

SOU Chamber Music Concerts ~ Program Notes

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Thursday, February 17, 2005, 8 pm:

Paris Piano Trio

Haydn: Piano Trio in A Major, Hob XV no. 18 (1794)

Ravel: Piano Trio in A Minor (1914)

Tchaikovsky: Piano Trio in A Minor, Op. 50 (1882)

HAYDN PIANO TRIO in A MAJOR, Hob XV no. 18 (1794)

Haydn's piano trios provide a wonderful means by which to consider a variety of 18th-century performance practices. Many composers, including Haydn, wrote for a generic group of keyboard instruments (organ, harpsichord, clavichord and the new forte-piano) in the 18th century, to attract as many amateur consumers as possible. The first work in which Haydn specifies "forte piano" (the immediate predecessor of the modern piano) was in a piano trio in G Major from 1784. Tonight's trio from 1794 belongs to the first set which specifies only the piano (and no other keyboard option). This modern designation is coupled with an old-fashioned title, as Haydn follows 18th-century convention in calling these works "keyboard sonatas accompanied by violin and cello." He never uses the word "trio." His popularity as a symphony composer in London also led to publisher's demands for other works. At that moment, Haydn had only the G Major trio on hand. As the publisher wanted to publish sets of three, that's what Haydn gave him---though the other two were by Haydn's pupil Ignaz Pleyel. In a world without copyright, Haydn was often swindled by publishers; but he was not above the occasional bit of "sharp practice" himself.

These "trios" proved especially popular in late-18th century London, prompting Haydn to write his final 12 sonatas (four sets of three) for his second London visit of 1794-95. Such trios were usually intended for the lucrative amateur market, hence their three-movement cycles and comparatively short movements. The irony in these works from 1794-95 lies in Haydn's acquaintance with two extraordinary London keyboard virtuosos, Rebecca Schroeter and Therese Jansen. Their presence encouraged Haydn to write his most demanding keyboard music. Music scholar and pianist Charles Rosen maintains that the most challenging piano music before Beethoven exists "...in the Mozart concertos and the Haydn piano trios." Such virtuosic demands could hardly be met by an amateur player. Tonight's trio was published with two other 1794 trios (this time all his own!) and dedicated to Princess Maria Esterhazy, the widow of Prince Anton Esterhazy. Though Haydn achieved wealth and fame in London, and was invited to stay in England by the royal family, his ties to his former employers (the Esterhazy family) brought him back to Vienna.

The first movement, in **sonata form**, opens with three chords unrelated to the rest of the movement. Haydn grew weary of the casual attitude of public talking and game playing at these concerts, and he wrote the chords (known as "noise killers" or "curtain raisers") to simply quiet the audience. Once the movement proper begins, the movement bristles with typical Haydn features: the good-humored dialogue of a sinuous, chromatic, 16th-note passage and a secondary theme derived from the opening. When Haydn returns to this secondary material in the recap, he typically alters it with some remarkable, unexpected

harmonies. The complex keyboard figuration begins to emerge in the Andante movement in **A B A** form. Haydn sets the movement in A Minor, but listen also for the warmth of the **B** section, in which he shifts to A Major. Great humor (especially in a grace-note motive) and difficult keyboard passagework dominate the delightful **rondo** finale. The cello part became an equal partner in Mozart's piano trios, but Haydn has it most often double the piano. The violin, however, comes in for its share of difficult passagework in dialogue with the piano. And when all three instruments pile on top of each other with that silly grace-note figure, Haydn creates a joyous, high-spirited cacaphony to close the trio.

RAVEL PIANO TRIO in A MINOR (1914)

The piano trio repertory includes some of the greatest chamber works ever written. Think only of Mozart's "Kegelstatt" Trio, Beethoven's "Archduke" and the Brahms Horn Trio, among many others. The first generation of piano trio compositions in the late 18th century was prolific, led by Mozart (7 trios) and Haydn (45). Mendelssohn and Schubert each wrote two, and Beethoven (7), Schumann (3), Franck (5) and Brahms (5) developed the genre throughout the 19th century. However, Ravel's single trio unfortunately represents the 20th-century approach; few composers turned to it more than once, if at all. The principal revolutionary composers of the early 20th century ignored the medium. Among such composers, only Bartok contributed to the genre with a single work: *Contrasts* (1938) for Piano, Clarinet and Violin. Furthermore, as Basil Smallman notes, there was also an absence of a series of works in this medium by a major composer "...comparable to the string quartets of Bartok, Hindemith and Shostakovich." It remained for the more conservative composers to continue the genre, as it---unlike the string quartet---thus became the "preserve mainly of traditionalists."

