



CLEVELAND
CHAMBER
MUSIC
SOCIETY

PROGRAM NOTES

Wu Han, piano; Philip Setzer, violin; David Finckel, cello
September 13, 2022 – 7:30 p.m.

Kulas Hall, CIM

Piano Trio in B-flat major, D. 898 (1827)

Piano Trio in E-flat major, D. 929 (1828)

Franz Schubert

Born: Vienna-Himmelpfortgrund, 1797

Died: Vienna, 1828

After Beethoven's funeral—where he had been a torchbearer—Schubert and some friends stayed together and talked about the deceased master and his music until one o'clock in the morning. According to one version of the story, Schubert raised his glass in memory of Beethoven, and a second one for whoever would be the next to follow him. Tragically, this would be Schubert himself, who passed away only one year and eight months later, at the age of 31.

During those twenty months, Schubert completed more than sixty compositions, many of them large-scale works where he consciously took up Beethoven's mantle and began to emerge, even in the eyes of his contemporaries, as the master's true heir and a master in his own right. The common perception that Schubert was neglected during his lifetime is only partially true. Schubert had in fact done remarkably well for a composer his age. He was in fact on the verge of a major breakthrough in his career at the time of his

passing. On the first anniversary of Beethoven's death, he gave an enormously successful private concert of his works; publishers were bringing out a steady stream of his songs and piano works throughout the year. By all indications, Schubert (whatever his earlier health problems may have been) was in top form until September 1828 (two months before his death); as a composer, he was definitely on the rise.

Primarily known as a composer of songs, Schubert had, since about 1824, been writing masterpiece after masterpiece in all of Beethoven's major genres: piano sonata, symphony, string quartet. The two magnificent piano trios of 1827/28 were also part of this trend as Schubert's responses to the "Archduke" Trio and other famous Beethovenian achievements. Of course, Schubert's melodic language, and his entire style, are very much his own. But no one understood the implications of Beethoven's novel approach to chamber music more deeply than Schubert. And no

one after Beethoven could create such intimate conversations among the members of a chamber group as this shy young man, whose friends sometimes called him by the affectionate nickname “Schwammerl” (little mushroom).

One of Schubert’s first champions outside Vienna was Robert Schumann. In 1836, Schumann devoted an enthusiastic review to the two Schubert trios. Among other things, he wrote: “One glance at them, and the troubles of our human existence disappear and all the world is fresh and bright again.” He then went on to discuss both works in detail, concluding that the trio in E-flat major was more “active, masculine, dramatic,” while the B-flat major was more “suffering, feminine, lyrical.”

The Trio in B-flat—the earlier of the two—opens with an energetic melody over a pulsating accompaniment. This theme and the one that follows it—an expansive, lyrical idea with wide melodic leaps—are given ample space to develop new aspects of their respective personalities through surprising key changes and other transformations.

The second movement is a dream. Its enchanting opening melody, in a gentle barcarola rhythm, is harmonized with some notes borrowed from the minor mode to give it a tinge of sadness. A more agitated middle section then follows. Both Mozart and Beethoven had often included such turbulent middle sections in their slow movements (musicologist Maynard Solomon has coined the term “Trouble in Paradise” to describe these forms). In Schubert’s hands, the pattern takes on a special poignancy, and the return to calm sounds particularly blissful.

The third-movement Scherzo is based on an insistent rhythm that serves as the point of departure for many subtle musical games. The “trio,” or middle section, is quiet and subdued. The fourth movement is an elaborate fantasy on a string of dancing and galloping melodies, where Schubert subjects his rather playful raw material to extremely ingenious

transformations.

Much has been written about Schubert’s piano trios, but no one has summarized critical opinion better than Schumann, who ended his above-quoted review with the words: “However many and beautiful things our time brings forth, it will not soon produce another Schubert.”

While the B-flat major trio is a gentle and lyrical masterpiece, the E-flat major is more dramatic, occasionally even tragic, yet also witty and playful at times. Schubert combined his exceptional melodic gifts with an innovative treatment of harmony and a highly original approach to musical form.

Commentators have pointed out how little time Schubert spends on his cheerful first theme in the opening Allegro, how quickly he moves on to more mysterious secondary materials, and what remote keys he includes in his tonal trajectory. Moreover, the third theme (developed extensively in the central section of the movement) is based on a very poignant dissonance that is closer to Wagner than to Beethoven. The entire Allegro can be compared to a long and arduous journey from which one can return home only with great difficulty.

The second-movement “Andante con moto” is a different kind of journey. It opens with a celebrated cello solo, one of Schubert’s most memorable melodies. The theme is based on a Swedish folksong, “Se solen sjunker” (“Look, the sun is setting”), which Schubert had heard from the tenor Isak Albert Berg who visited Vienna in 1827. The song must have appealed to Schubert because, with its walking accompaniment and wistful melodic line, it is not unlike the opening song in his own song cycle *Winterreise* (“A winter’s journey”), written during the year of Berg’s visit. In the trio, the Swedish song becomes the point of departure for an extraordinary set of developments that takes us from the wistfully lyrical opening to spectacular outbursts of passion, and then back to the initial state of calm.

In the scherzo, the two string instruments play in canon with the piano,

repeating the piano melody a measure later; two different (though rhythmically related) melodies are successively treated in the same manner. The humor is always gentle, the tone always delicate. The “Trio” (that is, the middle section of the scherzo), by contrast, is a foot-stomping dance with some powerful accents, but the dance tune also shows its lyrical side at one point.

The final movement alternates

between two time signatures: the opening 6/8 switches to a fast duple meter in the second theme, and the two meters even appear simultaneously later on. Even more unusual is the return of the slow movement’s cello solo—the Swedish song—in the middle of the movement. All three themes are subsequently recapitulated, before the piece ends with a brief closing gesture derived from the opening melody.

-Peter Laki

Mr. Laki is a musicologist and Visiting Associate Professor of Music at Bard College. He has been the annotator for the Society’s program booklet since 2012, having previously served as annotator for the Cleveland Orchestra from 1990 to 2007. He is a native of Budapest and holds a Ph.D. in music from the University of Pennsylvania.