Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center
Beethoven Connections
Program Notes

Trio in C minor for Violin, Viola, and Cello, Op. 9, No. 3
Ludwig van Beethoven
Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn.
Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna.

Composed in 1797-98.

Duration: 23 minutes

Ludwig van Beethoven did not have an easy time after moving to Vienna in 1792. He had a hot and cold relationship with his composition teacher, Franz Joseph Haydn, and barely made ends meet financially, especially at first. He was greatly indebted to various patrons, who helped him to stay afloat while he worked toward his first publications. Among those early supporters were Count Johann George von Browne and his wife, Countess Anna Margaretha. Von Browne was reportedly a strange and capricious fellow, but despite this (or perhaps because of it) he got along quite well with Beethoven. Their good relationship can be seen in the extended dedication the composer included with his Op. 9 String Trios, where he called the Count's generosity "as tasteful as it is liberal" and referred to him as "the foremost patron of my Muse."

In this dedication, Beethoven also put to paper that he viewed these as the very best of his works yet published, though in a stroke of humility he attributes their quality to hard work and not to any sort of genius. He was right to be proud of these trios, which achieve much of the artistry and creativity that are seen in the first string quartets he would produce a couple of years later. They are successful as pieces in their own right, but also served as a ground for experimentation where the evolving composer could refine his methods of formal, harmonic, and melodic development.

In the third work in the set, the trio in C minor, Beethoven confronts head-on two major compositional problems in minor-key works. The first, melodic problem is established in the first two measures, where the three string players descend in unison, step by step. Between the second and third notes is a leap of an augmented second, the spooky and problematic interval that defines the harmonic minor scale. This interval crops up throughout the trio, including in some surprising violin figuration in the otherwise tranquil second movement. Beethoven spends much of his energy across the piece probing and contorting such figures, trying various approaches to smoothing out the naturally gnarly melodic terrain of the minor scale.

A second problem in minor-key pieces is formal and harmonic. In a typical major-key sonata form, the exposition modulates to the key of the fifth scale degree. In a minor-key piece, there is a wider range of possible destinations. In each movement, Beethoven takes advantage of this open field, exploring the relative major key of E-flat, but also tropically warm A-flat major, ominous E-flat minor, and even using the almost unheard-of key of D-flat minor in the coda to the first movement. The C-major second movement, and the light C-major trio of the otherwise turbulent third movement, involve sudden episodes in E-flat, suggesting that Beethoven has something to work out with this tonality. Again, in the driven, final movement, we can hear an almost irresolvable conflict between a multitude of musical destinations; the many sequences heard in this finale eventually dissipate in a humorous and unsettling C major flourish.

Quintet in E-flat for Piano, Violin, Viola, Cello, and Bass, Op. 87

Johann Nepomuk Hummel
Born November 14, 1778, in Pressburg (now Bratislava).
Died October 17, 1837, in Weimar.

Composed in 1802.

Duration: 20 minutes

Johann Nepomuk Hummel was born to a musical family in Pressburg, then in the Kingdom of Hungary. A piano virtuoso from a young age, he was noticed by Mozart, who hosted him at home for two years and gave him composition lessons. After tours in London and across Europe, he settled in Vienna, where he developed close friendships with Ludwig van Beethoven and eventually the young Franz Schubert. His music was very popular in his time, which complicated his relationship with equally renowned Beethoven; their supporters engaged in quite a rivalry, though the composers themselves somehow managed to get along in spite of the competition.

Hummel wrote a number of pieces for soloist and orchestra, including a trumpet concerto that is his most known work today, but most of his compositional output was for small ensembles. His music exhibits the same experimental and transitional tendencies as that of Beethoven and Schubert. He is searching for ways to build on Classical forms while incorporating new harmonic and expressive possibilities that would come to consume music over the course of the 19th century.

The 1802 Piano Quintet, in the tense key of E-flat minor, was undoubtedly a vehicle for Hummel's own virtuosity. In the first movement, a dramatic, minor-key gesture is repeated and developed by the strings alongside a near-constant stream of cascading piano triplets. The second, scherzo movement pits strings against piano more directly, though the violin seems to win out, closing each section with an eerie, dancing, modal solo. The Lento starts with a touching melodic fragment in unison that opens up into a chorale, hinting at a simplicity and profundity akin to what we find in late Beethoven. But the movement remains little more than a hint; after a few provocative phrases it gives way to an energetic finale back in E-flat minor. The piano shares the virtuosic spotlight with the strings and the full ensemble finishes with aggressive flare. Take that, Beethoven fans.

