

TUESDAY EVENING CONCERT SERIES PRESENTS
Trio Celeste

Piano Trio in G major, Op.1, No.2
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

You might think that Opus 1 was a composer's first composition. In the case of Beethoven, you'd be wrong. By the time the three piano trios of Opus 1 were published in 1795, Beethoven was already a fairly experienced composer, particularly of chamber music. A number of compositions collectively called *Werke ohne Opuszahl* [Works without Opus number, abbreviated WoO] include various pieces Beethoven wrote as a youth in Bonn and during his first years in Vienna. A surprising quantity of chamber music predates the Opus 1 trios, including a wind octet, three early piano quartets, a trio for piano, flute, and bassoon, a couple of violin/piano pieces, several piano sonatas, and two piano trios. None of these works was published until later.

Beethoven waited until 1795 to publish the three trios. The delay was strategic and well-calculated. He had moved from Bonn to Vienna in November 1792, after Joseph Haydn agreed to teach him composition. Within a few months, the twenty-two-year-old German pianist was befriended by the wealthy arts patrons Prince Karl Lichnowsky and Count Ferdinand Waldstein. Beethoven lodged briefly with the Lichnowskys. These influential aristocrats introduced him to the cream of Vienna's musical society. He was soon celebrated as a virtuoso, achieving remarkable success in the Austrian capital's musical salons. By early 1795 he had made his first public appearance, playing a piano concerto with an orchestra (probably his own B-flat Concerto, later published as Op.19). Now, with his reputation established and growing, the time was right to publish some music.

He chose the three piano trios for two principal reasons. One was that the trio was a popular genre with Viennese amateur musicians and was likely to sell well. The other reason was that he'd worked hard on these trios and was proud of them. Indeed, they reflect a level of virtuosity and mastery of form not present in his earlier works. They are the first flowering of his early maturity. In gratitude to his patron, he dedicated Opus 1 to Prince Lichnowsky. The first performance took place at a private concert at Lichnowsky's residence in late 1793 or early 1794. Beethoven revised the trios before sending them to the Viennese publisher Artaria to be engraved.

All three trios have complicated textures, a grand manner, and four movements that suggest Beethoven was thinking symphonically (most contemporary trios only had three movements). The second trio, in G-major, has been overshadowed by its better known sibling in C minor, but this delightful work has much to recommend it. The first movement opens with a slow introduction that hints at the thematic material of its lively Allegro. The slow movement, in the distant key of E major, is a richly scored Largo that matches the depth of Beethoven's slow movements in the early piano sonatas. Eloquent and spacious, this movement hints at the sublime heights he would achieve in later works.

The Scherzo/Trio demonstrate Beethoven's skill in counterpoint and motivic

development. The sudden dynamic changes, *sforzato* emphases, and glint of humor that characterize his style are abundant. Haydnesque wit is the dominant impulse in the Presto finale, a whirling dervish of a movement that celebrates the featherlight action of the Viennese *fortepiano*.

Piano Trio No.2 in C minor, Op.66 Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Mendelssohn has been subject to the vagaries of musical fashion and political turmoil since the mid-19th century. Both popular and financially successful in his lifetime, he was hailed by Robert Schumann as the most important composer of chamber music since Beethoven and Schubert. Posterity has validated that judgment, and if some skeptics over the years have maligned certain of Mendelssohn's piano, orchestral and vocal works, few would challenge his sovereignty in the realm of chamber music between Beethoven and Brahms.

Mendelssohn composed two piano trios: Op. 49 in D minor and the work we hear this evening. In light of the broad cultivation of the trio in the mid-19th century, it is surprising that he did not write more for this popular combination. Nevertheless, his legacy is stunning. Both Mendelssohn trios have firm holds in the repertoire, though the C minor work is less frequently performed.

Mendelssohn completed the second trio in April 1845, only two and a half years before he died. It was published one year later with a dedication to the violinist and composer Louis Spohr. Opus 66 is a fully mature work, balancing Mendelssohn's classical stance with the passion of the Romantic era. His first movement is a marvel: "Mendelssohn never wrote a stronger sonata form movement," John Horton has written. Philip Radcliffe agrees, calling its flexible opening phrase "more suitable for sonata form" than the main theme of the D-minor trio.

The principal difference between Mendelssohn's two piano trios lies in the conception, which is more vocal (or *Songs without Words*-like, if you will) in the D-minor, and more instrumental in this later trio. Both slow movements are in tripartite (A-B-A) form. In both trios, Mendelssohn's writing is idiomatic for the instrumentalists; he was, after all, a virtuoso pianist and a creditable string player. In the C minor work, his writing is particularly impressive in the whirlwind Scherzo. Here, the elfin spirit of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is energized by perpetual motion and occasional, unexpected Schumannesque outbursts to yield one of his finest third movements.

The finale is a complex rondo with three principal themes, the third of which receives particular emphasis. It is a chorale melody closely linked to (but not identical with) Martin Luther's well known Christmas hymn, "Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ." Mendelssohn's initial introduction of the chorale, through imposing piano chords, is interrupted by short phrases from the rondo's first theme. Ultimately the chorale melody dominates the movement's conclusion. Mendelssohn endows all three players with an almost orchestral conception to their parts. Their combined efforts suffuse the conclusion with grandeur and majesty, suitably capping this noble and dramatic trio.

