

## PROGRAM NOTES

### **Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827): String Quartet in E-Flat, Op. 74, “Harp” (1809)**

The summer of 1809 in Vienna was very turbulent and trying. Napoleon’s army was besieging the city and finally occupied it. Beethoven managed to leave and went to Hungary where he worked on both the Emperor Concerto and the “Harp” Quartet.

The first movement begins with a slow introduction followed by an allegro concerned chiefly with broad melodies. It contained several pizzicato passages in broken chords, that is arpeggios (from the Italian, arpa—meaning harp), hence the nickname of the quartet. The second movement is an extended song-like piece that is deeply emotional. The third is a scherzo that brings to mind the scherzo of the Ninth Symphony. The final movement is a theme and variations that follows the scherzo without a break. There are six variations that are widely different in character. The movement ends suddenly on two quiet chords as if (quoting Daniel Gregory Mason) the composer was saying under his breath: “That’s all.”

### **Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959): Three Madrigals for Violin and Viola (1947)**

The Czech composer Martinů’s career has several parallels with that of the Russian, Prokofiev. Both had nationalistic backgrounds, found academic training irksome, joined the neo-classic movement in Paris and retrieved their nationalism before World War II. But whereas Prokofiev returned to his native land, Martinů remained a refugee, ever seeking and finding new modes of expression. He spent some time in the United States, teaching at Princeton (1948-51), and at the Curtis Institute (1955-6).

One can speculate as to why these pieces are called madrigals. They do not resemble the Italian or English madrigals of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Several other Martinů instrumental compositions also have the word “madrigal” in their titles. Villa Lobos’ series of pieces, Bachianas Brasileiras may afford a clue. They were written “in homage to the great genius of J. S. Bach.” Martinů avoids the rich romanticism of his Czech predecessors, Dvořák and Smetana. He seems to go back to an earlier era for inspiration—one in which harmony was leaner and counterpoint was an important ingredient. The Three Madrigals make much use of counterpoint and of a tartly dissonant harmonic idiom.

### **Johannes Brahms (1833-1897): Piano Trio in C Minor, Op. 101 (1886)**

Composers of the Baroque era—Handel and Vivaldi for example, wrote with no thought of how the future would regard their compositions. Works came to life only when the occasions for their use arose. Brahms, on the other hand, was deeply concerned for his responsibility as a creative artist and was highly critical of his own work. Whatever did not meet his standards was destroyed. We cannot trace his development as we can with Beethoven and his sketchbooks. There are no Brahms sketchbooks. The great first symphony, for example is no novice work. It was preceded by several that Brahms rejected.

The following occurs in Tchaikovsky’s diaries (1888):

“Going to Brodsky’s (Leipzig) for the one o’clock dinner, I heard sounds of the piano, violin and cello. They were rehearsing for the next day’s performance of Brahms’ new Piano-forte Trio Op. 101, and the composer himself was at the piano. Thus it chanced that I saw the famous German musician for the first time ... During the rehearsal I took the liberty of making some remarks as to the skill and execution of the relative tempo 2—3 (in the andante), and these remarks were very good-naturedly received by the composer.”

This trio was created in the same fruitful summer that produced the Cello Sonata, op. 99 and the Violin Sonata, op. 100. It has been suggested that these three would make a very fine program. I believe they would.

The C Minor Trio is probably the shortest of all great modern chamber works, being terse and concise to a remarkable degree. The first movement, one of the most powerful of Brahms’ creations, reveals these terse and concise qualities. The following presto non assai brings a degree

of relaxation. It fulfills the function of a scherzo. The beautiful andante is complicated rhythmically. Brahms originally wrote it in 7/4 meter but later decided to alternate one 3/4 bar with two in 2/4. The finale transforms the grimness of the first movement into a triumphant conclusion.

Listen to the three-note figure that is first heard in the left hand of the piano. It is all-important. It is defiant and forceful at first but appears in many alterations—sometimes upside down. The first movement is well described—*allegro energico*. The second is phantom-like. The “andante” starts with three notes—not stepwise as before but using larger intervals. It is essentially a dialogue between the strings and the piano. In the last movement, the three rising notes are changed to two repeated notes and an upward jump. The key changes from minor to major with a firm, ringing concluding statement. To me this is one of Brahms’ greatest.

Program notes by Hoyle Carpenter