# Ludwig van Beethoven:
# The String Trios

## Sinae Baek, violin
## Cesia Corrales, viola
## Paul Christopher, cello

### Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

The genre of string trio was one which occupied Ludwig van Beethoven for only a few years. All five of his trios for violin, viola, and cello were written in the 1790s and published in Vienna. Beethoven would write no further string trios after starting his impressive cycle of sixteen string quartets in 1798. Yet, alongside the one string trio produced by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, the five created by Beethoven are regarded as the greatest works of their genre produced in the eighteenth century. Together they mark the first pinnacle in this genre's history, as Beethoven's turn away from the string trio would prove symptomatic of a larger trend: though the eighteenth century was rich with string trios, composers of the nineteenth favored the string quartet and chamber music which integrated strings with piano. Eighteenth-century composers including Johann Stamitz, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Joseph Haydn, Luigi Boccherini, and Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf all wrote string trios. These represent an outgrowth of the Baroque trio sonata, often scored for two violins and cello and sometimes still including figures for a continuo part. By contrast, few nineteenth-century composers applied their talents to the genre. Franz Schubert was one exception, though his two string trios are still tied to Viennese Classicism. Much later Antonín Dvořák produced his Terzetto for two violins and viola—a third instrumentation which might qualify as a "string trio." The twentieth century and our own have been kinder to the string trio with major composers like Max Reger, Paul Hindemith, Anton Webern, Arnold Schoenberg, and Alfred Schnittke all contributing trios of their own. These have brought renewed meaning to this long-neglected genre, ushering in a second flourishing of the string trio.

Tonight's program centers on the trios of Beethoven, and we hear two of these—numerically the first and the last in his catalogue. The String Trio in E-flat major, Opus 3, is Beethoven's earliest, published in 1796. Much like the trio by Mozart, which he had titled "Divertimento," Beethoven's Opus 3 is in six movements and follow his same pattern. Both trios begin with a fast first movement which applies sonata principle; they continue with a slow second movement, a minuet, another slow movement, and another minuet; and finally conclude with a fast sixth movement in rondo form. Beethoven even snatches Mozart's conspicuous key signature of E-flat major, one which would have posed difficulties for string players of that era. The divertimento, a genre of light evening entertainment, was one which Mozart knew well, but whose conventions he largely ignored in his string trio. His, instead, is one of the weightier pieces of chamber music he composed, only applying the divertimento's freer and dance-oriented formal structure rather than the more common format for instrumental compositions. Beethoven certainly knew Mozart's Divertimento as it was published in Vienna in 1792, a year after Mozart's death and the year in which Beethoven arrived in this cultural capital. The music of the recently-deceased Mozart was still well-regarded in this city and by Beethoven, in particular. Whether his aim was to pay homage to Mozart or simply learn from his example while also catering to a public still in love with that man's music, the striking formal similarities between the two works indicate the influence of the former on the latter. That the work of the young Beethoven compares favorably with that of Mozart, the established master, reveals just how deftly he had assimilated the Classical Style; yet, as we shall see, even at this early stage, he was already designing his own compositional aesthetic.

The String Trio, Op. 3, opens with a movement marked *Allegro con brio*. Formally and texturally, this movement adheres to tradition while also incorporating a few surprising innovations. Though this sonata-principle movement goes through the standard phases of exposition, development, and recapitulation, it takes some intriguing sidetracks, launching a false recapitulation midway through the development and also adding an extensive coda at the movement's conclusion. Texturally, though the violin takes the lead at pivotal moments, such as the presentation of the first and second themes, there is generally more exchange between instruments than would have been the case a few decades earlier. The viola, indeed, goes oddly silent at the introduction of the second theme where only the cello accompanies the violin. The motivic aspect is also indicative of Beethoven's future works (i.e. the Fifth Symphony). Here, there is an ascending motive, first heard in the violin, which is often repeated three times in a row. The second movement, marked *Andante* and in B-flat major, approaches sonata principle more typically. Its themes, however, are largely motivic, only occasionally growing into melodies. The triple meter gives this movement a measured dance feel, harkening back to the divertimento model, and the exchanges between its players are particularly playful, with each taking its turn as leader. The third movement, *Minuetto - Trio* is the first of the two minuet movements. Its minuet is in the original key of E-flat major while its intervening trio is in A-flat major. Though both sections are in simple triple, the typical meter for these stylized dances, the minuet is witty and sarcastic while the trio is graceful. A coda with hints of both the minuet and trio sections rounds-out this movement.

