

PROGRAM NOTES

Blue Hill Concert Association
PARIS PIANO TRIO
March 9, 2003

Franz Schubert - Trio in E-Flat, D. 929 and Adagio in E-Flat ("Notturmo"), D. 897

Both of Schubert's piano trios date from near the end of his short life, that extraordinary period which saw the birth of so many rich, moving - and sprawling - masterpieces. Each trio is in marked contrast to the other. Robert Schumann described the B-Flat Trio as "passive, feminine, lyrical," while today's work in E-Flat he considered "active, masculine, dramatic." Schumann also said of the E-Flat: "Some years ago, a trio by Schubert passed across the face of the musical world like some angry comet in the sky. It was his hundredth opus, and shortly afterwards, in November 1828, he died."

Though the trio is cast in E-Flat major, it is striking how much time three of the four movements spend in the minor mode. This frequent alternation between major and minor is a typical characteristic of Schubert's proto-Romantic sound. The first movement's exposition is wonderfully rich in thematic material. Schubert opens with a dramatic unison motive *a la* Beethoven. Later on, after some exciting chromatic scales and a striking shift to minor, a wistful, staccato subordinate theme seems to be almost preparing us for the slow movement to come. As the exposition draws to a close, Schubert delights us with a brief new theme of great lyrical warmth. As it happens, he then focuses on this melody to the exclusion of all else during the very extensive development section, lovingly exploring it through countless modulations. After a regular recapitulation, the coda reminds us once again of the minor key subordinate theme and points us towards the next movement.

This Andante con moto is surely the highlight of the entire trio. Movie buffs will remember the striking use Stanley Kubrick made of it in **Barry Lyndon**. Some may also recall a memorable moment of cinematic camp, when in the horror movie **The Hunger**, David Bowie's aging, cultivated vampire plays the opening cello part while holed up in his Manhattan mansion. That C minor cello theme, sung to a marching piano accompaniment, is without doubt one of Schubert's supreme inspirations. Though originally suggested by a Swedish folk song of similar character, Schubert's melody is his own. To me it conjures the image of a sad wanderer in the night, territory Schubert would soon explore further in **Die Winterreise**.

The gently dance-like Scherzo that follows is cast in the form of a strict canon and provides a major key respite from the storms just encountered. Then on to the lively, and very long, finale, which is loosely sectional and even changes meter periodically for 6/8 to cut time. Here the outstanding moment is the surprising, and for Schubert quite unusual, intrusion of the great melody from the Andante con moto, literally quoted at full length in the middle of this new movement. And it returns again later to bring the entire trio to a close; Schubert knows he has a good thing and makes to most of it!

The Adagio in E-Flat that starts our program is also late Schubert. In fact, it is generally assumed to have been the original slow movement for the Trio in B-Flat. One simple, quietly ecstatic melody predominates, built up out of a basic repeated motive.

Schubert varies this effectively, and also twice switches to a more insistent related theme in 3/4 time. The designation “Notturmo” need not detain us, as it was arbitrarily added by a publisher long after Schubert’s death.

Ernest Chausson: Trio in G minor, Op. 3

Ernest Chausson was a French composer writing during the last decades of the 19th Century, perhaps best known to us for his **Poème** for violin and orchestra. Coming to music rather late, his two most important teachers were César Franck and Jules Massenet. Chausson loved vocal music, but he was also strongly stirred by the rich flowering of idiomatically French chamber music then underway. The Piano Trio Op. 3 is his own early attempt to add to this native tradition, and he composed it in 1881 at the age of 26. For what is still essentially a student work, Chausson demonstrates a surprising level of technical mastery. Following his French models, and also his youthful infatuation with Wagner, Chausson employs an impassioned style and richly chromatic pallet. He also specifically emulates Franck’s love of cyclical form, in which important themes or mottoes travel from movement to movement and strongly unify an entire work. Only the trio’s brief scherzo does not utilize material first presented in the opening movement. Pay special attention to the slow introduction to this first movement, as the key thematic ideas are clearly presented here.

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