

Joseph Haydn

Piano Trio in G Major, Hob. XV:25 (“Gypsy Rondo”)

The term “piano trio” as applied today to late-18th-century compositions for piano, violin and cello is a slight misnomer. Published scores typically advertised these works as “piano sonatas with accompanying strings.” This semantic distinction reveals an essential aspect of musical hierarchy, as the greatest interest rests in the piano part. The violin often doubles the piano melody, though occasional “independent” violin themes add much-needed variety. Cello lines reinforce the harmonic foundation. Haydn conformed to this conventional stratification in his nearly 30 piano trios composed between 1784 and 1797. Later composers, beginning with Beethoven, elevated the violin and cello to more equal thematic importance.

Classical piano trios appealed to enlightened amateurs whose knowledge and technique often fell short of their musical enthusiasm. Haydn defended the interests of this zealous public, once upbraiding publisher Artaria & Co. for slipshod engraving: “Anyone buying these works who then tries to play them is bound to curse the engraver and abandon them because of your penny-pinching economies. I should have preferred to pay for two extra plates out of my own pocket rather than have to contemplate such a mess. Even connoisseurs will have difficulty deciphering this passage: whatever will amateurs make of it?”

Two months after returning to Vienna after his second trip to England (1794-95), Haydn composed three piano trios, which he dedicated to the wealthy widow Rebecca Schroeter, his music copyist in London. Their relationship blossomed into a romance, documented by Schroeter’s daily letters of affection to the sexagenarian composer. “I was extremely sorry to part with you so suddenly last night,” she wrote on one occasion, “our conversation was particularly interesting and I had [a] thousand affectionate things to say to you, my heart was and is full of tenderness for you, but no language can express half the love and affection I feel for you, you are dearer to me every day of my life.”

Haydn’s second composition for Schroeter—the Piano Trio in G Major, Hob. XV:25—is the most famous because of its infectious “gypsy-rondo” finale. His opening movement cleverly merges variation and rondo forms. Each segment presents a variation of the graceful *Andante* theme, but with a tonal scheme closer to a rondo (G Major alternating with G minor and E minor). The lyrical *Poco Adagio* contrasts the piano’s ornamented melody with a lyrical violin theme. Then, the two instruments join in restating the original melody. Haydn simulates a frenzied gypsy fiddle style in his final movement, an exotic aura most effectively portrayed in the violin-dominated episodes.

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Zoltán Kodály

Serenade in F Major, Op. 12

“If I were to name the composer whose works are the most perfect embodiment of the Hungarian spirit, I would answer Kodály.” This flattering appraisal gains credibility when its source is considered: the great Hungarian musician Béla Bartók. Kodály was an indefatigable teacher, composer and folk music scholar during his 60-year career. No musician, Bartók included, contributed more to the evolution of modern Hungarian music than Kodály. A steady, productive composer, Kodály is remembered primarily for the instrumental *Háry Janós Suite*, *Dances of Galánta* and the *Peacock Variations*. Nonetheless, vocal music, both for chorus and

solo voice, dominates his catalogue. The *Psalmus hungaricus* for mixed chorus is most familiar. His few chamber compositions employ string instruments almost exclusively. (Kodály played violin, viola and cello.)

The Serenade in F Major, Op. 12, for two violins and viola was composed in 1919-20, a tumultuous period for Kodály and his countrymen. Kodály was unceremoniously removed from his position as deputy director of the Academy of Music in Budapest after the fall of the Hungarian Republic of Councils. He subsequently was blacklisted, and performances of his works were banned. For nearly two years, Kodály virtually disappeared from the national and international music scene.

Bartók once again brought Kodály's name before the public in a 1921 review of the Serenade: "This composition, in spite of its unusual chord combinations and surprising originality, is firmly based on tonality, although this should not be strictly interpreted in terms of the major and minor system. The time will come when it will be realized that despite the atonal inclinations of modern music, the possibilities of building new structures on key systems have not been exhausted. The means used by the composer—the choice of instruments and the superb richness of instrumental effects achieved despite the economy of the work—merit great attention in themselves. The content is suited to the form. It reveals a personality with something entirely new to say and one who is capable of communicating this content in a masterful and concentrated fashion. The work is extraordinarily rich in melodies."

The Serenade blends folk-like melodies, modern harmonies and a respectful allegiance to traditional forms. In the *Allegramente*, a driving first theme contrasts with an expressive viola melody. Kodály clearly delineated the three-part texture of the *Lento, ma non troppo*: the second violin provides a constant tremolo, a lyrical melody is assigned to the viola, and the first violin interjects decorative echoes. After a rhythmic reminiscence of the first movement, the first violin and viola change roles. The finale is an extended, sectional movement.

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Johannes Brahms

Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor, Op. 25

Brahms spent the summer of 1861 in the town of Hamm, a short distance from his native Hamburg. Boarding at the home of Frau Dr. Elisabeth Rösling, Brahms concentrated on chamber compositions with piano. He worked simultaneously on four pieces: the three piano quartets and his lone piano quintet. The Piano Quartet No. 1, which had evolved slowly over the previous four years, was completed in the fall and performed by an ensemble that included pianist Clara Schumann on November 16 before an appreciative audience in Hamburg. Simrock published the score the following year with a dedication to Baron Reinhard von Dalwigk, a patron of Brahms's friend Albert Dietrich.

Critics left the first performance somewhat perplexed by the work's structural complexities, intellectual weightiness and profusion of thematic ideas. The *Blätter für Theater-Musik und Kunst* (November 21, 1861) offered the following review: "We do not propose to condemn Herr Brahms altogether until we have heard more of his work, but the present specimen will not induce the Viennese people to accept him as a composer. The first three movements are gloomy, obscure and ill-developed; the last is simply an offense against the laws of style. There is neither precedent nor excuse for introducing into chamber music a movement entirely conceived in the

measure of a national dance, and it is much to be regretted that Herr Brahms should have departed in this matter from the example set by Beethoven and Schubert.”

This work opens with a tightly integrated movement: its chromatic first theme later generates an important half-step motive. An *Intermezzo* substitutes for the more typical scherzo, although this replacement lacks the colorful exuberance associated with the scherzo. The *Andante con moto* is a lyrical instrumental aria. Brahms entitled his finale a *Rondo alla Zingarese*, reflecting the gypsy-like character of its opening minor-key melody. Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim remarked: “In the last movement you have outstripped me on my own territory by a considerable track.”

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