

PROGRAM NOTES

Franz Josef Haydn (1732-1809): String Quartet, Op. 74, No. 3, “The Horseman” (1793)

Haydn’s works of the 1790’s are the peak of his impressive output. While they exhibit a beautiful classical balance they are, at the same time, frequently experimental in nature. New devices are tried out, and there is a new expressiveness that foreshadows the approaching Romantic style.

The first movement of Op. 74, No. 3 is an experiment in sonata structure. Are the opening bars an introduction or the first theme? Authorities differ. My opinion is that they are thematic. No matter—they are closely integrated into the structure. The jogging manner of this beginning has given this quartet the nickname of The Horseman. The second movement, a largo in the remote key of E major, is like a coloratura aria for the first violin. The minuet in G major is comfortably paced. There are many dynamic contrasts and unbalanced phrases. The trio is more chromatic and in the parallel minor—an unusual feature. The driving last movement has Hungarian and Austrian folk elements, e.g. the ‘oompah’ rhythm at the beginning and other places. Many of Haydn’s last movements are amiable, good-natured resolutions of previous tensions. Here occurs the climax of the whole work before Haydn’s inevitable cheerfulness makes itself felt.

-Hoyle Carpenter

Walter Rabl (1873-1940): Quartet for Piano, Clarinet, Violin, and Cello, Op. 1 (1897)

If the name Walter Rabl doesn’t ring any musical bells in your chamber music consciousness, you may be excused. This Viennese composer, conductor, and teacher of vocal music has been largely forgotten today. His musical education began in Salzburg where he studied music theory and composition under the Austrian composer and conductor Joseph Friedrich Hummel. He graduated from the Royal and Imperial State School in Salzburg in 1892.

Not only did he leave a small number of works, but he stopped composing entirely at the age of 30 and devoted himself to conducting and vocal coaching. In fact, even in his own lifetime he was known more as a conductor than a composer. As a composer he has only two chamber works to his credit: a set of fantasy pieces for piano trio and this Quartet for Piano, Clarinet, Violin and Cello in E Flat Major.

It was this quartet that made his name – such as it is – as a composer. Submitted in 1896 to a Viennese chamber music competition with none other than Johannes Brahms as its head judge, it won first prize, and was published the following year. Rabl dedicated the piece to Brahms, whose influence in it is undeniable, yet it is entirely an original composition. It is also an extraordinarily mature work, despite its early opus number. The relaxed, lilting opening of the Allegro moderato recalls Brahms’ lovely Op. 114 Clarinet Trio. The second movement, an Adagio molto, is a set of variations on a rather funereal theme. Brahms’ influence appears again in the Andantino, and the work closes with a buoyant Allegro con Brio finale.

Interestingly, Rabl’s publisher insisted that the composer create a second version of this quartet with a viola replacing the clarinet, thus making it a standard piano quartet. The idea was to increase its circulation as wide as possible. Ironically, the viola version is even less well known!

-Steve Siegel

Franz Schubert (1797-1828): Piano Trio in B-Flat Major, No. 1, Op. 99 (1827)

By 1827, Schubert had become a well-known composer. There was every reason to believe that he would become the most prominent of composers on the Vienna scene. Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven were no longer present.

Schubert never heard a public performance of the Op. 99 Trio. However, there was a private hearing on January 28, 1828, played by violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, cellist Joseph Linke and pianist Carl Maria Bocklet. All three had been closely involved with Beethoven’s music.

Surprisingly, Schubert never offered it to a publisher. It was brought out in 1836 by Diabelli—the same Diabelli of the Beethoven piano variations.

Two of Schubert's best-known chamber works have movements based on his songs—the Trout Quintet and the Death and the Maiden Quartet. The last movement of the Trio is based upon the song, Skolie: "Let us, in the bright May morning, take delight in the brief life of the flower, before the fragrance disappears."

Robert Schumann, with his keen insight into musical values, describes the B-Flat Trio: "One glance at Schubert's Trio (Op.99)—and the troubles of our human existence disappear, and all the world is fresh and bright again. Yet some ten years ago, a trio by Schubert passed across the face of the musical world like some angry portent in the sky. It was his hundredth opus and shortly afterwards, in November 1828, he died. This recently published Trio seems to be the older of the two works. There is absolutely no evidence of any earlier period in its style and it may well have been written just before the familiar E-Flat Trio. Yet the two works are essentially and fundamentally different. The first movement, which in the E-Flat Trio is eloquent of extreme anger and passionate longing, is here a thing of grace, intimate and virginal; the Adagio, in the E-Flat Trio a sigh, rising to spiritual anguish, is here a blissful dream state, a pulsating flow of exquisitely human emotion. The Scherzos are very similar to each other; yet to my mind, that of the B-Flat Trio is superior. I will not attempt to choose between the two last movements. To sum up, the Trio in E-Flat is active, masculine, and dramatic while the B-Flat is passive, feminine, lyrical..."

-Hoyle Carpenter