

8 Dec 2023
Sitkovetsky Trio

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Trio in D, Op.70 No.1 (Ghost) (1808)

Allegro vivace e con brio

Largo assai ed espressivo

Presto

1808 saw Beethoven composing at full power: his Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, the Choral Fantasia, the A-major cello sonata as well as the two Op 70 piano trios all come from this year. The cello sonata and the piano trios seem to have been part of a conscious decision by him to revisit the chamber music forms with which he had made such an impact shortly after his arrival in Vienna.

Why the 'Ghost' trio? The name was coined by Carl Czerny, pianist, composer, pupil and friend of Beethoven who wrote that the slow movement always reminded him of the appearance of Banquo's ghost in *Macbeth*. It is not known whether Czerny was aware that Beethoven had included in the sketchbook that he had used for the *Ghost* Trio preliminary ideas for an opera based on *Macbeth*. Whether or not Beethoven specifically had Banquo in mind, the trio is certainly dramatic.

The opening (*illustrated*) is ferociously violent with groups of four quavers (bracketed) battling with the triple-time key signature. Immediately,



though, the cello presents an 'aching, tender melody' (*illustrated*); each of its first two bars presents a motif for later development as the movement batters us with conflicting emotions.



The eponymous slow movement is marked *Largo assai* – Very slow – and slow it is; I know of none slower in chamber music. In many performances, each crotchet beat takes almost 4 seconds. A consequence of this sepulchral tempo is that in order to get the players to play fast you have to write lots of notes in the bar: just before the end there are shuddering bars that contain 48 separate triplet hemi-demi-semi-quavers! As Angus Watson points out, these trembling figures are reminiscent of Florestan's despairing aria at the opening of Act 2 of *Fidelio*, and this movement lacks none of its spine-chilling passion. Note that the opening two crotchets on the violin (*illustrated*) D and G are the same notes as the first two crotchet beats in the opening theme of the first movement (*).



The last movement opens expansively and genially, then pauses twice for breath, gathering its strength to lay some of the preceding ghosts.

Elfrida Andrée (1841-1929) Piano Trio No. 2 in G minor (1883)

Allegro agitato

Andante con espressione

Finale. Rondo Allegro risoluto

Elfrida Andrée was a pioneer for the rights of women. She was the first woman in Sweden to graduate as an organist, and, after she and her liberal, physician father had been instrumental in changing the law, the first woman cathedral organist (at Gothenburg). At London's 1851 Great Exhibition, her father had met women who were both organists and also managed telegraph stations, so he and Elfrida again got Swedish law changed so that Elfrida became one of the very first Swedish women telegraphists. This was at a time when her initial attempts to become a church organist had been rebuffed by: 'the sight of a woman on the organ stool [would be] indecorous and disruptive of devotion' and 'Paul has said "Let your women keep silence in the churches"'. Towards the end of her life, when still at Gothenburg, she enjoyed playing late into the night at full volume on the now electrically-pumped organ. One evening as the final blast died away she was heard to remark: 'Paul, old lad – try that for size!'. Incidentally, Gothenburg Cathedral was a Schartauan bastion, which meant that the somewhat secular Andrée had to endure sermons lasting for hours, with extensive depictions of severe punishment for sins raining down over the congregation.

In the early 19th century, Swedish women had composed songs but none had written any major composition. In the 1860s Andrée composed several chamber music works and submitted, anonymously, a piano quintet to the Swedish Art Music Society. It was accepted and published in 1865. There was great surprise when it became known that the presumed 'man' behind this composition was a woman. Her substantial musical output includes an opera, 2 each of symphonies, string quartets, piano trios and violin sonatas, a piano quartet and quintet. Securing adequate performances for her major works was not easy. She and her sister walked out at the start of the last movement of the premier of her first symphony in 1869 when the first violins persisted, in Andrée's view intentionally, in playing a bar behind the rest of the orchestra. Reviews were predictably and quite unfairly scathing.

