilled Waldstein's prophecy.

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