

Prometheus Trio – 10th Anniversary Season

Monday, September 21, 2009

Tuesday, September 22, 2009

Wisconsin Conservatory of Music – Helen Bader Hall

Trio in A Major, Hob. XV:18 (1794)

Allegro moderato

Andante

Allegro

Franz Josef Haydn

(1732-1809)

Mood Swings (1998)

Paul Moravec

(b. 1957)

INTERMISSION

Trio in B Major, Op. 8 (1889-91)

Allegro con brio

Scherzo: Allegro molto

Adagio

Allegro

Johannes Brahms

(1833-1897)

Though fewer than his Symphonies (104) or his String Quartets (68), Haydn's extant Trios for piano and strings number 43 (though we have diligently—and enthusiastically—programmed one in each of our seasons as a trio, we are not even a quarter-way through the list!). Haydn biographers generally concur that the composer's better trios are his later ones. Scholar Karl Geiringer, discussing the trios of the 1790s, compares them favorably to earlier efforts in the genre: "the piano trio changed...from an inferior type of composition treated in an offhand manner to a carefully elaborated form...A new type of piano trio in which all three members share the responsibility is breaking through..."

Tonight's trio was composed as the first of a group of three "probably" (writes scholar Irmgard Becker-Glauch) "written during Haydn's second stay in London from 4 February 1794 to 15 August 1795." The three instruments begin the work *forte* and in unison, with fanfare-like chords. Haydn immediately shifts gears with the ensuing *cantabile* (singing) theme, presented in imitation: each single-line melodic idea is closely followed in near-canon by another voice. Piano and violin share the melodic load throughout; while the cello has less to do than either of the other instruments, the cello line is often independent of the piano left hand—a new development in Haydn.

A Haydn hallmark is the composer's economy of material. Here, he uses the same imitative theme to establish the secondary key area of his exposition, and returns to the same material for much of his development; he also uses a tiny fragment of dotted rhythm, first found early in the exposition, to open the development and to dominate the movement's coda. But while Haydn is frugal with his melodic material, he is profligate with his harmonies, ranging widely throughout development and recapitulation, especially, and frequently juxtaposing unexpected sonorities.

The trio's central Andante begins like a lonely serenade in A minor, with the melodic lines accompanied by guitar-like textures. Haydn follows a contrasting, major-key section with a thickly-elaborated version of the serenade material, which leads directly into the work's sprightly concluding Allegro. Essentially a sonata form without a development section, this rollicking movement bubbles gaily throughout, almost evaporating as it approaches the finish-line, before bringing this delightful work to an emphatic close.

—Stefanie Jacob

When we programmed Paul Moravec's *Mood Swings* in Tim's first season with the trio (2005-6), we surrounded it with trios by Mozart (K. 564) and Brahms (C Major, Op. 87), both of which contained variation sets. Both Mozart's tightly-structured variations, closely-related to the theme of his second movement and Brahms' somewhat more loosely-related variations in the second movement of *his* trio struck us as vastly different from Moravec's, of which the composer writes:

Mood Swings, for piano trio in one movement, is a series of variations on thematic and harmonic materials presented at the outset. As my intention was to make musically audible the workings of the central nervous system, the title refers to the comprehensive range of moods and psychological states through which this rather mercurial composition proceeds. The word "swings" also refers to the rhythmically charged elements characteristic especially of the finale.

Moravec, who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for composition in 2005, wrote *Mood Swings* for the Trio Solisti, who premiered the work in New York in 1999. It is an absolutely dazzling, incredibly difficult piece, less fearsome than it was our first time around, but still a fascinating challenge for us, both individually and as an ensemble. As we played it during a power failure on Washington Island last month, with our music lit only by flash-light and barely able to see each other's silhouettes, we very much look forward to these performances!

Though individual variations are difficult to discern, a broad slow-fast grouping of the variations, preceded by a fast, shadowy introduction, is easily recognizable. The "harmonic and melodic materials" Mr. Moravec speaks of are primarily a serpentine, chromatic figure in the strings (marked *ponticello*, or close to the bridge), and a four note chorale-like motive in the piano, both stated at the outset.

