Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio

Saturday, November 14  |  8 pm  |  The Folly Theater

Joseph Kalichstein  piano
Jaime Laredo  violin
Sharon Robinson  cello


SHOSTAKOVICH  Piano Trio No. 2 in E Minor, Op. 67
Andante; Moderato
Allegro con brio
Largo
Allegretto

INTERMISSION

BRAHMS  Piano Trio No. 1 in B Major, Op. 8
Allegro con brio
Scherzo: Allegro molto
Adagio
Allegro

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14 Variations for Piano, Violin & Cello,
Op. 44, “Das rote Käppchen”
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

For nearly two hundred years, this work was mistakenly known as “Variations on an Original Theme” or, even more anonymously, ‘Piano Trio No. 10.’ The latter designation is a confusing misnomer because the canon of Beethoven piano trios culminates in the magnificent Archduke Trio, Op. 97 (1811), which is ‘Trio No. 6’ in the conventional numbering.

Rule number one: pay no attention to the ordinal numbers, at least for Beethoven’s piano trios. In this case, even the opus number is misleading. These variations were published in 1804 by the Leipzig firm of Hoffmeister & Kühnel, but Beethoven had composed them much earlier. Scholars were long unable to pinpoint precisely when, guessing it to be between 1792 and 1800. As recently as The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians II, published in 2001 and edited in the late 1990s, there is no date of composition listed for Op. 44, although The New Grove does indicate that Beethoven sketched the variations in 1792.

The most erroneous assumption about Op. 44, however, was to believe Beethoven’s theme was original. Because the triadic E-flat major theme bears a passing resemblance to the familiar tune used in both The Creatures of Prometheus and the Eroica symphony finale, Beethoven’s contemporaries assumed he had written it. In the early 1990s, however, the German musicologist Petra Weber-Bockholdt discovered that Beethoven had borrowed the melody from Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf’s opera Das Rote Käppchen (“The Red Cap”), a Singspiel in three acts. The opera was a popular success in Vienna at its première in Vienna’s Kärntnertortheater in 1788, prompting productions in other cities, including Bonn in 1790 and Weimar in 1791.

Beethoven heard it in Bonn, then composed a set of piano variations on the hero Hans’s Romanze, “Es war einmal ein alter Mann” (There once was an old man). The piano piece is known today as WoO 66. Ms. Weber-Bockholdt was able to identify the theme of the Op. 44 variations as another popular tune from Dittersdorf’s opera, “Ja, ich muss mich von ihr scheiden” (Yes, I must leave her), establishing that Beethoven had actually composed two sets of variations based on Dittersdorf’s opera.

In his 1988 survey of the piano trio literature, before Ms. Weber-Bockholdt’s discovery, Basil Smallman dismissed Op. 44 has having a “severely unmelodic theme.” In all fairness, one could, of course, make the same observation about many other themes in Beethoven’s oeuvre. What Beethoven divined in the Dittersdorf original was the potential of a fermata (literally ‘stop’, but in music, a pause) that furnished him with a strategically placed pause for a rhetorical statement in each variation. He exploited it beautifully. Op. 44 is workmanlike, showing that at age 22, Beethoven already understood how to navigate his way through variation technique. He emphasizes piano figurations by using conventional methods: note values are faster and meters altered. Two variations are in a minore mode, and a handful of variations are in a slower tempo providing variety.

The result is a surprisingly satisfying work that reveals the composer’s predisposition for the keyboard. The second variation is for piano solo; the third adds triplets for the violin, the fourth has the cello in walking eighth notes, the fifth variation features the piano in octave triplets, and the sixth opens with a scalar unison fanfare for all three players. Variation Nos. 7 and 13 switch from the key of E-flat major to the dark key of E-flat minor (the parallel minor), one in 6/8 time, one in an expressive Adagio. Variation No. 8 is an operatic adagio for piano with string accompaniment in slow triplets. The later variations show more integration of textures and material among the three instruments. We can practically trace Beethoven’s compositional growth as he gains skill in the process. Op. 44’s final variation incorporates a coda that increases its dramatic weight, hinting at the great variation sets of Beethoven’s maturity.

Piano Trio No. 2 in E Minor, Op. 67
Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Shostakovich completed the first movement of this celebrated trio just four days after the death of his close friend Ivan Sollertinsky on February 11, 1944. It has been described as one of his most heartfelt works, and doubtless reflects the composer’s sense of personal loss, as well as broader feelings about the darkness of wartime. He did not resume work on the balance of the trio until the summer. When he completed the fourth movement on August 14, the trio bore a dedication to Sollertinsky.
We know that he had begun work on it in 1943, because a Soviet publication late that year quoted him as describing a trio “on Russian folk themes,” and he mentioned a trio to his friend Isak Glikman in a letter dated December 8, 1943. The most striking aspect of this trio from the listener’s standpoint is the stark, sparse writing for the piano. The work opens with a slow, fugato introduction. The cello states the subject in its highest register, in harmonics. The violin answers with its own lowest voice. Finally the piano joins, in open octaves. The composer thus lays the groundwork for startling, unexpected sonorities from all three participants. In marked contrast to the unabashed dominance of the keyboard in all classical and most romantic piano trios, there is no possibility here for the piano to overshadow its companions. Shostakovich rarely takes advantage of the piano’s polyphonic capabilities, restricting the instrument to single lines, octaves, and chordal commentary for much of the work.

