

Notes on the Program by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

Trio in B-flat major for Clarinet, Cello, and Piano, Op. 11

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born December 16, 1770 in Bonn.

Died March 26, 1827 in Vienna.

Composed in 1798.

Beethoven first acquired his reputation after arriving in Vienna in 1792 as a pianist, a flamboyant young man of untamed spirit particularly noted for the power and invention of his improvisations. It was with the premieres of his first two piano concertos in 1795 that his fame as a composer began to flourish. Some of the compositions from the years immediately following show his eagerness to stretch the boundaries of the conventional forms and modes of expression, but most of his music of the 1790s still pays eager obeisance to the traditions and taste of the time. Such a work is the Trio for Piano, Clarinet, and Cello, Op. 11, composed in 1798. Beethoven's disciple Carl Czerny simply said, without specification, that the Trio was written for "a clarinetist," the most likely candidate being Joseph Bähr, a virtuoso then attached to the musical establishment of the Prussian court chapel at Potsdam. Chamber pieces with winds were much in vogue at that time in Vienna, and Beethoven contributed nine works to the genre between 1792 and 1800. (The Septet, Op. 20 of 1800 was by far his most popular piece during his lifetime; in 1805 he arranged it for clarinet, cello, and piano as his Trio in E-flat major, Op. 38.) The Clarinet Trio was intended to please the drawing-room sensibilities of the Viennese public, and to help ensure its success Beethoven based the last movement on a well-known tune (*Pria ch'io l'impegno* — "Before beginning this awesome task, I need a snack") from Joseph Weigl's popular comic opera *L'Amor Marinaro* ("The Corsair in Love"), which had been unveiled at the Hoftheater in November 1797. (Such a tactic was then common — Hummel and Joseph Wölfl both composed variations on the melody shortly after Beethoven, and Paganini created a *Grand Sonata and Variations* for Violin and Orchestra on it as late as 1828.) Upon the score's publication in 1798 (which was issued with a substitute violin part for the clarinet to boost its potential sales to Vienna's home music-makers), Beethoven shrewdly dedicated the score to his patroness Countess Wilhelmine von Thun, who had also supported the creative efforts of Mozart, Haydn, and Gluck.

The review of the Clarinet Trio that appeared in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* ("General Music Journal") in 1799 is typical in its mixture of praise and caution of many that Beethoven received throughout his life: "This Trio is by no means easy, but it runs more flowingly than much of the composer's other work, and produces an excellent ensemble effect. If the composer, with his unusual grasp of harmony, his love of the graver movements, would aim at natural rather than strained or *recherché* composition, he would set good work before the public, such as would throw into the shade the stale, hurdy-gurdy tunes of many a more talked-about musician." Beethoven, of course, paid no attention to this advice, and went on to become, well, Beethoven, but this early Clarinet Trio, though fitted with a number of harmonic audacities, is music still well within the Classical mold, untroubled by the searching expression of his later works.

The Trio's sonata-form opening movement begins with a bold, striding phrase presented in unison as the first of several motives comprising the main theme group. The complementary themes are introduced following two loud chords, a silence, and an unexpected harmonic sleight-of-hand. The movement's development section is largely concerned with the striding motive of the main theme. The *Adagio* is based on a melody of Mozartian tenderness first sung by the cello before being shared with the clarinet. The finale is a straightforward set of nine

variations and a finale on Weigl's melody, a movement that Beethoven repeatedly promised Czerny he would replace with a more substantial one, but never did.

Selections from the Eight Pieces for Clarinet, Cello, and Piano, Op. 83

Max Bruch

Born January 6, 1838 in Cologne.

Died October 20, 1920 in Friedenau, near Berlin.

Composed in 1909.

Max Bruch, widely known and respected in his day as a composer, conductor, and teacher, received his earliest music instruction from his mother, a noted singer and pianist. He began composing at eleven, and by fourteen had produced a symphony and a string quartet, the latter garnering a prize that allowed him to study with Karl Reinecke and Ferdinand Hiller in Cologne. His opera *Die Loreley* (1862) and the choral work *Frithjof* (1864) brought him his first public acclaim. For the next 25 years, Bruch held various posts as a choral and orchestral conductor in Cologne, Coblenz, Sondershausen, Berlin, Liverpool, and Breslau; in 1883, he visited the United States to conduct concerts of his own choral compositions. From 1890 to 1910, he taught composition at the Berlin Academy and received numerous awards for his work, including an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University. Though Bruch is known mainly for three famous compositions for string soloist and orchestra (the G minor Concerto and *Scottish Fantasy* for violin, and the *Kol Nidrei* for cello), he also composed two other violin concertos, three symphonies, a concerto for two pianos, various chamber pieces, songs, three operas, and much choral music.