Such "traditionalists" as Ravel, Faure, Shostakovich, Bridge, Copland, Harris, Turina, Granados, et. al., nonetheless produced piano trios of great quality in the 20th century. Many critics, such as Mark De Voto, consider Ravel's piano trio to be "...the summit of his achievement in the chamber genre." Unlike Debussy, Ravel turned to chamber composition regularly throughout his career. Given the fact that he wrote the piano trio in 1914, over a decade after his string quartet, such judgments constitute high praise indeed. Ravel himself prized the trio, and dedicated it to his composition teacher Andre Gedalge. Ravel bases the themes of the opening movement on the folk music of his mother's Basque homeland. He lengthens the Basque *zortzico* dance pattern into an 8/8 meter subdivided into 3 + 2+3 beats, and uses his most beloved folk harmony (Dorian mode) as well. Thus both the structure (sonata form) and content of the opening movement reflect aspects of Ravel's "traditionalism."

As the first movement demonstrates, Ravel loved dances. The minuet became a special favorite, so though he doesn't label it as such, he bases the second movement Scherzo and Trio on this tradition. The title he chose---"Pantoum"---reflects the Malaysian poetic form *pantun*, which juxtaposes two distinct ideas in each stanza. The central trio section provides a wonderful contrast, with smooth legato lines and rich, jazz-like harmonies. Ravel turns to ancient tradition yet again for the third movement---the 17th-century Passacaglia. He creates a slow, 8-bar theme in triple meter and offers ten variations, also turning to a contrasting theme of similar structure in the middle of the movement. The lively finale recalls the folk rhythms of the opening movement, as Ravel smoothly alternates between 5/4 and 7/4 meters. The movement also opens with a virtuosic display of harmonics in the violin and

double-stop tremolos in the cello. By developing some of the features of his earlier string quartet---extended passages of pizzicato, harmonics, trills, and double-octave spacing---Smallman notes that Ravel brought "...entirely new effects of colour and expression to trio writing." Perhaps he's not entirely a "traditionalist" after all! And as each trio on tonight's program contains at least one movement in A Minor, the concert highlights Ravel's special gift for warm, yet sophisticated harmonies.

TCHAIKOVSKY PIANO TRIO in A MINOR, OP. 50 (1882)

By 1880 Tchaikovsky's works, in many genres, established him as a major international composer. He had already written the first four symphonies, many of his symphonic poems (1812 Overture, the Romeo & Juliet and Francesca da Rimini fantasias), the Serenade for Strings, the first two piano concertos and the violin concerto, his opera Eugene Onegin, and the Swan Lake ballet. Tchaikovsky had also written all three of his string quartets, but in a century rich in piano trios he had yet to tackle this other major chamber genre. However, his longtime patron and benefactor Nadezhda von Meck wrote him in 1880 about her hosting successful concerts with a piano trio. The young student she hired from the Paris Conservatory to give piano lessons to her children (Claude Debussy!) had written a trio which they performed, and she urged Tchaikovsky to attempt this genre. When Nikolay Rubenstein died in 1881---a great pianist, Tchaikovsky's longtime mento and founder of the Moscow Conservatory---Tchaikovsky wanted to dedicate a major work to him. Thus he dedicated his only piano trio "A la memoire d'un grand Artiste" and it premiered on the first anniversary of Rubenstein's death in 1882.

To complete this Russian circle, Sergei Rakhmaninov dedicated a Piano Trio in Tchaikovsky's memory, his second *Trio Elegiaque*, after Tchaikovsky died in 1893.

Though Tchaikovsky set this trio in two movements, it is by no means a small-scale work. He wrote two huge movements, lasting almost fifty minutes: an opening movement in sonata form, followed by a theme and variations finale. This two-movement scheme recalls the similar cycle in Beethoven's final piano sonata in C Minor, Op. 111. (Despite the deserved lionization of Beethoven, however, we would also do well to remember that Haydn wrote many two-movement trios which incorporated theme and variations as well.) One difference with Haydn becomes immediately apparent, however. 19th-century piano trios took advantage of the extraordinary advances in keyboard construction to write increasingly virtuosic piano parts. The great composers compensated by making all parts technically demanding, needing concert virtuosos to perform them properly---even the cello.

The first movement opens with the cello performing the opening phrase of the theme (answered by the violin which appears in both movements of the trio. To compensate, the piano introduces the secondary theme, and the exposition then closes in lively fashion. The violin and cello together open the development with a variation of the primary theme. But as one critic says, these two instruments provide the true dramatic passion at the end of the development, with a very long duet in which "a deeply personal grief, until now contained, finally finds voice in the most beautiful passage in the whole trio." This remarkable passage also resonates in the section which immediately follows, as Tchaikovsky opens the recap with an adagio version of the primary theme.

For the finale, he fashions a variation movement of huge scope---an E Major theme and eleven variations. The variations provide changes in tempo, mood, and key; notice especially the sixth variation, a delightful waltz---"Tempo di Valse"---in A major. Most of the variations remain in E Major, however, because that key prepares for two final sections centered on the opening key: A Minor and A Major. The A Major section comes first, bringing back a triumphant return of the first movement's opening theme. Most composers would have left it

here. However, this is the Tchaikovsky of the (still-to-come) sixth symphony, with the somber, tragic pathos of the final movement. Tchaikovsky closes as he began the trio: with return of A Minor, motives of the opening theme, an emphasis on the violin and cello, and a softly lyric farewell to his friend and mentor.

Program notes by Ed Wight.