BEETHOVEN
‘Archduke’ Piano Trio
Kakadu Variations
Tichman • Bieler • Kliegel
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Piano Trios - 5

It was not until 1792 that Beethoven finally settled in Vienna. Born in Bonn, the son of a singer in the musical establishment of the Archbishop-Elector of Cologne, of which his grandfather had been Kapellmeister, he inevitably followed family tradition as a musician, acquiring skill as a boy both as a keyboard-player and string-player, in addition to growing competence as a composer that had attracted the attention of Haydn. His patron had intended that he take lessons with Mozart, but he was prevented from pursuing this course by the illness of his mother, which necessitated his return from Vienna to Bonn. His mother's death left him with responsibility for his brothers and the need to manage his father’s affairs with the latter's growing inadequacy and irregularity of life. Arriving in Vienna once more in 1792, with the encouragement of the Archbishop, a member of the Imperial family, and armed with introductions to members of the nobility, Beethoven set about bettering himself by lessons with Haydn, with Abrechtsberger and with Salieri, and earning a living through his gifts as a pianist, a skill to which his developing powers as a composer were an important adjunct. In a period of social and political change, Beethoven was to win for himself an exceptional position in Vienna, his increasing eccentricities and indiscretions accentuated by the onset of deafness at the turn of the century, tolerated even under the restrictive policies of Prince Metternich, after 1815. By the time of his death in 1827 Beethoven had opened the way to a new era in music with his expansion and development of existing forms, leaving works that presented later generations with a challenge and inspiration.

Beethoven's Kakadu Variations, Op. 121a, are based on a song from Wenzel Müller's Singspiel Die Schwestern von Prag (The Sisters from Prague), first staged in 1794. Müller, born in Moravia in 1767, had been a pupil of Dittersdorf. In 1786 he became Kapellmeister at the Leopoldstadt Theatre in Vienna, holding this position, with a break of six years at the German Opera in Prague, until 1805. A prolific composer, with some 250 theatre pieces to his credit, he not only provided works that may have influenced Mozart and Emanuel Schikaneder's Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute) but enjoyed a highly successful career on his own account. Die Schwestern von Prag, indeed, had over 130 performances. Much of the humour of the piece revolves around the comic servant Kaspar and his failure to understand his master's instructions as various suitors try to win access to the women of his master Odoardo's household. It is the journeyman tailor Krispin who, in disguise as a sister from Prague, resolves the complications of the plot. His entry song in the first of the two acts, Ich bin der Schneider Wetz und Wetz / Bir'g'heit durch d'halbe Welt (I am the tailor, sharp and sharp, / I have travelled through half the world), became a popular song of the day, transformed into Ich bin der Schneider Kakadu (I am the tailor cockato). Beethoven's variations on the song were apparently written in 1803 and revised in 1816-17, to be published only in 1824. The slow G minor introduction leads to a statement of the theme, with a first variation entrusted to the piano, followed by a version of the theme in which the violin plays semiquaver triplets. Cello and piano provide the third variation, while the piano starts the fourth, with a rapid descending accompaniment to the theme. Contrapuntal imitation opens the fifth variation, while the sixth calls for delicate piano octaves, punctuated by increasingly insistent syncopated notes from violin and cello. These instruments have the seventh variation to themselves, one entering in imitation of the other and leading without a break to the eighth treatment of the melody. The G minor ninth variation is marked Adagio espressivo and leads to a tenth compound metre Presto that starts in G major, before turning to G minor. The work ends with a final G major Allegretto.

Beethoven sketched the ideas for the greatest of his compositions for piano trio, the so-called Archduke Trio, in 1810 and completed the composition in March the following year. The work was dedicated to Archduke Rudolph, the composer’s pupil, son of the former Emperor Leopold II and later Archbishop of Olomouc. The first public performance of the Trio was given on 11th April 1814 in a charity concert at the inn zum Römischen Kaiser, by arrangement with the landlord and the violinist Schuppanzigh. It was at a rehearsal for this event that the composer Louis Spohr heard Beethoven play and was horrified: the piano was badly out of tune, and Beethoven’s deafness led him to bang on the keys in loud passages until the strings jangled and to play so quietly in soft passages that notes were inaudible. Ignaz Moscheles, however, who was present at the public performance, commented only on the lack of clarity and precision, while admiring the music itself. Beethoven played the work again at a concert in the Prater given by Schuppanzigh a few days later, but his days as a pianist were coming to an end.