Bruch composed his *Eight Pieces* for Clarinet, Cello (originally viola), and Piano, Op. 83 in 1909, in his seventieth year, for his son Max Felix, a talented clarinetist who also inspired a Double Concerto (Op. 88) for his instrument and viola from his father two years later. When the younger Bruch played the works in Cologne and Hamburg, Fritz Steinbach reported favorably on the event to the composer, comparing Max Felix's ability with that of Richard Mühlfeld, the clarinetist who had inspired two sonatas, a quintet, and a trio from Johannes Brahms two decades before. This was indeed sweet praise to Bruch, since Steinbach had been Music Director at Meiningen before moving to Cologne, and knew Mühlfeld's playing intimately. Like Brahms' late works for clarinet, the *Eight Pieces* favor rich, mellow instrumental hues in the alto range and an autumnal maturity of expression, deeply felt but purged of excess. Clarinet and cello are here evenly matched, singing together in duet or conversing in dialogue, while the piano serves as an accompanimental partner. Bruch intended that the *Eight Pieces* be regarded as a set of independent miniatures of various styles rather than as an integrated cycle, and advised against playing all of them together in concert. The *Pieces* (they range from three to six minutes in length) are straightforward in structure — binary (A–B) or ternary (A–B–A) for the first six, compact sonata form for the last two — and are, with one exception (No. 7), all in thoughtful minor keys. Though Bruch was fond of incorporating folk music into his concert works, only the *Romanian Melody* (No. 5, suggested to him, he said, by “the delightful young princess zu Wied” at one of his Sunday open-houses; he dedicated the work to her) shows such an influence; the only other movement with a title is the *Nachtgesang* (No. 6, “Nocturne”). “The *Eight Pieces* are the product of one aspect of the 19th-century cultural climate,” wrote Gordana Lazarevich. “In their display of lyrical effusiveness where each piece is based on an extensive melody, and in their rhapsodic treatment of the material, the compositions epitomize those aspects of Romantic thought which glorified the sensual, the emotive, and the sentimental.”

Trio in A minor for Clarinet, Cello, and Piano, Op. 114

Johannes Brahms

Born May 7, 1833 in Hamburg.

Died April 3, 1897 in Vienna.

Composed in 1891.

Premiered on November 24, 1891 in Meiningen, by clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld, cellist Robert Hausmann, and the composer.

As an unrepentant, life-long bachelor (he once vowed that he would “never undertake either a marriage or an opera”), Johannes Brahms depended heavily on his circle of friends for support, encouragement, and advice. By word and example, Robert Schumann set him on the path of serious composition as a young man; Schumann’s widow, Clara, was Brahms’ chief critic and confidante throughout his life. The violinist Joseph Joachim was an indefatigable champion of Brahms’ chamber music, and provided him with expert technical information during the composition of the Violin Concerto. Hans von Bülow, a musician of gargantuan talent celebrated as both pianist and conductor, played Brahms’ music widely, and made it a mainstay in the repertory of the superb court orchestra at Meiningen during his tenure there as music director from 1880 to 1885. Soon after arriving in Meiningen, Bülow invited Brahms to be received by the music-loving Duke Georg and his consort, Baroness von Heldburg, and Brahms was provided with a fine apartment and encouraged to visit the court whenever he wished. (The only obligation upon the comfort-loving composer was to don the much-despised full dress for dinner.) Brahms returned frequently and happily to Meiningen to hear his works played by the orchestra and to take part in chamber ensembles. At a concert in March 1891, he heard a performance of Weber’s F minor Clarinet Concerto by the orchestra’s principal player of that instrument, Richard Mühlfeld, and was overwhelmed. “It is impossible to play the clarinet better than Herr Mühlfeld does here,” he wrote to Clara. “He is absolutely the best I know.” So fluid and sweet was Mühlfeld’s playing that Brahms dubbed him “Fräulein Nightingale,” and flatly proclaimed him to be the best wind instrument player he had ever heard. Indeed, so strong was the impact of the experience that Brahms was shaken out of a year-long creative lethargy, and the Trio for Clarinet, Cello, and Piano (Op. 114) and the Quintet for Clarinet and Strings (Op. 115) were composed for Mühlfeld without difficulty between May and July 1891 at the Austrian resort town of Bad Ischl, near Salzburg. Three years later Brahms was inspired again to write for Mühlfeld, and produced the two Sonatas for Clarinet and Piano (Op. 120). Both the Trio and the Quintet were first heard at a private recital at Meiningen on November 24, 1891 presented by Brahms (as pianist), Mühlfeld, cellist Robert Hausmann and the other members of the Joachim Quartet. The same forces gave the public premieres of both works in Berlin on December 12th.

Both the Trio and the Quintet that Brahms devised for Mühlfeld are autumnal in mood, tinged throughout with the bittersweet nostalgia that marked the music of the composer’s full maturity, a quality to which the darkly limpid sonority of the clarinet is perfectly suited. The Trio’s opening movement, a seamlessly woven sonata form that treats the two melody instruments as twin voices, begins with a somber main theme that arches through the cello’s tenor register. The ensemble’s discussion of this motive leads to a climax, from which emerges the second theme, a lyrical cello melody that, reversing the shape of the main theme, descends then rises. The compact development section, based on the main subject, is draped with ribbons of scales passed among the participants. The themes are somewhat altered upon their returns in the recapitulation, and the movement ends with a whispered reminiscence of the scales from the development. The *Adagio* is a tender, introspective duet with piano accompaniment that makes superb use of the burnished hues of clarinet and cello. The third movement, one of Brahms’ final tributes to the lilting dance music of his adopted Viennese home, takes a graceful, languid, waltz-like strain as its principal theme, and creates contrast with a rustic episode in the manner of the countryside *Ländler*. The main theme of the sonata-

form finale, initiated by the cello, comprises bold phrases of leaping intervals followed by a tight, scale-step motive; the contrasting subsidiary subject is more flowing. The development section is dominated by the impetuous main theme. The Clarinet Trio, Brahms' penultimate piece of chamber music, concludes with the recapitulation of the finale's themes and a brilliant coda grown from the principal subject.

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