The fourth movement, another slow one, is marked *Adagio* and returns to A-flat major, the key of the preceding trio. This ternary movement is romantic and expressive. Its theme begins in the violin, but is soon echoed simultaneously by the viola and cello as if an intimate dialogue. Later, all three instruments speak in alternation, beginning with the violin and cello. The fourth movement, the second minuet, is marked *Minuetto - Minore*. The cheerful minuet returns again to E-flat major while the trio ventures into the minor mode, as its title implies; its specific key is C minor. The minuet's tempo is *Moderato* though the insistent *staccato* markings tend to propel it along quite briskly. The trio displays a radical change in texture as the violin takes on an impassioned solo over drones in the viola and cello; the resulting mood is reminiscent of folk music. The concluding sixth movement, marked *Finale. Allegro*, is once more in E-flat major and adheres to rondo form. The A theme includes what will become a familiar motive of three *staccato* pulses as well as soloistic breakaways in the violin and then viola. Later, in a darker C-minor section, these solo lines join with another in the cello for several measures of insistent counterpoint. After this ordeal spins-out, the A theme returns. After another more cheerful interlude, the familiar A material returns a final time to bring Opus 3 to a delightful conclusion.

Ignaz Schuppanzigh

The other work we hear tonight is Beethoven's String Trio in C minor, Op. 9 No. 3. It belongs to his definitive Opus 9 set of three string trios, published in 1798; the other two are in the keys of G major and D major, respectively. Between Opus 3 and Opus 9, Beethoven had also published his Serenade in D major, Opus 8, for string trio which like Opus 3 is in six movements with various dance connotations. On the contrary, each trio in the Opus 9 set is in four movements, according to the conventional pattern for symphonies, string quartets, and other instrumental genres (i.e. fast-slow-dance-fast). Opus 9 is dedicated to Count Johann Georg von Browne, a Viennese patron of Irish descent. Browne and his wife were actually the recipients of several dedications by Beethoven during his first years in Vienna, including one which famously inspired Browne to present Beethoven with a horse! Beethoven certainly thought highly of his Opus 9, calling these trios the "best of my works," and many movements rank alongside those of the Opus 18 string quartets, his first set of six, which Beethoven had already begun sketching. The first performances of the Opus 9 trios were given by Beethoven's friend, the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh. Likely, he was joined by his colleagues the violist Franz Weiss and the cellist Nikolaus Kraft or his father Anton. Later, Schuppanzigh and his quartet would become the first professional string quartet and premiere many of Beethoven's works in that genre. Through these activities, Schuppanzigh would not only arouse excitement for Beethoven's music but also become one of the first

musicians to create a public audience for chamber music.

The first movement of the String Trio, Op. 9 No. 3 is marked *Allegro con spirito*, follows sonata principle, and is in compound duple meter. Its fiendish first theme begins quietly but rapidly gains dynamics, as it builds in emotional vigor. Quick descending passages, first heard in the violin, are soon echoed by the viola. All three players also rejoin for sudden halts. Just as these halts reach their climax, the gentler second theme enters, now in E-flat major. It enters first in the violin but soon passes to the viola and cello in succession while the violin suggests its intent to recoil to the first theme through its descending scale passages. The violin eventually has its way in the development, and for a time it pulls the other instruments into its depression. The purity of the second theme does, however, return for a short time in the recapitulation. A lengthy coda follows the recapitulation where some signs of rehabilitation emerge, only to return to the despair of the first theme. Tranquility is found in the second movement, *Adagio con espressione*, set in C major. This set of variations flow naturally from the opening theme. It calls for active participation from all three players and also reaches its own emotional heights, if, unlike the first movement, always able to return to a state of calm.

The third movement, *Scherzo. Allegro molto e vivace*, returns to the extremes of the first movement. In fact, it reclaims its predecessor's key of C minor and compound duple meter. Significantly, the violin which had been so adamant in the first movement, is the one to initiate the scherzo. The contrasting trio section moves into C major for its elegant courtly dance before the scherzo bursts onto the scene once more. The fourth movement, *Finale. Presto*, continues in C minor though the meter shifts to cut time. This movement again applies sonata principle as had the first. As elsewhere in this piece, the violin seems to be the most frustrated of the group, initiating the proceedings with a quick descending passage. The viola and cello, however, are less accommodating than they had been previously and, they encourage their colleague to put aside its despair. It is, therefore, not the minor first theme but the major second theme that predominates the exposition. The development becomes increasingly cheerful, introducing new material rather than exclusively exploring the material of the exposition. Ultimately, the Trio, Op. 9 No. 3, concludes, not in C minor, but in C major as the outcome of a gradual mode change throughout its final movement.



**About Jackson.** Jackson Harmeyer is a master's candidate in musicology at the University of Louisville where he has been awarded the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship. His current research focuses on French spectral music and the compositions of Kaija Saariaho, exploring the aesthetic ramifications of timbre, harmony, and melody in this new music. He has recently shared this research at the American Musicological Society South-Central Chapter's annual meetings in Sewanee, TN and Asheville, NC and also at the University of Tennessee Contemporary Music Festival in Knoxville, TN. Previously, Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars' College in Natchitoches, LA following the completion of his undergraduate thesis, "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers." Then, from 2014 to 2016, Jackson served as director of the successful chamber music series, Abendmusik Alexandria. Since that time, he has remained a concert annotator and organizer, co-directing the Sugarmill Music Festival and the series Nachtmusik Alexandria. Aside from his studies, he is a composer, choral singer, and award-winning photographer.

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