The cello begins the large slow section with an intensely lyrical, arching melody, which is taken up by the rest of the group, and leads to a series of dramatic, cascading climaxes. A more placid, dolce section follows, primarily in 5/8 meter (and marked "singing!" by Mr. Moravec). This is followed by two remarkable solo sections, one each for cello and violin. It is worth noting Moravec's considerable gift in writing for string instruments in these sections—music which is exciting and challenging, yet is idiomatic as well. The slow section closes with a hushed, chorale-like section, which functions as a codetta.

The concluding fast section returns to 5/8 meter, but with many irregularities and cross rhythms. It begins with the violin and cello in light *scherzando* mode, while the piano contributes airy, jazz-like figures. Gradually the music acquires more and more density, and a soaring melody emerges in the strings, which takes the instruments to their highest reaches. A brief pause sets off a remarkable section in which the entire group hammers out notes from the opening piano chorale motive in unison. With a marking of "Intense, relentless", Mr. Moravec ushers in the final section, which rushes headlong to a blazing, C major finish.

--Stefanie Jacob & Scott Tisdell

In 1854 a very young Brahms composed the first version of his Trio in B Major. A close friend of Robert and Clara Schumann, he presented the piece to Clara at a difficult time, when Robert Schumann had attempted suicide and subsequently been removed to an asylum. According to Brahms biographer Karl Geiringer, "[Brahms] achieved the miracle of saving Clara from complete despair...the young man's creative power, at this time breaking tumultuously forth, could not, even in her bitterest grief, fail to impress the artist in Clara. Soon after the catastrophe, Brahms was able to play his new Trio to her...."

According to writer John Burk (author of *Clara Schumann: A Romantic Biography*), "the trio puzzled Clara [who had barely touched the piano since the tragedy] a good deal at first. In studying it, she was led into touching the keys again, and soon she was playing without hesitation."

In its original form the Trio was extremely long. As Geiringer describes,

only in one characteristic point was the youth of twenty-one lacking: he could not contain himself. To begin with, the enormous first movement, with its five clearly separated themes, which comprises almost five hundred bars, has interpolated, in the recapitulation, a sort of secondary development in the form of a Fugato. ...in the final Rondo the romantic disintegration of form to excess of invention is unmistakable.

The original version of the Trio was published in 1854. More than 30 years later, Brahms began tinkering with it again, writing to Clara in September of 1889: "With what childish amusement I wiled [*sic*] away the beautiful summer days you will never guess. I have re-written 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---?"

Brahms ended up using the opus number of 108 for his third violin sonata, and was for a time displeased with his revision, as he wrote to Clara: "it does not please me at all--not in the least." But then circumstance changed his mind, as he wrote in January of 1890:

you will see that yesterday there was a rehearsal and performance of my B major Trio. I

had already thrown the piece to the dogs and did not want to play it. The fact that it seemed inadequate to me and did not please me, means little. When it came to be discussed, however, no curiosity was expressed, but everybody, including Joachim and Wüllner, for instance, started off by saying how much pleasure they had in playing the old piece quite recently and had found it full of sentiment and romantic and heaven knows what else.

And now I am glad I did play it after all.

The new version of the Trio was quite different from the original, as Geiringer describes:

In the first movement he replaces several individual themes by a new, sharply outlined subsidiary theme. This change makes it necessary to work out afresh the development and the recapitulation, now left without a Fugato. The Adagio and Finale share the same fate. Only the Scherzo receives mercy from the mature Brahms, the Coda alone being modified. Altogether the work lost more than a third of its length through the 'new setting,' but gained enormously in its vigorous concentration."

The opening of the work retains the continuous line of the original version, an outpouring begun by piano alone, continued by piano and cello and culminated by all three instruments together. The Scherzo and its contrasting trio have much more in common than is first apparent: the opening repeated notes of the Scherzo find their way into the piano's accompanying left hand throughout the trio, and the listener realizes with a mild shock that a minor-key version of the trio melody was previously heard as a counter-melody in the Scherzo's return. The ethereal sounds that open the Adagio--the piano's *una corda* statement and the expanding unison of the strings' reply--are enhanced at the movement's end by stratospherically high piano triplets; between the two is a considerably more earth-bound middle section. The Finale, beginning and also ending in B minor rather than major, is a continuous whirlwind of notes and gestures, sweeping all before it to a tragic conclusion.

--Stefanie Jacob