

**NYS: Astatine Piano Trio January 26 2024**  
**Programme notes by Chris Darwin**

**Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) Piano Trio in Eb, Hbk. XV:29 (1795)**

*Allegro moderato*

*Allegretto*

*Finale: Allegro*

It is easy to undervalue Haydn's Piano Trios. The string parts, particularly the cello, often double the keyboard and generally lack the independence found later in say Beethoven. But for much of his piano trio output, Haydn's hands were tied by the underpowered keyboards that he was writing for – doubling of the weak keyboard bass line was a necessity. Viewed on their own terms as 'keyboard sonatas with string accompaniment', we can enjoy their virtues rather than wishing they were Beethoven.

Charles Rosen devotes a whole chapter of "The Classical Style" to Haydn's piano trios encouraging us to see them as a "third great series of works to set beside the symphonies and the quartets". They fall into two main groups: 16 or so early trios composed between about 1760 and the early 1770s, and the latter 27 or so composed between 1784 and 1797. In all of them Haydn is surprising and inventive. In the earlier trios his natural extraversion sits well with the excesses of the contemporary Mannerist style. But in Haydn's later trios his creative exuberance acquires new significance as it is constrained by the structures of the newly emerging Classical style.

Tonight's E-flat major trio, is one of three dedicated to the virtuoso pianist Theresa Jansen Bartolozzi whom he had met in London. It is one of the last trios he wrote (around the same time as the Op 76 string quartets), and exploits the more powerful Broadwood pianos that were then available in England. Broadwoods freed the cello in particular from merely doubling the bass line of the keyboard part giving Haydn more scope to transcend the limitations of the "accompanied sonata". Why did Haydn write no more piano trios after this set? Partly because he had left London with its talented pianists and forceful Broadwoods, but also perhaps because Beethoven's revolutionary three Op.1 piano trios had appeared in 1795. Haydn knew when he had been overtaken.

The work opens with a forte held chord – to shut the audience up and encourage



them listen to to the quiet entry of the graceful motif that dominates the movement: two pairs of falling fifths and a rising dotted figure (*illustrated*). Robert Philip describes it as having a 'mock-ecclisastical air, with its dignity punctuated by sudden accents and flourishes'. A middle section moves into the six flats of E-flat minor and the violin enjoys some melodic freedom before a return to the familiar territory of the major. The final section of the movement gives Mrs Bartolozzi's piano its flamboyant head.

The slow movement might have simply added another flat to the earlier six to give us the seven of C-flat major, but Haydn takes pity on the players and gives them the enharmonic equivalent – 'just' the five sharps of B major. Its lovely, spacious melody looks like the material for an extensive movement but Haydn, ever surprising, denies us by all too soon swerving back into E-flat and after a brief piano cadenza whisking us off into the boisterous *Finale: Presto assai* (very fast) *in the German style*. After 30-odd bars Haydn gives the pianist an accented 4-quaver phrase repeated 5 times across 6-quaver bars (*illustrated*), but takes pity and explicitly numbers them 1 to 5 observing that at a *Presto*

tempo 'the performer will find great facility by reckoning the Numbers in mind while playing the passages thus marked'. How kind!



### Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Piano Trio No. 2 in C, Op 87 (1882)

*Allegro*

*Andante con moto (Tema con variazioni)*

*Scherzo: Presto – Trio: Poco meno presto*

*Finale: Allegro giocoso*

By 1880 Brahms had not composed a piano trio for almost 30 years, but then, like no. 87 buses, two came along at once: one in C, the other in E-flat. Brahms often started to compose contrasting pairs of works at the same time; he started these trios shortly before the contrasting Academic Festival and Tragic Overtures. After composing the first movements of both trios, he set them aside and, ever self-critical, eventually destroyed the one in E-flat - despite Clara Schumann's preference for it. A couple of years later, after finishing his second piano concerto, he returned to and completed this C major trio.

In the 30-odd years since his Op 8 B major trio, the piano had become more powerful, and Brahms had gained experience of writing for piano with a larger group of strings (piano quartets and a quintet) or as soloist in a piano concerto. Consequently, the relationship between the strings in the Op 87 trio is different from that in the much earlier Op 8 trio. The difference is evident from the start: the work opens with the violin and cello playing the expansive main theme (*illustrated*) in octaves treating them as a single voice against the piano.