Stylistically, much of Andrée's music, including tonight's piano trio written towards the end of her composing career, owes much to Mendelssohn. She had spent the spring of 1872 in Leipzig after having impressed Mendelssohn's erstwhile Leipzig colleague the Dane Niels Gade with her first symphony. Her trio combines the lyrical fluency of Mendelssohn with the robust energy of a composer who was definitely her own woman.

That energy is evident in the forceful opening theme (*illustrated*) with its initial bold falling seventh and also in its subsequent sprightly quaver partner. We then get the contrast of a lovely, calmer, *tranquillo cantabile*, theme (*illustrated*) which is clearly derived from the opening. These three themes provide abundant material for Andrée to develop and reprise with passion and skill.

The image displays two staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'Allegro agitato' and 'f', showing a forceful opening with a falling seventh interval. The bottom staff is labeled 'tranquillo cantabile' and 'p dolce', showing a calmer, lyrical theme derived from the opening.

The *Andante* slow movement's tender opening theme (*illustrated*) also gains poignancy from the interval of the seventh, first across the opening four notes falling from D to E natural and then a bar later rising from B flat to A. Contrast then comes, as in the first movement, from a quaver figure, this time with an added dotted rhythm (*illustrated*).



The Finale is a lively Rondo with a recurring motif of rhythmically opposed triplets and duplets (*illustrated*), contrasting with more lyrical episodes.



It has been a real pleasure playing and listening to this piece. I hope you enjoy it too. My debt to an excellent biography of Andrée by Eva Öhrström at <https://www.swedishmusicalheritage.com> will be obvious to those who read it.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) Piano Trio No.1 in Bb, D.898 (1827)

Allegro moderato

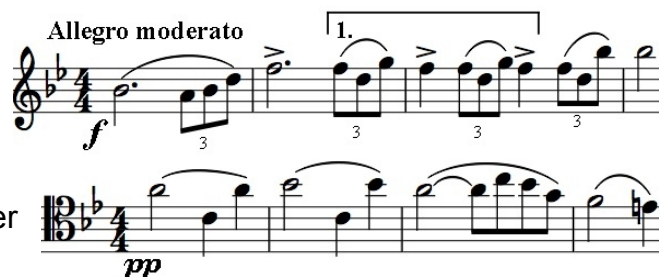
Andante un poco mosso

Scherzo & Trio: Allegro

Rondo: Allegro vivace

Schubert's two piano trios date from the final years of his life when, frustrated by his lack of success at opera and dissatisfied with his song writing, he turned to instrumental music. They were written after his Octet and late string quartets but before his 2-cello string quintet. They are both very substantial works, matching his contemporary 'Great' C major symphony in length and musical depth. Despite Schubert's failing health and erratic mood swings, the Bb Trio is radiant. Robert Schumann wrote of it: "*One glance at Schubert's Trio and the troubles of our human existence disappear and all the world is fresh and bright again.*"

The glorious opening theme in unison on violin and cello is confident and optimistic. It also contains two ideas, one local, one global, which reappear in various forms throughout the piece. The local idea is the triplet – crochet pattern under [1]. The global idea is the pattern of the first four bars: simply put, "slow, slow, quick, slow". The same pattern reappears immediately in the tender second theme introduced by the cello. After an expansive development of this material Schubert gives us three false starts for the recapitulation in 'wrong' keys.



The glorious *Andante* with its opening cello theme joined rhapsodically by the violin was, incredibly, an afterthought. Schubert originally wrote a slow *Adagio*, which was posthumously published as a *Notturmo* in Eb D.897. Its opening theme (illustrated) is a slowed down version of the opening of the first movement. It is not clear why Schubert rejected it, but we are lucky that he did since the replacement *Andante* is one of those movements that you cannot imagine being without – and we do still have the *Notturmo*.



The *Scherzo and Trio* are based on the *Ländler* and the waltz respectively. The opening figure of the *Scherzo* (illustrated) is based on the local triplet-crotchet figure of the first movement, whereas the first four bars of the *Trio* (illustrated) are in its global 'slow, slow, fast, slow' pattern. This global pattern also appears in 2-bar units in the 8-bar opening (illustrated) of the Rondo last movement with the dotted rhythm providing the 'quick' quality.



Programme notes by Chris Darwin