The second movement is a true scherzo, almost demonic in its lightning speed and melodic verve. It is linked to the scherzo in the composer’s own Piano Quintet, Op. 57 (1940). In its lightning quick pace and fleet fingerwork, this one also draws on the heritage of Mendelssohn, whose scherzi were rarely matched in 19th century chamber music. Sollertinsky’s sister was struck by the music’s resemblance to her late brother, calling it:

...an amazingly exact portrait of Ivan Ivanovich, whom Shostakovich understood like no one else. That is his temper, his polemics, his manner of speech, his habit of returning to one and the same thought, developing it.

The scherzo’s lighthearted, diatonic brilliance and contrapuntal gamesmanship are a dramatic foil, for Shostakovich takes his listener next into the darkest reaches of the grieving soul. The ensuing Largo is a passacaglia. The piano’s repeated eight measures of somber, chorale-like chords provide the backdrop for a plaintive, mournful melody initially stated by the violin. The second statement comes from the cello, with the violin offering anguished commentary in counterpoint. Shostakovich mesmerizes us with the inexorable, Chopinesque chords of the piano beneath the expressive dialogue of the two stringed instruments.

Shostakovich’s finale is a Russian danse macabre punctuated by extensive string pizzicati and the piano’s insistent foursquare background. He incorporated a Jewish theme into the finale, one among several prominent examples in his wartime works demonstrating his keen interest in Jewish music. His biographer Laurel Fay has observed:

The appearance of these works at a time when appalling revelations about the Holocaust were filtering out and when homegrown anti-Semitism was assuming more menacing dimensions is hardly coincidental. Shostakovich’s aversion to anti-Semitism in any form was deeply rooted. Nevertheless, the deeply aesthetic nature of his engagement with Jewish folklore and music should not be underestimated. The inflected modes of Jewish music went hand in hand with his own natural gravitation toward modes with flattened scale degrees. Shostakovich was attracted by the ambiguities in Jewish music, its ability to project radically different emotions simultaneously.

The polymetric sections in the middle of the movement are unsettling. The composer slips in and out of 5/4 and 3/4 time with diabolical ease, fooling us with an occasional reminder of the oom-pah march that opened the movement. The tension and rhythmic excitement of this conclusion build to a climax, in which the composer finally permits a passionate, brilliant outburst from the piano—the only one of its kind in this trio. Shostakovich defuses the tension from here, closing the movement gradually with musical quotations from the first, third, and final movements. The coda resolves quietly against the background of the third movement passacaglia-chorale.

**Piano Trio in B Major, Op. 8**

**Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)**

Brahms met Robert and Clara Schumann at the end of September 1853. The rapport was immediate. Their historic meeting resulted in some of the most compelling music and romantic lore of the entire 19th century.

Thus far, Brahms had thus far only published songs and large piano works. Perhaps inspired by the stimulating association with the Schumanns, Brahms now turned to chamber music, one of Robert’s strengths. By January 1854, he had completed an expansive, four-movement piano trio in B major. We know that he had already destroyed a large number of chamber works and other compositions. The new trio was the first piece of chamber music that satisfied him enough to publish; it was issued later that year as Op. 8.

One month after Brahms completed the trio, on February 27, 1854, Robert Schumann threw himself into the Rhine in a tragic suicide attempt that resulted in his commitment to a mental asylum in Endenich. He never recovered his health, and remained at Endenich until his death in 1856. Clara was understandably stricken.
She had lost the daily emotional support of the husband she adored, and she was left with seven small children to support, and an eighth on the way. During this trying time, Brahms was her near constant companion and psychological anchor. The B Major Trio was one of the works he played to Clara to comfort her after Robert’s accident.

More than a quarter century elapsed before Brahms composed another piano trio. His next one was Op. 87 (1880-82). The premiere took place in Frankfurt on December 29, 1882, on the same program that introduced his String Quintet in F Major, Op. 88. By then, Brahms had become the grand old man of Austro-German music, and its most prominent living composer. (Wagner, in some camps Brahms’s arch-rival, had suffered a massive heart attack in March 1882. He died the following February.)

In 1888, Brahms’s publisher Fritz Simrock negotiated with Breitkopf & Härtel to secure the rights to the first ten works Brahms had published as a twenty-something. Simrock was intent on becoming Brahms’s sole publisher. In the long term, he largely succeeded; apart from some late vocal quartets, Simrock would issue the first editions of everything Brahms composed after that.

In the short term, Simrock inquired whether Brahms would like to revise any of the works published as Op. 1 through Op. 10. Looking over the B Major Trio thirty-five years later, Brahms decided that he would. During the summer of 1889 Brahms wrote to Clara from Ischl:

> With what childish amusement I whiled away the beautiful summer days you will never guess. I have rewritten my B Major trio and can call it Op. 108 instead of Op. 8. It will not be so wild as it was before—but whether it will be better—?

Simrock eventually published both versions of the trio as Op. 8. Comparison of the two is a fascinating illustration of the differences in Brahms’s spirit and musical philosophy during his youth and in his final years. The themes remain the same; their treatment differs. The later, revised version – which the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio performs – is considerably shorter and more compact; its structure is altogether tighter, yet it preserves the passion and heady romanticism of the original material. The ardor of youth is tempered by the wisdom and skill of maturity.

*Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2015*