The expansive first movement of the Piano Trio in E flat major, Op. 97, is introduced by the piano with the first subject, echoed by the violin. The elaboration of this theme leads to a second subject in the unexpected key of G major, again introduced by the piano. This material is developed at the heart of the movement. The Scherzo which follows is introduced by the cello with an ascending theme to which the violin adds a descending phrase before giving the expected fugal answer. The cello starts the contrasting Trio and there is a further repetition of the Scherzo and Trio before the Scherzo re-appears yet again, leading to a coda. The slow movement, one of some length, is in the form of a D major theme and four variations, following the traditional practice in a use of increasingly rapid notes to elaborate the material in the first three, while the fourth leads without a break to the final rondo, restoring the original key. A feature of the work, the height of Beethoven’s achievement in the genre, is the relatively low range of the violin part and the relatively high tessitura of the cello writing.

The Piano Trio in E flat major, WoO 78, was written during the earlier years of Beethoven’s career, in 1790 or 1791, while he was still in Bonn, but now charged with the care of his brothers and with his father’s affairs. The autograph of the work was found among Beethoven’s papers after his death and was published in 1830, with a declaration that it was the authentic work of Beethoven, the manuscript in the possession of Beethoven’s disciple Anton Schindler and certified as genuine by the signatures of Anton Diabelli, Carl Czerny and Ferdinand Ries. The piano opens the initial Allegro moderato with a cheerful theme, in which the violin later joins, leading to a subsidiary subject, material duly developed before the expected recapitulation. The second movement is a Scherzo that has more of a Minuet about it, with a trio section characterized by a running piano part. The work ends with a Rondo of some originality, a suggestion of what was to come.

Keith Anderson
Xyrion Trio
Nina Tichman, piano • Ida Bieler, violin • Maria Kliegel, cello
Recognized as one of Germany’s most outstanding ensembles, the Xyrion Trio plays with passionate intensity, exuberance, subtlety of dynamic expression and the ability to illuminate the repertoire through the strongly individual personalities of its members. Soon after its formation in 2001 the Trio was invited to appear in major musical capitals and international festivals throughout the world, including the Beethovenfest Bonn, Ludwigsburger Schloßkonzerte, and Rheinische Musikfest. The Trio’s cycle of complete works by Antonín Dvořák for piano and strings was presented in the Liederhalle in Stuttgart, Sevilla, Ulm and in other European cities to outstanding critical acclaim. The ensemble’s début recording on the Naxos label (8.557723) the first of five CDs presenting the complete Beethoven Trio cycle, was named Editor’s Choice of the Month for MusicWeb by Colin Clarke and was awarded the Supersonic Prize of Pizzicato Magazine in Luxemburg. Germany’s leading HiFi Magazine, Fono Forum, hailed the “vibrant and glowing” performances of Beethoven’s Opus 70 Trios as a major addition to the catalogue. Recent notable Xyrion Trio appearances worldwide have included a tour of Germany performing Beethoven’s Triple Concerto with the Orchestre Sinfonique de Liège and its chief conductor Louis Langree, a ten-city celebrity tour of New Zealand, concerts on the cruise ship MS Deutschland as well as concerts throughout Germany, Switzerland, Spain and France. Since 2007 the ensemble has assumed the artistic directorship of the Andernacher Musik Tage which takes place every year in May. For more information about the trio, please visit their homepage at www.xyriontrio.com.

Dedicated to his friend and pupil Archduke Rudolf, Beethoven’s expansive Archduke Trio is his greatest work in the genre, though increasing deafness meant it also signalled his final appearances as a performer. The cheerful Piano Trio in E flat major is an earlier work, though only discovered amongst the composer’s papers after his death, and the Kakadu Variations is another good humoured work based on a popular song of the day. With the American Record Guide “impressed with every recording”, Volumes 1 (8.557723), 2 (8.557724), 3 (8.570255) and 4 (8.570943) are also available.

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1 Variations in G major on Wenzel Muller’s Ich bin der Schneider Kakadu, Op. 121a (Piano Trio No. 11) 16:35
   Piano Trio No. 7 in B flat major, Op. 97 ‘Archduke’
   (Erzherzog-Trio) 42:52
2 Allegro moderato 12:18
3 Scherzo: Allegro 10:54
4 Andante cantabile ma però con moto 12:35
5 Allegro moderato 7:05
6 Piano Trio in E flat major, WoO 38 15:21
   Allegro moderato 4:54
7 Scherzo: Allegro ma non troppo 5:17
8 Rondo: Allegretto 5:10

Nina Tichman, Piano • Ida Bieler, Violin • Maria Kliegel, Cello

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