

Program Notes

by A. Robert Johnson

These pieces are brought together to portray the singular profile of these composers in silhouette, the first two at the same chronological point in their lives.

Trio in c minor, Op. 9.3
for violin, viola and 'cello

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

At age 28, Beethoven was pursuing his art in a cultural environment mostly indifferent to him, and suffering from undernourishment, both of the physical and the metaphysical varieties. He had arrived in Vienna from his native Bonn six long years before. He managed in that time to establish some solid support from among the cognoscenti of the nobility, but was far from having made the mark he felt his talents warranted. His extraordinary gift for improvising at the piano was a major vehicle for him in private. Not only could he invent music that profoundly moved his listeners, he had a gladiatorial aspect to his person. He was talked about, not so much as a person to know, but as a person to experience, not at all comfortable for his many landlords. He was forced to move frequently, as he had a habit of splashing water over himself and his surroundings at home. In spite of his quirks people of means pursued him for their musicales and for piano lessons. An invitation to Beethoven, besides relieving him of some of his financial concerns, given that some patrons understood the need to offer at least an honorarium, resulted in an opportunity to try the pieces out before offering them for publication. The problem, however, was that Beethoven wrote for posterity. He broke contemporary barriers at every turn. But to such an extent! The amateurs were also the patrons. Who would buy such music if there was scant hope of mastering its difficulties?

In the case of his six trios written between (probably) 1792 and 1798, there are two that are often played, even today — the Opus 3 and the Opus 8 (*Serenade*). The three Opus 9 works are played less frequently. They are great to listen to, but a performer does *not* engage lightly in the performance of these works. Each member of the trio must be a master. But what satisfaction when virtuosity is put to the service of the music. If fortune smiles, this is going to be your experience. This transient from Bonn was right after all, about people's willingness to submit to the challenge of mastering new techniques, as players and as listeners. Look at the changes we can see (couldn't hear to make a comparison from then to now!). There have always been collaborators whose need to excel required equally talented and committed partners. I'm thinking of the instrument makers. How rapidly and how marvelously they developed *their* craft. They were eager for the likes of Beethoven to try their latest effort and to get his endorsement if possible. Typically, nothing ever fully satisfied him, and too soon he began slipping towards his famous affliction — the loss of his hearing. Oh, it mattered profoundly that he suffered that fate. But it did not prevent his art from growing — only his enjoyment of it. *We* have that pleasure. Predictably we are repelled at first by the shock of it all. Then we revel in its daring and imagination. The battle between our curiosity and dubiousness leaves us ultimately enthralled by the whole process, and usually grateful.

Quartet in g minor, K.478
for piano, violin, viola and 'cello

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

The period during which Mozart wrote his first work for piano, violin, viola and 'cello (1784) was an especially fertile time for this already prolific man. In his 28th year he was enjoying sustained success in Vienna as a performer and composer. He also did well giving concerts for public subscription. The general excitement over such events declined over the next few years as a consequence of the radical changes in the political situation in Europe, particularly in France. Events there threatened all of Europe, and by extension, the stable environment on which support of the arts depended.

His good friend and frequent patron Franz Anton Hoffmeister published this quartet as the first of what was to be a group of three. However, when the public complained of its being too difficult (for the amateurs to play, in a familiar refrain), Hoffmeister decided he didn't want the others, and allowed Mozart to keep his advance. A second such quartet, K. 493 in E-flat, was offered to a different publisher.

This instrumentation adds a viola to the piano "trio." It was significant in Mozart's hands, contrasted to a few insubstantial works of C.P.E. Bach that predated K. 478. Mozart chooses his key of fate, G minor, for the opening movement. From the opening *unisono* we know this is more than passing entertainment for a few good friends. It has passion and depth. It can be cited as the single piece that led to the establishment of a genre of chamber music to which other major contributors would be Brahms, Dvořák, and Schumann, each of whom composed works that added a second violin to the combination. Hearing it, the attraction is obvious.

Sextet in C, Opus 37
for clarinet, horn, violin, viola, 'cello and piano

Ernst von Dohnányi (1877-1960)

Hearing this work for the first time, it is impossible to avoid images of the legendary years of the Hollywood moguls. There is a good reason for that impression. Ernst von Dohnányi, as head of piano and composition at the Budapest Academy of Music, interrupted at times by the fluctuating politics of the region, from 1928 to 1941, was the teacher of the numerous composers who immigrated to the United States in the 30's and 40's. They gravitated to Hollywood, where their musical voices helped define that era of film. What may now sound close to cliché in the *Sextet* was in fact the original.

The composer literally burst on the music world at age 17 with his *Piano Quintet*, Opus 1. Unlike many other composers, he managed to produce a first published work of mature dimensions sufficient to establish his importance from that moment forward. He had the equally unfortunate luck to live during a politically tumultuous time, which, by virtue of his prominence as a musician, put him alternately at odds with each of the extremely radical

movements of his era, Fascism and Communism. On the purely musical scale, his accomplishments were notable then and remain so. He helped introduce and promote the music of Bartók and Kodály. During the 1920's he performed all of the works for piano of Beethoven and Mozart, a feat attempted by no one up to that time. During that same decade, he toured extensively, including to the United States, where he was named chief conductor of the New York State Symphony Orchestra (a curiously obscure entity). His reputation enabled him in 1949 to secure a tenured position at Florida State University in Tallahassee.

Dohnányi's influences were most prominently Schumann and Brahms. He wrote a lot of piano music, concertos for both the piano and the violin, symphonies and chamber music. In this last category, his *Serenade*, Op 10 (1902), is his best known work, finding its way today onto many programs. The *Sextet* was completed in 1935 and premiered in Budapest on June 17 of that year. For a while it was a New York Philomusica staple. We thoroughly enjoy its richness of tone, playful flourishes and grand breadth of ensemble that altogether unfailingly wins our audiences' enthusiasm.