Rondo in A major for Piano, Four Hands, D. 951
Franz Schubert
Born January 31, 1797, in Vienna.
Died November 19, 1828, in Vienna.

Composed in 1828.

Duration: 12 minutes

This Rondo for Piano, Four-Hands (D. 951), written by Franz Schubert in the last year of his life, opens with a lyrical melody. The first piano lines up a series of delicate falls, slowly opening up the harmonies and then returning to a close in A major. A turn to minor marks a more active transition, leading to a prayer-like secondary melody. We meander back to the opening lyrical tune again, then divert to a scampering C section with soaring arpeggios in the first piano and a marching bassline in the second. An abbreviated statement of the A and B sections follow and develop into some extraordinary variations of the prayer-like tune. At last, a closing rendition of the opening melody appears in the second piano part, a gesture that cues a calm resolution.

This musical form, a slow-tune rondo that meditates repeatedly on deceptively simple materials, emerges definitively in Schubert's late compositional output. Similar controlled and lyrical rondos appear

in the Sonata in A minor for Arpeggione and Piano (D. 821) and many of his solo piano sonatas (D. 850, D. 894, D. 959). In all of these pieces, the slow-tune rondo is not an inner movement, a diversion between more energetic chapters, but rather the ending of a large-scale work. In fact, there are theories that the A major Four-Hands Rondo was meant to form the last movement of a collection that would have opened with the turbulent A minor *Lebensstürme* (D. 947). Why did Schubert so often eschew conclusive fireworks in favor of a poignant, repetitive, contemplative end?

He was likely drawing on the work of Ludwig van Beethoven, whose music he admired greatly. Beethoven's E major Piano Sonata closes with a similarly constructed lyrical movement. But Schubert creates much more expansive versions of this model and uses them to conclude longer pieces. These rondos demand much of the listener, asking them to work through the same, beautiful thought many times. But in doing so, Schubert finds a way to make a final moment last forever, pulling feeling from every second of music. Despite all its repetition, when the last note dies away, we crave hearing the tune just one more time.

Sextet in D major for Piano, Violin, Two Violas, Cello, and Bass, Op. 110
Felix Mendelssohn
Born February 3, 1809, in Hamburg.
Died November 4, 1847, in Leipzig.

Composed in 1824.

Duration: 30 minutes

Felix Mendelssohn was born into a prominent banking family based in Berlin and his parents were able to provide him and his siblings with an extraordinary education. He showed early musical talent, though his father was skeptical of his choice to pursue music professionally for some time. He received extensive lessons in counterpoint, particularly studying the music of J.S. Bach, he had many performance opportunities, and wrote a lot of music in his early teens. By the age of 15, he had completed his first symphony, a multitude of string sinfonias, and a treasure trove of chamber works. Among those is the Sextet in D major. It has been dated to 1824 but, like many of these early creations, it was not published until after Mendelssohn's death.

The instrumentation of the sextet is remarkable. The Piano-Violin-Viola-Cello-Bass quintet was an ensemble that had previously appeared in a couple of works by Franz Schubert, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, and others. For his D major sextet, Mendelssohn adds an extra viola to that already unusual combination, creating a string texture that is completely singular in the Classical and Romantic chamber music literature. He was on to something: the four lower strings combine to create a rich bass sound that can stand out against the volume of the piano and the shining clarity of the violin.

The young Mendelssohn was a prolific pianist and would have studied the great works of Mozart thoroughly. The start of this sextet sounds particularly like a Mozart piano concerto: the strings open with inviting, lyrical gestures; the piano replies with a more developed tune. The piano's fluttering triplet arpeggios, which sit under much of the music, gloriously let loose in the final measures of the movement, soaring to the brightest register of the instrument, and creating a special textural counterpoint against the heavy string sound underneath.

A tender slow movement in the subdued key of F-sharp major follows. The third movement is a swashbuckling scherzo, contrasted with a central trio in the form of a chorale. The last movement begins with the piano alone, back in D major and giving a pitch-perfect imitation of a finale from a Mozart piano sonata. The strings eventually join, but take a back seat for much of the movement until Mendelssohn's most daring twist. At the very end of the piece, he brings back the music and time signature of the

scherzo for a chaotic coda in D minor. Was this serious formal experimentation for the precocious composer? Or was it a joke for his friend, the second violist? Mendelssohn didn't write anything about this piece, and so the enticing strangeness of this music remains a mystery for us to enjoy.

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