In fact, all the other movements also open with the strings in octaves. Despite the increased power of the 1880s piano, and Brahms' proclivity for dense chording, it is important to bear in mind that the Streicher piano that he was then composing at was considerably lighter in sound than a modern Steinway concert grand: "to hear Brahms's music on an instrument like the Streicher is to realize that the thick textures we associate with his work, the sometimes muddy chords in the bass and the occasionally woolly sonorities, come cleaner and clearer on a lighter, straight-strung piano. Those textures, then, are not a fault of Brahms's piano composition." (Edwin Good).

Half-way through the movement Brahms plays a master stroke, the tempo notches up *animato* and the cello transforms the jauntily dotted opening phrase by slowing it in a heartfelt *espressivo* (*illustrated*) above ripples on the piano.



A further modification of the opening gives the theme for the variations of the second movement. The rising third (now A to C) is still there, but the original dotted rhythm is reversed into a 'Scotch snap' (as in 'body coming through the rye').



At the end of the theme Brahms pulls a cunning technical trick: the two halves of the last 7 bars (*illustrated*) consist of a phrase followed by its inversion (rising intervals replaced by



downward and *vice versa*). Such devices reflect Brahms' thorough classical schooling (inversion of fugue subjects was a favourite baroque device), but using inversion to complete a melody looks forward, and perhaps contributed to Schoenberg's famous view of "Brahms the Progressive".

The *Presto Scherzo* again starts with string octaves with the hallmark rising third, but this time in a fleeting pianissimo in C minor. It is gloriously contrasted in the slightly slower trio section by one of Brahms' wonderful soaring melodies (*illustrated*) back in C major.



String octaves and a rising third again start off the playful *Finale - Allegro giocoso*. The piano accompanies with a descending figure of repeated quavers (*illustrated*) which is extended and frequently recurs as a sort of laughing motif throughout this good-natured movement.



## INTERVAL

### Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 – 1975) Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor Opus 67 (1944)

*Andante*

*Allegro con brio*

*Largo*

*Allegretto*

This Trio is dedicated to the memory of Shostakovich's close friend, the erudite music critic Ivan Sollertinsky. His sudden, early death aged 41 left Shostakovich bereft of a trustworthy soulmate. The Trio follows in a line of Russian elegiac piano trios: Tchaikovsky's in memory of Nikolai Rubinstein, and Rachmaninov's in memory of Tchaikovsky. But Shostakovich in 1944 is also expressing the suffering of the victims of war and barbarity, in particular through the appearance of Eastern European Jewish folk music to which Sollertinsky had introduced him. In addition, the Trio pays tribute to Shostakovich's young pupil Veniamin Fleishman, who defended Leningrad in the People's Volunteer Guard and was one of its first victims. Fleishman left an unfinished opera, *Rothschild's Violin* (based on the Chekhov story); after his death, Shostakovich rescued the manuscript from Leningrad, orchestrated it and facilitated its performance. Jewish dance themes from the opera appear in the finale of Shostakovich's Trio.

The work opens with a ghostly fugue whose sombre mood and arch-like form are reminiscent of Beethoven's C#-minor string quartet. But Shostakovich creates a unique sound with the hauntingly ethereal high harmonics of the muted cello (*illustrated* – the harmonic sounds two octaves above the lower note). The rising fourth (*bracketed here and in subsequent examples*) is a recurring



element in the work. The fugal *Andante* leads into a faster *Moderato*, the tempo quickens again and the mood continues to lighten into a positively exuberant figure leaping an optimistic ninth (*illustrated*).



The *scherzo* second movement is not only in the spikily remote 6-sharps of F#-major (just a semitone down from the final G major of the first movement) but also very fast, very strongly accented and heavy (*illustrated*), about as different as it could be from the opening of the first movement. It whirls on at finger-knotting pace; a figure consisting of rapid consecutive up-bows adds to the relentless, manic exhilaration.



Exhausted despair returns with the Chaconne-like *Largo*. The opening eight dourly inscrutable piano chords underly variations on a mournfully sad and tender theme (*illustrated*). The 'Dance of Death' final movement follows without a break. It was written after Shostakovich had read about the Red Army's liberation of the Polish death camps such as Treblinka. Staccato notes in the piano introduce the two sets of repeated bars that start the skeletal pizzicato theme (*illustrated*) with its Eastern Jewish folk rhythms. The exuberant upward leap of a ninth



from the first movement is now a desperate final accented fall. The deadly dance becomes ever more frenzied, before a final ghostly reprise of the opening. Shostakovich used the opening theme again, notably in his 8<sup>th</sup> String Quartet and the 'Babi Yar' 13<sup>th</sup> Symphony.

